Kakapo in danger...

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Facts

Kakapo (Strigops habroptila)is a flightless nocturnal parrot endemic to New-Zealand.
It is the heaviest parrot in the World. Males can weigh over two kilograms.
Kakapo breed every 3 to 4 years.
The birds are herbivores and eat variety of foods such as roots,leaves and fruit.
Although it cannot fly, it is good at climbing trees.
Possibly as defence against its ancient predator—the giant eagle- the kakapo became nocturnal and learned to remain still (freeze) at times of danger.
The male's low-frequency mating boom travels over several kilometres.
It is the only parrot to have an inflatable thoracic air sac.
It is an endangered species, in the wild there are about 126 birds.

Hot news

Genetic link suspected in kakapo death

Date: 05 March 2012

The death of a young male kakapo last week - the fifth since September - may be linked to poor genetics, prompting the Kakapo Recovery team to consider removing Basil, an Anchor Island-based bird, from the breeding programme.

Rooster, who hatched in 2008, was flown off Whenua Hou/Codfish Island on February 29 for veterinary care at Auckland Zoo, after suffering weight loss and loss of appetite. He died the next day, with initial post mortem results indicating a fungal infection - aspergillosis - was widespread throughout his body, including his lungs.

Kakapo Recovery programme manager Deidre Vercoe Scott said the team was investigating the cause and also looking into whether there could be a link with genetics. Of the six young kakapo to die in recent times (birds aged 1-9 years old since 2004), four had been fathered by Basil. Two, Rooster and Purity, had died since September.

"We also know that, of all the dead embryos and hatched chicks of known paternity, 24% of the 33 were fathered by Basil."

Kakapo Recovery scientist Dr Ron Moorhouse said statistically, the probability of Basil fathering that number of dead chicks by chance, was one in a hundred. Otago University geneticist Dr Bruce Robertson would be looking at Basil's offspring relative to other kakapo, examining their DNA for variation at the MHC allele. This was the part of the DNA involved with immune response to pathogens, Dr Moorhouse said.

"If we can get to the bottom of it we might, ultimately, be able to identify males likely to produce poor quality progeny before, rather than after, the fact."

He said it was inevitable that some young kakapo would be genetically compromised because of the very low genetic variation in the parental population.

"We are using artificial insemination and DNA fingerprinting to minimise the loss of genetic diversity from the kakapo population and improve the genetic quality of kakapo chicks."

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Melissa Reid for letting me use the article "Genetic link suspected in Kakapo death" , the copyright remains with DOC

References

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I wish to thank Barbara Heidenreich to let me print following article and photographs
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Parrot Conservation and You!

Parrot people are pretty amazing. One of the things I find so wonderful about people who share their lives with parrots is that they often are the same folks who are saving parrots in the wild. Yup, it's true. Parrot owners are a huge source of funding for parrot conservation. I love that!

The connection they make with the parrots in their home often leads to learning more about their wild counterparts and what is being done to protect them. I have to say that is exactly what happened to me. I had budgies as a child, but my first large parrot came into my life in 1987. Ever since then I have been fascinated with learning more about parrots. Not long after that I learned about a very unique parrot called the Kakapo.

This large (2000 gram) flightless bird struck me as the coolest parrot ever! I thought it was so interesting that the males climb mountains, build a bowl, suck in air and boom for a mate. For a behavior geek like me this is truly fascinating. When I also learned they were one of the rarest parrots on earth I became even more interested.

When I finally had a chance to visit New Zealand (the home of the Kakapo) I did my best to try to connect with the folks saving these birds in the wild. On my third trip to this beautiful country I finally had my opportunity.

The story of the Kakapo Recovery Programme is pretty inspiring. Kakapos were nearly wiped out completely by introduced stoats, rats, dogs and cats. Animal heroes such asRichard Henry and Don Merton went to great lengths to find safe island homes for the few remaining birds. These birds now live on Codfish Island and are closely monitored. Unfortunately they need more than an island to survive. They need genetic diversity, higher numbers and a plentiful food supply during breeding season. Different strategies have been implemented to address these issues and so far they seem to be working. Kakapo numbers are up to 131 individuals (from a low of 50). However as you can imagine 131 birds is still a small population and there is much more work to be done.

As a parrot enthusiast I wanted to know what I could do to help. As with any conservation project it requires people who care and of course funding to keep it going. We brainstormed some ideas on that day (and my head was spinning with even more on the flight home.)

Our visit took a pleasant unexpected twist. An opportunity to visit with some Kakapo chicks was possible. We only had one spare day to make it happen. The odds were against us. It was a 12 hour drive, flights were coming up as $1000! And time was not on our side. Miraculously we found a travel agent who found us reasonable flights. The next day however the airport closed down due to weather and our scheduled flight was canceled. We finally took off at 4PM. The next flight was delayed.due to mechanical errors. My heart was sinking. Finally we made it into the air! We landed at our destination around 8PM and were whisked away straight to seven Kakapo chicks!

Have you ever met someone that awed you? That moved you? That made you want do important and worthwhile things with your life? Meeting the Kakapo chicks did just that for me. Knowing these individuals represented hope for the species and that each bird was so incredibly important made this encounter so emotionally moving for me. I could not stop replaying the events in my head for days. . .