

Restoration of iconic native bird causes problems in urban areas

October 27 2017



Credit: Victoria University

After a century-long absence, kākā were successfully reintroduced in Wellington in 2002—but the restoration of the iconic native bird has ruffled a few feathers.

Kākā are a delight, says Victoria ecologist Associate Professor Wayne Linklater. "They're wonderful birds to watch and listen to, and you watch

kids' faces light up around them."

But, just like their cousins the kea, kaka are boisterous, brainy and also potentially problematic in urban areas.

An emerging challenge in Wellington's suburbs is kākā damaging property—gouging into trees, roofs and buildings.

"Kākā are cavity nesters and, like most birds, attract in numbers where there is food," explains Wayne. "They're quite happy living in cities, where there are human-made cavities and food everywhere."

This has led to neighbours arguing about whether people should be feeding kaka, says Wayne.

"Wellingtonians love feeding birds and connecting with wildlife—somewhere between 25 and 40 percent of residents at least occasionally feed birds in their backyard. It extends from throwing out some scrap food to placing large quantities in bird feeders.

"It could be that for many kākā their primary food source is people's backyards, and this is driving them to gather in particularly large numbers in some neighbourhoods."

Wayne and his research team are investigating the cause of, and potential solutions to, this emerging issue. This includes a group of postgraduate students surveying Wellington residents about the birds last summer.

"The results show people who feed kaka are very tolerant to damage, but non-feeders and neighbours of feeders weren't as happy. As the damage by kākā in their neighbourhood increased, their positive attitude toward kākā declined.

"This suggests that you can have a few kākā and that's fine for most people, but as their numbers and damage grow, it impacts people's tolerance of, and support for, the species."

The next step is working out the importance of nests and natural and artificial foods to kākā, and their choices about where to be in Wellington's environment.

"We need to determine what kākā prefer, and their frequency relative to concentrations of feeding," says Wayne. "A Master's student will be working on a project to predict how many kākā Wellington can expect in the future and where they'll live, given a variety of scenarios."

Wayne says kākā pose a challenge for conservationists: about how to manage a valued species that damages people's property and how to address the concerns of residents who have different values, priorities and expectations and disagree with each other about kākā.

"Is it realistic to stop Wellingtonians feeding [birds](#)? If we can't, how do we modify what and how kaka are fed so that they do less damage? How might neighbours reach agreement about how they live with kākā?"

"The more we understand about what people want and need and how to mitigate conflicts over and with wildlife, the more likely we are to be able to have a positive relationship with wildlife. There's a bigger conversation to be had."

Provided by Victoria University

Citation: Restoration of iconic native bird causes problems in urban areas (2017, October 27) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2017-10-iconic-native-bird-problems-urban.html>

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