



Title: *“The Thousand-yard Stare”*

Description: New Zealand falcon (kārearea), Lake Tekapo.

Photographer: Paul Sorrell

Where, when: Lake Tekapo, Canterbury, October 2021

Sustainability? New Zealand falcons (kārearea) seem to be holding their own, at least in the lower South Island (Te Waipounamu). Their persistence results in part from flexible habitat requirements. At Orokonui Ecosanctuary near Dunedin, I’ve seen them swooping across a forest clearing and diving through tiny gaps into the bush. And in forestry plantations in the city’s hinterland, they have made their homes in cutover blocks where they can scout for prey. I photographed this splendid male in the tussocklands of the Mackenzie Basin, near Lake Tekapo. Breeding is still a challenging task for our falcons, however, as their habit of nesting on the ground means that their young are prone to predation by introduced mammals.

In conservation management it is the trend in population abundance that matters most – some species are “naturally rare”, especially the “top predators” like our falcon and many birds of prey. The further a species is up the food chain, the more likely it is to be naturally rare, even if maintaining a stable population density. Consequently, many people haven’t seen our native falcon – or perhaps they have, but not recognised its distinctive flight pattern compared to the much more common Australasian harrier (kāhu) Our falcons are a “sparrowhawk” – they flap their wings rapidly, hover and can manoeuvre around obstacles (like tree branches) far more deftly than the larger, lumbering harrier hawks.

The pristine-looking environment surrounding this bird in the Mackenzie Basin is deceptive, as sheep were grazing in the next valley and the region’s braided rivers, where wrybills, black-fronted terns and black stilts breed, among others, are under threat from introduced weeds and mammals as well as the prospect of intensive dairy farming.

Birds of prey have exquisitely sharp eyesight – key to spotting small prey scuttering for cover as they cruise high above. The Māori phrase “kanohi kāhu” means long-sighted or hawk-eyed. This

individual was the perfect subject as I slowly circled him at a respectful distance, shooting from every angle. His haughty stare showed his complete indifference to me. He and his mate were prospecting for a nest site on the opposite hill slope; had they had chicks or eggs, I would not have got off so lightly!

Photo notes: *Camera:* Canon EOS 7D. *Lens:* EF400mm f/5.6L USM. *Settings:* 400mm f/6.3 1/400 sec ISO 200.

Digital specs: 5184 × 3456 pixels (11.2 MB).

Key words: Birds, upland birds, falcon, kārearea, *Falco novaeseelandiae*, raptor, Lake Tekapo, Mackenzie Basin, tussocklands, mammalian predation, environmental threats, biodiversity, Paul Sorrell, Aotearoa, New Zealand, sustainability

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Image Ref: PS#002 (Please refer to this reference in orders and correspondence).

Paul Sorrell

15 February 2022