

Kea, the clowns of the mountains.

As I sit at the computer putting this page together, there is a young male Kea on the roof just outside my office. He is peering over the edge upside down, hanging on to the guttering with his claws. I wonder if he is one of the keas that got into the garage last weekend and tore all the rubbish bags into tiny pieces! I bet they enjoyed that. Read on and find out more about these awesome birds...

The Kea is the largest bird you are likely to see at Arthur's Pass. It is a member of the parrot family, which we know by its beak shape and four claws, two forward and two back. Most birds have only three. Of course there are other well known features of the kea. It is cunning, clever, and a never ending source of laughs and clicking cameras. The laughs may be at your expense if the kea is chewing holes in your gum boots, or if you have to clean up the rubbish the kea has just spread all over the garage!

If you're ever short of a good yarn, ask any old time mountain person to tell you a kea story. You'll never be let down. I once saw a kea spend ten minutes knocking over a ski that had been stood up in the snow, so it could then go for a ride. Corrugated iron roofs are a kea's favourite slide, especially if there is someone inside to annoy with the clatter, clatter, clatter.

Kea are seen less often in Arthur's Pass village today as the rubbish dump (like a fast food store for kea) has been closed. It is important that people do not feed kea. Their metabolism is suited to the food they eat naturally like seeds, berries, insects, carrion (dead animals) and roots. Our human food has too much energy and too many sugars for kea, and it makes them hyperactive! They will also learn to live off people and not from their own environment.

The kea is rather dull in colour until it opens its wings to display the reds, the oranges and the yellows. The older it gets, the duller its feathers become and it loses the yellow around its beak. The hook shaped beak is an adaptation, which allows it not only to chew rubber, but dig up roots and lawns. The kea's habitat changes with the temperature. It tends to come down into the valleys more in the cooler days in the winter, otherwise it seems to fly anywhere there is interest or food. It nests under logs and boulders in very secretive places, which people rarely discover.