

THE KAGU DEFINITIVES OF NEW CALEDONIA

The Unique Kagu of New Caledonia

The Kagu (*Rhynochitos jubatus*), or Cagou in French, as spoken in the island group, is a unique bird, the only living species in the Rhynochitidae family, with only one other species known in the fossil record. However, it is closely related to the Rallidae, although it may have been flightless for much longer than the many island rail species which found no need for flight in their secretive predator free life, until European colonisation, that is. It has a full wing structure but the degree of keel bone and muscle atrophy means that it can only glide from a higher position to a lower, with no power to lift off, similar to the Ground Hornbills of East Africa.

For a secretive forest bird, it stands quite tall and it is unusual in not having any form of encryption of its blue grey plumage (*Fig 1*). For mating and alarm displays, it can raise a distinctive crest and reveal an even more striking underwing pattern. In the mists of the past history of the main island of Grande Terre, this plumage and the lore of the bird became an integral part of local Kanak tribal culture.



FIG 1 The unique Kagu of New Caledonia

Early overprints and the first Kagu Definitives

Before 1903, the stamps of New Caledonia had typically been the standard key type designs for colonial stamps of France, with the colony's name in the panel at the foot of the stamp, latterly the "Navigation and Commerce" design. As one of 27 such colonies at the time, New Caledonia was seeking to break away from the mother country's postal identity.

The celebration of the 50th anniversary of France's annexation of New Caledonia that year gave it the opportunity to use permitted local overprints to commemorate the occasion and to introduce a symbol of its own identity, the Kagu. *Fig 2* shows the Kagu with outstretched wings incorporated into some examples of the commemorative overprint.

As Gibbons "Stamps of the World" identifies the bird on the overprint as an eagle, its iconic significance on this issue could be easily overlooked, as the future would tell.



FIG 2 The 1903 overprint design incorporating a Kagu applied to definitive, surcharged and postage due stamps

New Caledonia did not look back. Having pressed its case with the overprints on a full set of definitives, subsequent surcharges and on postage dues, it was allowed, along with some other colonies, to produce its own stamp designs from 1905. The first definitive set featured, of course, the Kagu (*Fig 3*), with formal protection of the bird in the country having been introduced only the year before. In a definitive series produced over the period from 1905 until it was replaced in 1928, 28 stamps were issued, the first 8 values featuring the Kagu.

When overprinting was required for surcharges or for use in adjacent French territories (Wallis and Futuna and French New Hebrides) it was generally the Kagu stamps that were used.



FIG 3. Examples of the 1905 definitive, surcharged and overprinted for use in Wallis et Futuna.

Establishing pre-eminence

The Kagu did not appear in the 1928 definitive set, even though it comprised 42 values of only three designs featuring landscapes and historical characters. However, the Free French 1942 issue, one of several produced in French colonies to show solidarity with the French Resistance and de Gaulle's campaign from London, was exclusively devoted to a single distinctive art deco style of design representing a Kagu in 14 values for postage. There were also 7 airmail values in a different design. Appropriately, the flightless Kagu has never appeared on an airmail stamp and yet the illustration on the postage values shows a bird considered by some to be in flight. More likely, it is in the throes of jump display, showing off its underwing patterns, as its two feet are just visible in a downward extended position below the near wing. In 1945, eight of these Kagu stamps were surcharged.



FIG 4. Cover passed by the US censor during the war, with the first five of the Free French issue of 1942

In 1948, the Kagu again appeared in the lower values of a definitive set of 19 postage and 3 airmail values, the other values representing a number of New Caledonian landmarks. The maximum card at Fig 5 provides the most realistic image of the bird in display mode of any of the designs to date.



FIG 5. 1948 issue maximum card

For much of the next 37 year period, the 1948 issue remained in use as New Caledonia moved to themed issues for wildlife such as the attractive bird set of 1966 which included one value for the Kagu. By the time the Kagu returned to grace in the definitive series in 1985, a whole new approach had emerged.

