

Bellbird/korimako

Native birds

Most New Zealanders can easily recognise the bellbird by its melodious song, which Captain Cook described as sounding 'like small bells exquisitely tuned'.

Well camouflaged, the bellbird is usually heard before it is seen. Females are dull olive-brown, with a slight blue sheen on the head and a pale yellow cheek stripe. Males are olive green, with a purplish head and black outer wing and tail feathers.

Where are they found?

Bellbirds are unique to New Zealand, occurring on the three main islands, many offshore islands and also the Auckland Islands. When Europeans arrived in New Zealand, bellbirds were common throughout the North and South Islands. Their numbers declined sharply during the 1860s in the North Island and 1880s in the South Island, about the time that ship rats and stoats arrived. For a time it was thought they might vanish from the mainland. Their numbers recovered somewhat from about 1940 onwards, but they are almost completely absent on the mainland north of Hamilton, and are still rare in parts of Wellington, Wairarapa and much of inland Canterbury and Otago.

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Bellbirds live in native forest (including mixed podocarp-hardwood and beech forest) and regenerating forest, especially where there is diverse or dense vegetation. They can be found close to the coast or in vegetation up to about 1200 metres. In the South Island they have been found inhabiting plantations of eucalypts, pines or willows. They can be spotted in urban areas, especially if there is bush nearby.

Typically they require forest and scrub habitats, reasonable cover and good local food sources during the breeding season, since they do not travel far from the nest. However, outside the breeding season they may travel many kilometres to feed, especially males.



Did you know?

Just as people from different parts of New Zealand can have noticeable regional accents (think of the Southlander's rolling 'r'), bellbirds also sing with regional 'dialects'. Bellbird songs vary enormously from one place to another, even over short distances. For example, a study in Christchurch found that birds in three patches of bush on the Port Hills all had different songs. There is also anecdotal evidence that male and female bellbirds sing different songs, at least during some parts of the year. The song of juveniles is not fully developed straight away so an expert can distinguish their songs from adult songs.

Bellbird facts

- Bellbirds are generalist feeders; they eat nectar, fruit and insects, with insects being particularly important to females and chicks during the breeding season. They often feed in tree canopies but do come down to feed on flax and native fuchsia nectar.
- As nectar-feeders (or 'honeyeaters' as scientists call them), bellbirds are important pollinators of many native plant species, such as mistletoe, fuchsia and kowhai.
- The breeding season is approximately September through to February. Bellbirds tend to nest in trees, and prefer trees with dense foliage for cover. Bellbirds are strongly territorial during the breeding season.
- Bellbirds are known to mate with the same partner year after year, and the pair maintains the same breeding territory each year. The female makes the nest, lays 3 to 5 eggs, and incubates the clutch. Both parents feed the chicks, which fledge after 14 days. A pair can raise two broods in a season.
- Bellbird song comprises three distinct sounds resembling the chiming of bells. They sing throughout the day, but more so in the early morning and late evening. The alarm call is a series of loud, rapidly repeated, harsh staccato notes.

J L Kendrick

Threats

Although bellbirds are still widespread on the New Zealand mainland, research has shown that mammalian predators, such as rats and stoats, keep their numbers low. Where bellbirds persist on the mainland, numbers are usually lower than on islands where predators are absent. While possums have not been proven to kill bellbirds, they do compete with bellbirds for food.

How can you help?

There are various ways you can help protect bellbirds.

1. Planting a range of native plants that provide foods year-round will encourage bellbirds into your garden.
2. If you live near a patch of native forest, consider setting traps for stoats and/or rats on your land. Snap traps (the stoat version is called a Fenn trap) should be placed in a wooden or wire-mesh tunnel so birds and other animals cannot easily enter and be harmed. Bait the trap with a small piece of meat, or a hen's egg. Check the trap regularly to remove dead animals. You can access more information on traps from your local Department of Conservation office.
3. If you have a cat, put a bell on its collar – this seems to save some birds, while not preventing the cats from catching rodents.

Further Information

For further information you can access the Department of Conservation web site at www.doc.govt.nz or contact your nearest DOC office.

Landcare Research also has a bellbird research project in Canterbury that you might want to be a part of. See <http://www.landcareresearch.co.nz/research/biodiversity/bellbird/index.asp> for more information.

