

Birds of prey

Digging deeper...

Designer beaks

The New Zealand falcon, like other falcons, has a specialised beak. The beak is 'toothed' – it has a tooth shape on either side of the upper beak. This is designed for shearing and plucking feathers off their prey.

What's what

Harrier hawk or NZ falcon?

Harrier hawks are significantly larger than our falcons. New Zealand falcons are brownish-black on top with brown to white underparts. Harriers tend to be much more uniformly brown. Falcons are much faster fliers and have longer tails.

Those were the days...

Two now extinct birds of prey were formerly found in Otago. Haast's eagle, with a wingspan of up to 3m was the world's largest eagle and hunted moa. Eyles' harrier had a wingspan of up to 2m and was a more generalist predator, eating whatever was available. One of only three Haast's eagle skeletons in the world can be seen in the Otago Museum's Southern Land, Southern People.

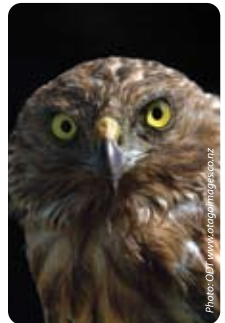
Hunting mainly birds, the New Zealand falcon's preferred hunting method is snatching prey in midair, while in flight. This persistent predator has even been known to hunt chickens from backyards, including venturing into houses to catch its prey!

The New Zealand falcon (*Falco novaeseelandiae*) is the only endemic bird of prey still alive today. Our falcon is an extremely aggressive bird and if you are lucky enough to see one hunting you are in for a treat. They readily attack birds seven or eight times their own size and for this reason have been killed by farmers and even bird fanciers trying to protect the birds they prey on! Falcons nest on cliff ledges or high in trees. Mum does most of the brooding while dad hunts for food for mum and her chicks. During nesting time that aggressive and territorial nature comes to the fore and they will readily attack people if they see them as a threat.



A New Zealand falcon in flight

Otago is also home to a second bird of prey, the self-introduced Harrier hawk (*Circus approximans*). This is the only Australian bird of prey to have established itself on our shores, feeding mainly on introduced mammals such as rabbits. Harrier hawks are a common sight throughout Otago, often seen soaring effortlessly over the open countryside. They can also be spotted feeding on roadkill, such as rabbits or possums. The occasional careless Harrier hawk even suffers the indignity of becoming roadkill itself while feeding.



Close up of a Harrier hawk

