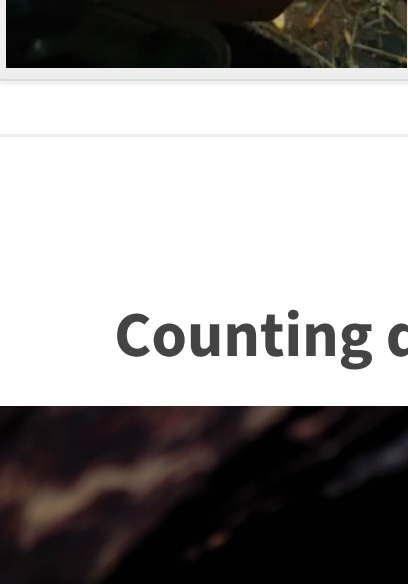


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## Kākāpō breeding season 2026

Department of Conservation – 27/06/2025 – 2 Comments

### 3...2...1, Boom!

#### Counting down to the kākāpō breeding season

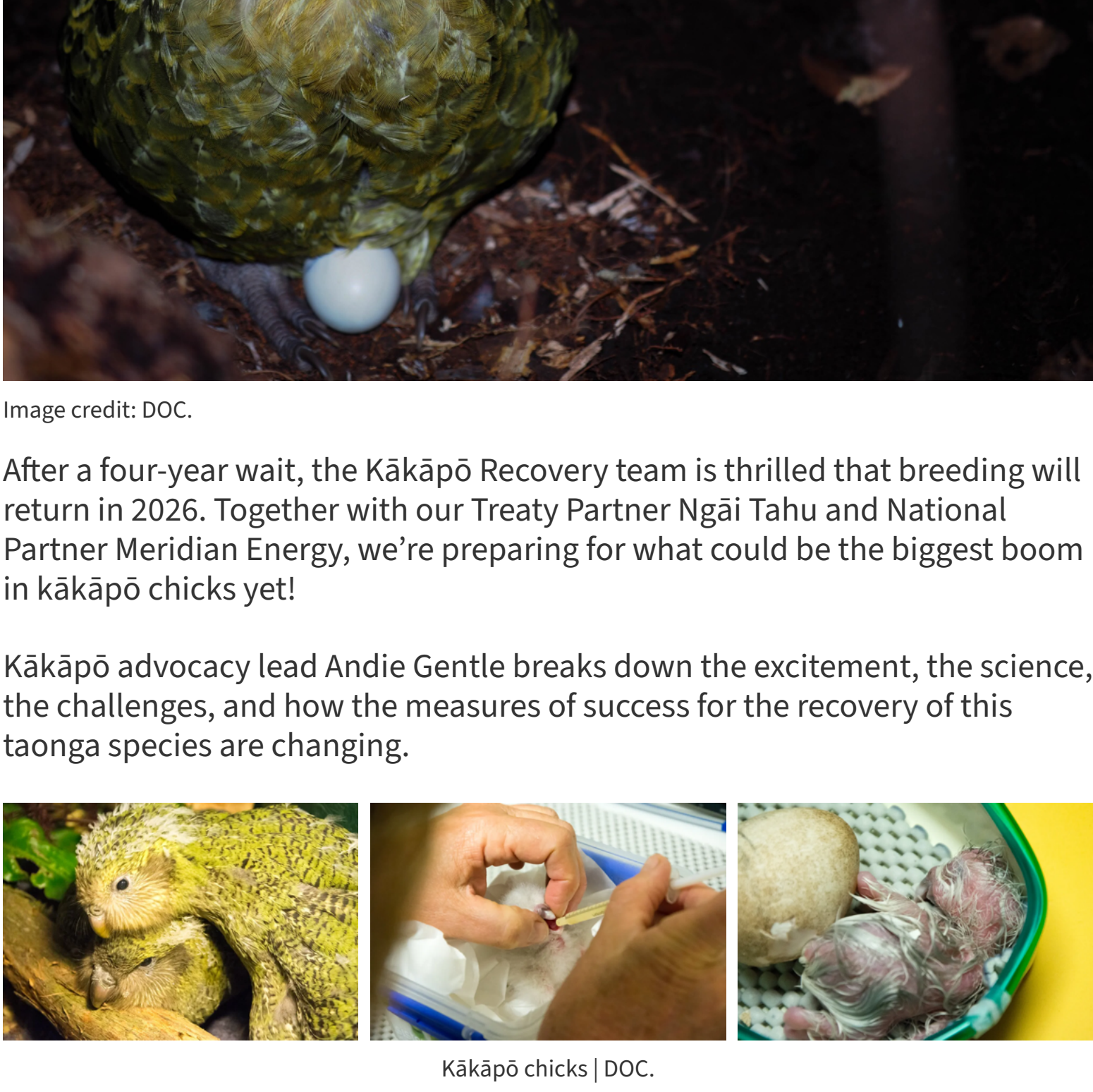
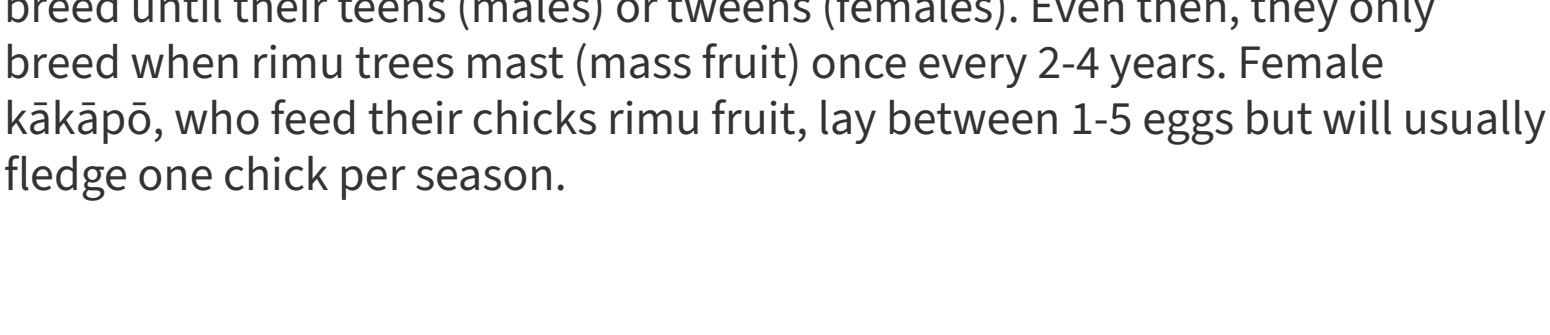


