

## And not a Kiwi in sight

New Zealand's Bird of the Year Poll - the most important election, after the real one

### Part 1: The winners 2015-2019

New Zealand grabbed everyone's attention recently with their generally successful response to the COVID virus. And then again with the general election that followed. That's a pretty high amount of media attention for a country with a population of just over five million. Which, dare I utter it, is actually smaller than Scotland's.

And New Zealand is not resting on its laurels either, for another great event has now just begun. Despite our own continuing but necessary focus on COVID, it is possible that the Eagle-eyed might just have spotted in recent news that New Zealand has just begun another election. It's their annual "Bird of the Year" poll!

Starting from Monday, 2<sup>nd</sup> November and lasting until Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> November, voting opens for the 2020 event. New Zealanders are now keenly considering their top five choices for this year, with a winner selected after a number of eliminating rounds and then crowned Bird of the Year or in Maori, Te Manu Rongonui o Te Tau.

As the organisers stress, a large number of New Zealand's native birds are endangered and need help to halt their decline. They estimate that 75% of land birds and 90% of seabirds are now threatened or at risk, with habitats being degraded or destroyed by predators, pollution, human intervention and, of course, climate change. Mind-boggling figures! So this poll is important in raising public attention and raising money for conservation.

Now, New Zealand has some fascinating endemic species and so I was keen to find out who the previous winners selected by the public had been. And heh, in the last five years there has not been a Kiwi in sight!

The Event has been running now for fifteen years, but I thought it a good idea to do a quick run-through - backwards - and then compare them with their local philatelic profile. For this blog, let's look at the last five winners.

In 2019 the poll was I understand, "hotly contested," but the Hoiho or Yellow-eyed Penguin was the winner. As the Guardian then reported, it received more votes than there are Hoiho! It is the world's rarest Penguin and seriously threatened with extinction. It was the first seabird to ever win the title. It is found on the eastern and south-eastern coastline of South Island, Stewart Island and a scattering of smaller islands even further south. The estimated population is just 4,000.

I found three examples on New Zealand stamps. See the illustrations below:-



1993 WWF



1996 Marine Wildlife sheet



2001 Penguins

2018 threw up another seemingly curious choice, the Kereru or New Zealand Wood Pigeon. Wood Pigeons in the British Isles are so commonplace that they are barely ever given further thought. Not so in New Zealand, where Kereru numbers - once high - have declined enormously since European colonisation and its status is now rated as, “Near threatened.” They are found on both islands but numbers are perhaps higher on South Island. It has had a good philatelic showing though, including a classic “Health Stamp”:-



1960 Health Stamps



1973 Anniversaries



1993 WWF Sheet



1995 Environmental protection



2006 Christmas



2018 Predator free 2050

In 2017 the Kea won the award. Described as the only Alpine parrot in the world, the Kea is found in the forests and mountainous areas of South Island. They are immensely intelligent birds, but with sadly greatly reduced numbers. Perhaps now over 15,000 birds. They are listed as Endangered and are a protected species.

On stamps they can be found across the full range of issues, from the very earliest “classics” to the more recent. I pulled out the following half dozen:-



1899/1902 Kea (& Kaka)



1998 Centenary pictorials



2009 Tiki Tour sheet



It was the Kokako, or more correctly North Island Kokako that won in 2016. The South Island Kokako is recorded as extinct. It's another species that is seriously endangered, with numbers reduced by introduced predators. It's a predominantly grey bird with distinctive blue wattles and a black mask. It has appeared twice on New Zealand stamps, most recently and appropriately as part of a conservation series.



1985 Native Birds



2018 - Predator free 2050

The last one in this set is another curious choice, the Bar-tailed Godwit. I like the idea of a wader being a winner as this species was in 2015. It is a migrant and there are several subspecies. The one that visits New Zealand in the winter is *Limosa lapponica baueri* and it crosses the Pacific to breed in western Alaska. A flight of over 11,000 miles. And why a curious choice? It has never been depicted on a New Zealand stamp. Stilts and Plovers yes, but the Bar-tailed Godwit has regrettably never graced a stamp. At least, not so far.



Waiting for a stamp - Bar-tailed Godwit

And here's a further thought. The Bird of the Year has been running since 2005 but, as far as I'm aware, there has never been a stamp to acknowledge the winners each year. Baltic countries have bird of the year stamps, but not New Zealand. I wonder why, as it's such an obvious thing to do and a missed opportunity to raise further money for conservation.

There will be more blogs on past winners to follow.