Le Club Cagou and the design competition

New Caledonia's Philatelic Society was founded in 1947 as, appropriately, Le Club Philatélique du Cagou. Always a very active society, by 1985 it had become a close partner of the New Caledonia post office to the extent that it not only persuaded it to use the Kagu exclusively on definitive stamps but to organise a design competition for each future definitive issue, in which the club still takes an active part. The definitives from now on were also to be in much shorter sets of 8, 10, 5, 10, 5 and 5 stamps respectively, but including non value indicator stamps.

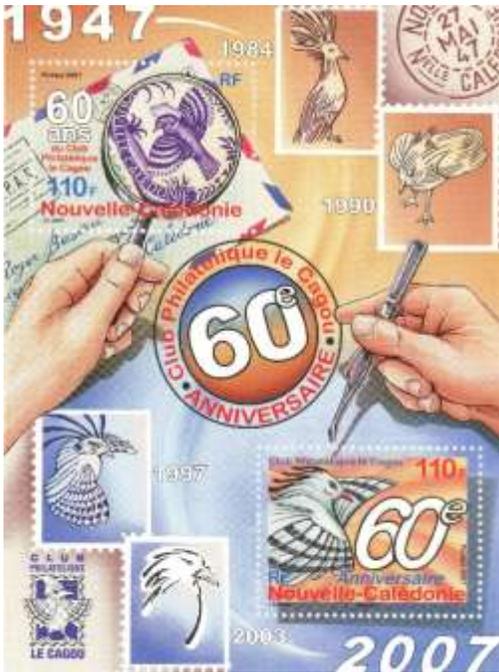


FIG 6. Club Cagou 60th anniversary sheet in 2007, with images in the surrounds of the four definitive competition designs up to that date

The design competition has encouraged stylistic variety in the 6 competitions to date, always in monochrome colours, which has added to the design innovation. The first competition winner in 1985 was French stamp designer/engraver Pierre Forget who depicted the bird in typical upright, startled manner with crest erect. Within a short period, however, this design had to be altered to remove “et Dependences” from the country’s official name as a result of the resolution of long standing civil unrest in the Matignon Accord. The resulting interim reissue in 1988 used the shorter name to the great advantage of the design, showing the bird to better effect.



FIG 7. Examples from the 1985 and temporary 1988 issues

The 1990 and 1997 competitions were won with designs, firstly, by Raymond Coatantiec and, secondly, by Jean Richard Lisiak and Andre Lavergne, that shows the Kagu displaying with wings extended, the one in crouching stance showing only the edges of the wing markings and the crest flat while the other is in upright stance showing both features to good

effect. In monochrome, the latter seems more successful in demonstrating the striking underwing pattern and the erect crest not only in view if the stance but also in the sweeping lines of the design for the whole stamp.



FIG 8. Examples from the 1990 and 1997 issues, including a franking label with the 1990 Kagu design

The design chosen for the 2003 issue, again by Andre Lavergne, is also stylised, this time showing only the head of the bird with its crest semi reclined and hinting at a thickness at the base of the bill where the nasal corns are found which protect the nostrils when rooting in the undergrowth, another unique feature of the bird.

Anniversaries

In 2003, a commemorative reproduction was produced for the centenary of the first Kagu overprint as was a special 70F version of the Lavergne definitive. This was embossed with silver to enhance the outline of the bird's head.



FIG 9. The 2003 definitive and the centenary design for the first Kagu overprint

Laurence Ramon was the successful designer in 2009 with a more realistic image of the Kagu. This was also the year of the 150th anniversary of the first post office on New Caledonia, which was celebrated by a lenticular (3D) stamp, also designed by Ramon, featuring all of the Kagu definitive designs since 1985 which can be seen by looking at the stamp from different angles.

Finally, to date, in 2016, the first New Caledonia resident to win the competition, Sebastian Werling, was successful with a minimalist single line depiction of a standing Kagu.



FIG 10. Images of the 2009 (2012 printing) and 2016 issues, and a personalised version for the 70th anniversary of Le Club Cagou.

New Caledonia's commitment to a regular design competition for its definitive stamps using the same subject, the national bird, has created a fascinating topic for bird stamps collectors who are also interested in wider philatelic aspects.