Image credit: DOC.

After a four-year wait, the Kākāpō Recovery team is thrilled that breeding will return in 2026. Together with our Treaty Partner Ngāi Tahu and National Partner Meridian Energy, we're preparing for what could be the biggest boom in kākāpō chicks yet!

Kākāpō advocacy lead Andie Gentle breaks down the excitement, the science, the challenges, and how the measures of success for the recovery of this taonga species are changing.



Kākāpō chicks | DOC.

#### Why all the hype?

Admittedly, we always get super excited about breeding seasons – and for good reason.

Kākāpō are a taonga species to Ngāi Tahu, the principal Māori iwi of southern New Zealand. The world's only, flightless, nocturnal parrot is critically endangered with just 242 alive today. The breeding populations are only found on three very remote, rugged predator-free islands in the deep south of Aotearoa New Zealand; Whenua Hou/Codfish Island, Pukenui/Anchor Island and Te Kāhaku/Chalky Island.

We estimate kākāpō can live between 60-90 years. Most don't successfully breed until their teens (males) or tweens (females). Even then, they only breed when rimu trees mast (mass fruit) once every 2-4 years. Female kākāpō, who feed their chicks rimu fruit, lay between 1-5 eggs but will usually fledge one chick per season.

Alice and chick Rupi | Jake Osborne/DOC.

Once widespread across the country, kākāpō populations plummeted after humans arrived due to hunting, habitat loss, and introduced predators. Since 1995, we've worked to rebuild the population from just 51 birds – 31 males, 20 females; and we've supported them through 12 breeding seasons, reaching a top population in 2022 of 252.

