

Before the Fast-track Panel

Under: Fast-track Approvals Act 2024

In the matter of: FTAA-2605-1236 – Remarkables Ski Area Upgrade and Doolans Expansion

Statement of advice: Dr Kerry Weston

Avifauna

DOC staff

12 October 2026



Department of
Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

**Te Kāwanatanga
o Aotearoa**
New Zealand Government

Introduction

1. My full name is Kerry Anne Weston.

Instruction

2. I have been requested to provide expert advice to the Director-General of Conservation (DOC/the Department) for the purposes of his comments on the Remarkables Ski Area Upgrade and Doolans Expansion Fast-track application. My advice will be used to inform DOC's s51 reporting and s53 comments on the application.

Qualification and Experience

3. I am a Senior Science Advisor for the Department of Conservation based in Christchurch. I have a Bachelor of Science in Zoology from the University of Otago (2001), a Master of Science with Distinction in Ecology from Canterbury University (2009) and a PhD in Zoology from the University of Otago (2014). I have over 20 years' experience working for the Department of Conservation, the last 12 of which have been as a Science Advisor. My role in this project to date has included review of both draft and substantive application documents.
4. I have written over 25 peer-reviewed scientific papers, reports and a book chapter predominantly focused on avifauna, avian ecology and species above the treeline.
5. I have a wide technical knowledge of alpine ecology and avifauna across the South Island, including extensive monitoring of several alpine avifauna such as kea and rock wren. This includes a good understanding of the avifauna found in the Remarkables region, particularly above the treeline.

Code of conduct

6. Whilst it is acknowledged this is not an Environment Court Proceeding, I confirm that I have read the Code of Conduct for expert witnesses contained in the Environment Court Practice Note 2023. I have complied with the Code of Conduct in the preparation of this advice. Unless I state otherwise, this advice is within my area of expertise, and I have not omitted to consider material facts known to me that might alter or detract from the opinions I express.

Scope of advice and expert opinion

7. My expert advice relates to the following:
 - a. Adequacy of the Applicant's assessment of avifauna, including identification of any values that have not been assessed or have been insufficiently characterised.
 - b. Adequacy of the Applicant's assessment of effects on avifauna, with specific reference to any effects that are incomplete, understated, or not addressed.
 - c. Adequacy of the Applicant's proposed mitigation, rehabilitation and management measures.
 - d. Alternative mitigation or management approaches, where appropriate, including clarification of my recommended or preferred measures including where these differ from those proposed by the Applicant.
 - e. Comments on conditions.

Material Considered

8. In preparing this advice I have reviewed the following documents as part of the substantive application:

Part A – Substantive Application

- a. *A-10 – Substantive Application Report Section 3 - Project Description updated 3 September 2026*
- b. *A-13 – Substantive Application Report Section 6 - Assessment of Environmental Effects updated 3 September 2026*
- c. *A-14 - Substantive Application Report Section 7 – Management and Monitoring of Actual and Potential Effects updated 3 September 2026*
- d. *A-16 - Substantive Application Report Section 9 – Approvals Relating to the Resource Management Act 1991 updated 3 September 2026*
- e. *A-18 - Substantive Application Report Section 10 – Approvals Relating to the Wildlife Act updated 3 September 2026*

Part B – Technical Reports

- f. *B-05 – Remarkables Ski Area Upgrade and Doolans Expansion – Carpark & Bus Hub Ecological Impact Assessment*
- g. *B12 – Terrestrial Ecology Impact Assessment 26 Aug 26*
- h. *B-29– Remarkables Ski Area Upgrade and Doolans Expansion – Terrestrial Ecology Management Plan*

Part H - Proposed Conditions

- i. *H.02 - Resource Consent Conditions updated 3 September 2026*
- j. *H.06 - Wildlife Approval – Avifauna updated 3 September 2026*

9. I have not undertaken a site visit due to the timing of my engagement on this project.

Avifauna values

10. The Applicant's assessment of avifauna within the Project area provides an adequate and accurate assessment of the avifauna values present. Field surveys undertaken by the Applicant revealed five of the six indigenous avifauna known to utilise open, tall-tussock dominated alpine grassland habitats of the Remarkables Ecological District. These were, New Zealand pipit/pihoi (*Anthus n. novaeseelandiae*), eastern falcon/ karearea (*Falco n. novaeseelandiae*), paradise shelduck/ Pūtangitangi (*Tadorna variegata*), Australasian harrier/kāhu (*Circus approximans*) and southern black-backed gull/karoro (*Larus dominicanus*). Kea (*Nestor notabilis*) were not detected during

field surveys, likely due to the limited length of surveying which was carried out only during the summer season, and the fact that they are 'intermittent' visitors to the area.

