The Kakapo’s binomial name is Strigops Habroptilus. In theory, every species has a two-part scientific name. The first part describes the genus (Strigops) and the second part is specific to the animal (Habroptilus). This standard makes communication easier between scientists around the world!

🡨 Visual Breakdown of binomial name 🡪

Both parts of the Kakapo’s binomial name are derived from Ancient Greek. “Strigos” means owl, “ops” means face, “habros” means soft, and “pitlon” means feather. If taken literally, the name translates to: “Owl face soft feather”.

The eyes of the Kakapo face forward which is more common in owls than a parrots. This is where “owl face” comes from. The feathers surrounding the eyes also have a different texture from the rest of the Kakapo resembling whiskers more than feathers.

A relatively short wingspan and lack of flight muscles have rendered the Kakapo flightless. Thus, the feathers do not need the stiffness and strength necessary to fly allowing them to be exceptionally supple and earning Kakapos the specific name “Habroptilus” or “soft feather”.

A kakapo is an expert at hiding among the ferns with its camouflage coloring. The combination of moss-green and yellow mottled with black or a dark brownish make it vanish while stationary. Mottled means spots or smears of color. This pattern is seen in many different animals.

🡨 Show examples of this patterns among different animals 🡪

The feathers may be soft, but the feet are certainly not. They are large, scaley and zygodactyl. That’s a fancy way of saying they have two toes facing forward and two toes facing backwards. Making something akin to an ‘X’. This is a trait among all parrots.

Kakapos are excellent climbers. Thanks to their zygodactyl feet they can scale rimu trees of up to 20 meters. While they may be flightless, they use their wings to glide down after climbing trees. This act is known as “parachuting”.

🡨 Show the feet of a parrot and then a Kakapo side by side 🡪

Kakapos are herbivores- they only eat plants. Kakapos will feed on many different plants including ferns, supplejack vines and orchid tubers. However, their favorite food is the fruit produced by the rimu trees. In fact, Kakapos will only breed during years the fruit is in abundance.

🡨Show some examples of Kakapo food. Be sure to include the rimu fruit 🡪

A notable sign of Kakapo feeding is called a “chew”. It’s a small, crescent shaped wad. They place their beak at the base of a piece of foliage and pull it through their beak using their feet. What’s left is a quaint ball of fiber.

🡨 Picture of a Kakapo Chew 🡪

Parrots have long lives and Kakapos are no exception. The average lifespan of a Kakapo is 60 years with reports of up to 100 years old. If you were to have a Kakapo as a pet, it would likely be a lifelong friend!  
There have been reports of people keeping Kakapos as pets and described as “more like a dog”.

🡨 Kakapo playing with a dog? 🡪

What happened to cause the Kakapo to become critically endangered even though they have such long lives? There are two main factors: evolution and colonialization.

Before people arrived on New Zealand, there were very few mammals. New Zealand was an island populated largely by birds. That means the Kakapo had very few predators excluding some like Haast’s Eagle, New Zealand Falcon, and the now extinct Laughing Owl. Birds of prey have good eyesight. The Kakapo evolved into their iconic green-yellowish color to hide in the ferns. Raptors also hunt during the day, so Kakapo became nocturnal.

🡨 Images of the three predators of Kakapo 🡪

All of these qualities were perfectly suited for the unique environment of New Zealand. It is thought Kakapo may have been the most prolific species on the island until mammals were introduced and altered the environment. Unlike raptors, many mammals hunt at night. They also rely on other senses than sight, like sound and smell.  
  
The kakapo are known to give off a distinct scent that is described as “musty-sweet” and is used as a guide for Kakapo to find each other. However, it also helps mammalian predators like rats and stouts easily track down the Kakapo.

Kakapo developed another defense against raptors. When in danger, the Kakapo will freeze. This allows them to blend in with the forest and hide from the sight of raptors. However, this also makes them easy prey for rats, stouts, dogs, and humans.

Breeding for the Kakapo is also not suited to the habits of the newly introduced predators. Kakapos are the only birds know to use a lekking mating. Lekking is when a group of male birds gather and engage in competitive displays of courtship. A female will select a preference from all the displays. Male kakapos make constant, low calls that are know as “booming” to attract females. The nests they make, which are shaped like bowls help throw the sound greater distances. It is common for Kakapos to build bowls near rocks and tree trunks. They act like natural amplifiers and reflect the sound. This makes it very easy for predators to eavesdrop on this conversation and track down the source.

The Kakapo’s favorite food is the rimu fruit. A bright red berry with little spines and a crimson spike on top. The Kakapo will only have a breeding season when the rimu fruit masts. Mast is a season with fruit or seeds at a greater quantity than normal. This means Kakapo will only breed every 2 to 4 years.

🡨 Andrew Digby quote 🡪

After a Kakapo couple successfully breeds and lays eggs, the mother must remain vigilant. Eggs are a favorite snake of rats and stouts. Once hatched, Kakapo mothers have a different problem, their young are altricial. Altricial are babies that require significant care after birth. Many birds, like the swallow, have babies that are weak and require the parents to feed and care for them for weeks before leaving the nest.

The opposite of altricial is precocial. Babies that can move and feed themselves quickly after birth. Examples of birds you may know are chickens and ducks.

🡨 Example of swallow babies and chicks/ducklings 🡪

This sporadic breeding wasn’t a problem when the Kakapo defenses were effective but the unfortunate introduction of new mammalian predators took advantage of the weakness making Kakapo easy pray and the number of Kakapos rapidly began to dwindle.