Many of the earlier seasons produced fewer than a handful of chicks, but as the population has slowly grown, breeding seasons have grown too! In terms of numbers, 2019 has been our biggest breeding season yet, with management initiatives helping produce a record 73 fledglings.

So yes, we do get hyped – because the mahi is intensive and every chick is so precious!

#### The art of prediction

Using summer temperature patterns, we can predict rimu mast events (and therefore breeding seasons) up to two years in advance. Closer to the season, we collect sample rimu branches from the islands and count the tips to estimate fruiting levels.

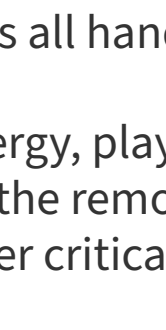
Image 1: Kākāpō Recovery's Technical Advisor Daryl Eason counting rimu tips | DOC.  
Images 2 & 3: rimu fruit | DOC.

We know some kākāpō will breed if more than 10 percent of rimu tips bear fruit and that a greater number of kākāpō breed as the percentage of fruit increases.

The latest data for 2026 shows record-high predictions of around 50–60 percent fruiting across all three breeding islands. If this happens there could be potential for nearly all of the 87 breeding-age females to nest in 2026.

#### What the lek?

Kākāpō are the only lek-breeding parrot in the world. A lek is a mating system where males gather in a communal area, called a lek, to display to females. Male kākāpō spend months preparing 'track and bowl' systems (networks of cleared paths and depressions that help resonate sound) where they perform booming and chinging courtship calls. These nightly displays to attract females from across the island can last for weeks or even months on end. Once mating is done, the female takes on all parenting duties – nesting, incubating, and raising the chick's solo.



VIDEO: Kākāpō Sinbad booming | DOC. (Tip: headphones in to hear this one!)

#### Our mahi behind the scenes

Just like male kākāpō preparing for breeding season, we've been busy getting ready.

From recruiting and training staff, to ensuring island infrastructure and data networks are running smoothly, it's all hands-on deck.

Our National Partner, Meridian Energy, plays a vital role in maintaining generators and power systems on the remote breeding islands to support the seasonal influx of people and power critical equipment like chick incubators.

Meridian Energy engineers Mark (left) and Joe (right), at work maintaining the power systems on the kākāpō breeding islands.

Ahead of each season, we strategically transferred some birds between islands, based on their history and genetics, to give them all the best chance of success. Around October we start providing supplementary food to help some birds reach optimal breeding condition.

Each kākāpō wears a radio transmitter that tracks their activity and location year-round. These allow us to learn remotely when matings occur (Dec-Jan), who mated with who, and when females are nesting.

During nesting and hatching (Jan–March), we locate nests, ensure their safety, and set up nearby camps to keep an eye on things. Vulnerable eggs or chicks may need incubators, hand-rearing or taken to the mainland for specialist care.

Through April and May, we continue to monitor chick growth and ensure they fledge safely.

Every breeding season is a chance to grow the kākāpō population, however success goes beyond numbers alone.

Image 1: Kākāpō Recovery Technical Advisor Daryl Eason weighing chick.  
Image 2: Operations Manager Deidre Vercoe assess fertility and development of kākāpō egg.  
Image 3: Kākāpō eating from feeding hopper | Jake Osborne/DOC

#### Redefining the measures of success

Kākāpō are among the most intensively managed species on Earth but as the population grows, the same level of on the ground management isn't sustainable.

After 30 years of managing each bird individually, breeding season success is now less about fledging numbers, and more about working towards establishing self-sustaining populations.

When the population numbered less than 200 birds, it was essential that every single chick made it through. In recent seasons we've been stepping back, phasing out nightly nest checks by using genetic ranking to prioritise eggs and chicks, and trialling low-intervention on Te Kāhaku / Chalky Island.

The population is still critically endangered, so we'll keep working hard to increase numbers, but as the population grows, we need to shift the balance towards understanding and supporting a more natural level of survival.

