

# KEAS AND SHEEP

For many years within New Zealand, and frequently in overseas journals, the New Zealand kea (*Nestor notabilis*) has been described in terms which can leave no doubt in the reader's mind that the bird is an implacable destroyer of sheep and these impressions still persist, notwithstanding that competent observers have concluded that the kea is a much maligned bird, albeit a mischievous one. It has been demonstrated that the policy of paying a bounty for the destruction of keas was entirely without justification and it was due largely to the efforts of our Society that the bounty was discontinued. By courtesy of the Ornithological Society of New Zealand we are reproducing an article by J. R. Jackson from the June 1962 issue of *Notornis*, the official journal of that society. Mr. Jackson is a competent observer and has obviously given much thought to the subject. We hope that publication of his article will place the kea problem in its proper perspective.

Photo of kea on front cover.

## DO KEAS ATTACK SHEEP?

by J. R. Jackson

For nearly a hundred years it has been widely believed among runholders and shepherds of the South Island high country that keas attack and kill sheep. Consequently during much of this period a bounty has been paid for keas. In 1886 the Government bounty was £1 and today many runholders pay about the same amount. After studying keas I have concluded this destruction is not justified.

The whole subject is part of the folklore of New Zealand. It has been collected by Benham (1906) and by Marriner (1906 and 1908) and today most of the tales told can be matched by what these authors put on record. One variant, not to be found in these authors, is described below.

The discovery of keas attacking sheep is lost in confusion. Marriner traced the first published account back to 1868 and attacks to 1867. I have been unable to check Marriner's 1868 and indeed Benham gives a different source for a newspaper article which Potts (1871) refers to a "local paper". Also

Benham points out how two men on neighbouring stations, J. McDonald on Wanaka Station in 1867 and J. Campbell on West Wanaka Station in 1870 both claim to have first discovered keas attacking sheep. Beattie (1936, 1937 and 1938) mentions a third independent discovery. Possibly the dislike of the kea is older; perhaps it is a transmuted hatred of cockatoos brought to New Zealand by Australian shepherds, the "shagrooms". Certainly Mr. D. A. Cameron, the original runholder of Nokomai and one of Marriner's correspondents, was from Australia, and Beattie (1936, 1937 and 1938) makes apparent the large Australian element among the early Otago and Southland settlers.

The year 1867 is of interest for, as Barker (1870) describes from 29 July to 6 August was the first heavy and persistent snowfall experienced by the runholders. Losses of sheep were very large. Yet in the early accounts as Potts (1871) no mention is made of keas feeding on carrion with which they were so well supplied in 1867. They are mentioned feeding at the gallows and a theory built on this basis. The heavy snowfall in August was followed in February 1868 by record floods (Brown 1940).

This account is largely an internal analysis of the folklore and it is my purpose to show:—

1. The accounts differ greatly;
2. Several accounts contain inaccurate descriptions. The authors may have had difficulty in describing what they saw but even so public policy should not be based on faulty accounts;
3. A geographic variation of account.

### DIFFERENCES

#### A. Difficulty of Witnessing Attack

As Marriner points out when he began collecting evidence there were no first-hand descriptions of kea attack. He says he obtained thirty descriptions and it is possible by comparing his accounts and Benham's to identify twenty witnesses. Benham has ten descriptions, four in common with Marriner. Since 1906 this topic has been discussed in the newspapers every few years and usually one or two more witnesses write their descriptions. It is notable that there have been few witnesses; yet four