

BIRD OF THE YEAR

by Iona McNaughton

Every year, people vote for their favourite New Zealand bird in the Bird of the Year competition. The bird that gets the most votes is the winner. The competition is run by Forest & Bird, an organisation that helps look after New Zealand's birds and wildlife.

I asked Megan Hubscher from Forest & Bird some questions about the competition.



Iona



Megan



Why does Forest & Bird hold the Bird of the Year competition?

We want people to know more about the wonderful birds we have in Aotearoa New Zealand and to learn how to keep those birds safe.

Can people vote for any bird?

No, the competition is only about native birds. That means birds that have always lived in New Zealand or birds that have flown here from other countries, but not birds like blackbirds and sparrows that have been brought to New Zealand by people.

Why native birds?

New Zealand has 168 kinds of native birds, but most of them are in danger of becoming extinct. This means they may die out. The fairy tern, the 2014 Bird of the Year, is our most endangered bird. There are only twenty of them left. We want people to know how they can help stop native birds like the fairy tern from dying out.

Some of our native birds can be found in other countries as well. For example, the pūkeko and kororā (little blue penguin) also live in Australia, but they have different names there. These birds flew or swam to New Zealand many years ago.

Ninety-three of our native birds are also endemic. This means they live only in New Zealand. The kiwi, the kākāpō, and the tūī are all endemic – you won't find them anywhere else in the world.

The Bird of the Year competition helps people to understand what makes our native birds special and why we need to look after them.



A fairy tern – tara iti

Why are New Zealand birds in danger?

There are three main reasons why New Zealand birds are in danger. The biggest danger is from animals such as possums, rats, and stoats. These animals are predators. They kill the birds and eat their eggs.

Another danger is from changes to the birds' habitats (the places where the birds live). For example, many birds live in forests, but people often cut down the trees to make space for houses. People also use a lot of plastic, and that can get into the ocean and kill seabirds.



Kea live in the mountains.



Kākā live in forests.



Tarāpuka (black-billed gulls) live on the seashore.



Whio (blue ducks) live in rivers.

Changes in the weather can also be dangerous for birds. For example, in Northland, hot weather has made the ground so hard and dry that some kiwi have been starving because they can't get their beaks into the ground to eat the bugs and worms that live there.

Do you think the Bird of the Year competition is helping to save our birds?

I'm sure it is. Every year, more and more people take part. In 2018, around 50,000 people voted in the competition. All those people are learning more about our native birds.

Forest & Bird also has the Kiwi Conservation Club (KCC) to help Kiwi kids learn about New Zealand's birds and other wildlife. KCC members get together to find out more about places such as the bush and the beach and the birds and animals that live in these places. They also get a magazine called *Wild Things* four times a year.

When did the Bird of the Year competition start?

Bird of the Year started in 2005. When it began, it was the only competition in the world where people could vote for their favourite bird.

Who can vote?

Anyone can vote. The only rule is that you can vote only once. You can vote online, by email, or by posting a letter.



Kiwi Conservation Club members

Can you tell me more about the competition?

Bird of the Year takes place in October every year. A list of the birds that people can vote for is put up on the Forest & Bird website.

The competition gets people very excited. They make videos and posters to try to get other people to vote for their favourite bird. They write songs, make speeches, and take photos. In 2018, the prime minister asked people to vote for the black petrel. And former All Black captain Richie McCaw painted a picture of his favourite bird, the kākāriki (orange-fronted parakeet), on his helicopter.

How can school students get involved?

The best way is for a class to choose their favourite native bird and find out all they can about it. Then they can tell their friends and family why it should be the winner and try to get everyone they know to vote for it.

Which bird has won the most times?

It's really interesting – no bird has won more than once. I think we have so many amazing birds that people like to share first place around. It's hard to pick just one favourite bird!

Me pōti - Vote for me

In 2018, some students from Bethlehem School in Tauranga wanted the kakaruia (black robin) to win Bird of the Year. They made a video about why people should vote for it.

Their main message was “Ahakoa he iti noa, he pounamu”, which means although it is small, it is a treasure to the world.

The students also made biscuits and soap in the shape of black robins. They sold these to raise money to help the birds.

Although the black robin didn't win, the students now know much more about this beautiful little native bird. They've also learnt a lot about other New Zealand native birds and what people can do to help keep them safe.



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