This season, we'll step back further with:

- Fewer egg and chick checks
- More eggs hatching in nests rather than the safety of incubators
- Allowing mothers to raise multiple chicks
- Reduced supplementary feeding in some areas
- Expanding the low-management trial to parts of Pukenui / Anchor Island

Inevitably, this reduced management approach could result in a higher, more natural number of egg and chick deaths however this move toward minimal intervention is key to a more natural, efficient, and sustainable future for kākāpō recovery.

Mother Makorea and chick Willans together in a nest cavity | Jake Osborne/DOC.

#### The habitat challenge

While the potential of a record-breaking season is great news, kākāpō still face big challenges. Ongoing research on genetics and disease are helping us learn as much as possible to support a healthy population, but the most pressing challenge is finding more suitable habitat. We are trialling new small islands and a fenced sanctuary site, but what this species really needs is large scale habitat. As a former natural home to kākāpō, Rakiura/Stewart Island is the perfect contender, but introduced predators need to be removed to make it safer for kākāpō to return. You can learn more about why Predator Free Rakiura could be a game changer for kākāpō in this [new blog post](#).

Solstice in nest | DOC.

#### Let's make history, together

The 2026 breeding season could mark a significant turning point for kākāpō, not just in numbers, but in how we support the future of this taonga species.

You can support the mahi, and follow along as we bring kākāpō stories from the remote islands of Southern New Zealand to the world.

- Social Media: Follow us and share our stories on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#)
- [Sign up](#) to our newsletter
- [Volunteer](#): This breeding season there will only be a very limited number of volunteer roles available. These will be advertised [here](#) in August.
- [Donate](#) or [adopt](#) a kākāpō to support Kākāpō Recovery via the Mauri Ora Kākāpō Trust
- Help create safe habitat for kākāpō on Rakiura. [Visit New Zealand Nature Fund to donate](#)
- Get on board with [Predator Free 2050](#) and [Predator Free Rakiura](#) (Removing predators from Stewart Island/Rakiura)

Our mahi is achieved with our Treaty Partner [Ngāi Tahu](#) and National Partner [Meridian Energy](#) which provides funding as well as electrical infrastructure, technology and volunteering support to the programme.

Kākāpō receiving medical care at Dunedin Wildlife Hospital (left) and Auckland Zoo (right) | DOC.

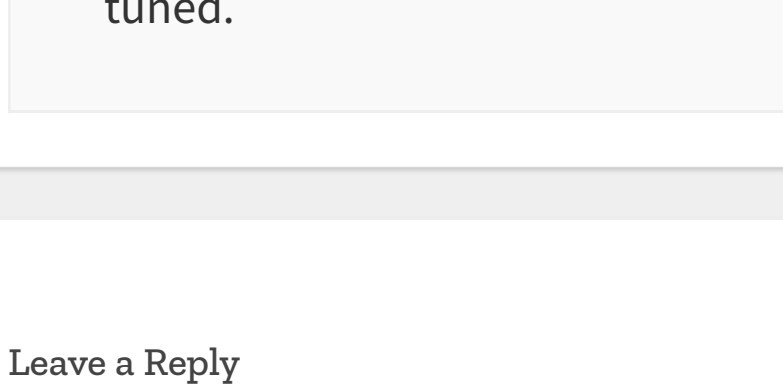
Invaluable to the programme too, is the expertise from vet supporters [Auckland Zoo](#) and [Dunedin Wildlife Hospital](#), and the transportation of threatened species through the DOC and [Air New Zealand](#) national partnership.

With 100 percent of our operational costs covered externally, work to help restore the mauri (life force) of kākāpō is also made possible thanks to the generosity of hundreds of volunteers, supporters and donors.

The kākāpō are ready. We're ready. Let's make history, together!

Image credit: DOC.

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2 responses to [Kākāpō breeding season 2026](#)

**Kristen Fraser** *27/06/2025 at 11:44 am*

Do you have a Kakapo nest Live Cam like you have the Royalcam for the albatross?

If not, please install one

[Reply](#)

**Department of Conservation** *27/06/2025 at 11:56 am*

Hi Kristen, we have trialled this in the past – [Kākāpō Cam 2022](#) – and we're working with the team to see what's possible this season. Stay tuned.

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