11. The Applicant states that that kea are 'rare visitors'. I would caution against this description, given that several sightings of small flocks of kea have been recently recorded (during Autumn - Spring 2026) within the Project area (see [iNaturalist, Kea Database - Observations](#)). It is hoped that a recent intensification in conservation effort towards this species may see increased numbers of kea dispersing into this area (see [Te Rautaki Whakaora Kea / Kea Recovery Strategy 2024-2034](#)). Furthermore, additional development of the area and an increase in human activity, is likely to attract more kea to the area.
12. Of the indigenous avian species present, three species are of high – very high ecological value. The New Zealand pipit is 'At Risk – Declining', based on a criteria (B1) of 'a large population and low to moderate ongoing or forecast decline of 10–50% over the next 10 years or three generations, whichever is longer, with a population size of 20,000 – 100,000 mature individuals'. The pipit is uncommon but widespread across coastal, open and alpine habitats throughout the North Island, South Island and Stewart Island, and is the most abundant avian species recorded throughout the project area.
13. The eastern falcon is 'Threatened – Nationally Vulnerable', based on a criteria (B1) of 'a moderate population (unnatural), stable $\pm$ 10%, with a population size of 1000–5000 mature individuals'. Eastern falcons generally range throughout the open dryer habitats east of the Southern Alps from Marlborough down to Southland, but extend from coast to coast in central South Island. Two - three pairs hold territorial ranges across the Upper and Lower Rastus Burn and the headwaters of the Doolans Creek Right Branch.
14. It is noted in the most recent bird threat classification for New Zealand (Robertson et al. 2021) that the classification panel "*was particularly challenged by a lack of knowledge on the overall population trends of New Zealand pipit (Anthus novaeseelandiae novaeseelandiae) across a wide range of habitats on mainland Aotearoa New Zealand and by the difficulties of recognising the differences between eastern and southern forms of New Zealand falcon (Falco*

novaeseelandiae novaeseelandiae and F. novaeseelandiae “southern”, respectively) in the field and hence determining their distributions and population sizes and trends. Concern was raised that these taxa may be undergoing greater declines than currently estimated”.

15. Kea are ‘Threatened - Nationally Endangered’, based on a criteria (C1) of a ‘moderate population and high ongoing or forecast decline of 50–70%, with 1000–5000 mature individuals. Kea range throughout forested and alpine areas of the South Island, from Golden Bay in the north, down to Southern Fiordland, though they are rarer in areas east of the Southern Alps. Whilst they are not known to nest in the area (and largely nest below the treeline), they are intermittent visitors with flocks of 3-5 individuals most recently observed visiting the skifield during late Winter- Spring 2026.

Effects on Avifauna

16. I agree with the Applicants assessment that the proposed development will have moderate-high levels of direct ongoing effects on both eastern falcon and New Zealand pipit through loss of high-quality foraging and nesting habitat and infrastructure impediment. I also agree with the assessment that indirect effects from construction noise and ongoing light, operational noise and increased human presence will be highest on kea, and that these effects will reach high - very high levels, given that they are inquisitive and attracted to human activity.
17. All three of these most affected species are of high-very high ecological value, are taonga and are fully protected under the Wildlife Act 1953. Mitigation measures for their protection against these effects are therefore required.

Mitigation and management measures

Falcon/Karearea

18. I agree that there is limited scope for mitigating the loss of foraging habitat of the two or three falcon pairs whose range spans the proposed Project area.
19. However, surveying nesting habitat within the Project area during the falcon breeding season (August-May) no more than 5 days prior to works start, and establishing a ≥ 200 m exclusion zone around any nests found until the chicks

fledge, provides the best chance of breeding success and reduces the potential effects of disturbance on this species.

20. I am satisfied that efforts have been made to mitigate the effects of infrastructure impediment and window strike within the falcon's territories.

Pipit/ Pihoihoi

21. Pipit will be the most affected avian species due to a relatively large loss of foraging and breeding habitat across the Project area, an effect that cannot be mitigated further. However, pipits have a higher tolerance to human disturbance in general and therefore I am satisfied that the proposed mitigation measures are adequate.
22. The applicant has made adequate effort to mitigate direct impacts on active pipit nests by planning nest surveys no earlier than 5 days prior to breeding habitat disturbance. If no active nests are found, by subsequently clearing vegetation within 50 m of these areas, it is hoped that the lack of suitable remaining habitat will discourage the pipits from nesting within the disturbance footprint. Further, if a nest is located, the Applicant will attempt to avoid or delay earthworks in the area. If attempts at discouraging nesting within the disturbance footprint fail and a nest is established within the area to be disturbed, I agree that removing and humanely destroying the eggs is the best effect-mitigating measure to provide the breeding pair with the best chance of surviving and renesting.

Kea

23. The effect of increased human activity will be greatest on kea and is not easily mitigated. It is encouraging to see that the Applicant will use lead-free building materials and keep ongoing waste and materials secured away from kea. Ongoing staff and visitor education should be included as a management measure, including guidance not to feed kea and on minimising operational risks.

Alternative migration or management approaches and clarification required

Relocating falcon nests

24. The Applicant had originally sought Wildlife Approval to relocate falcon nests. Then, after discussions with DOC this was removed from the application. However, Table 6.4 of the Terrestrial Ecology Management Plan still says

"Relocate nests to adjacent undisturbed habitat where avoidance is not achievable" as a mitigation and management measure for falcon. I assume that it is an oversight that this has been left in the application documentation and that the mitigation measure for direct effects on eastern falcon nesting is an at least 200 m setback around the nest, not attempted relocation of the nest.

25. Relocating New Zealand falcon nests is not a feasible mitigation measure because they do not build a nest. Rather, they make a simple scrape on the ground. In these open grassland habitats this is usually associated with a rock outcrop or vegetated structure overhanging the scrape. To attempt moving the nest would entail moving the scrape contents without the surrounding context which provides a strong visual cue to the adult pair. Moving eggs or young falcon chicks would likely result in their death through lack of parental care and/or increased predation risk and is very unlikely to be effective.

Pipit nests

26. The mitigation measure for risk to pipit nests within the Terrestrial Ecology Management Plan differs to the Resource Consent and Wildlife Act Conditions. Within the Management Plan, Table 6.4 is missing mention of the vegetation removal measure specified in Resource Consent Condition ECO 22B part e) "Vegetation must be reduced within the disturbance footprint to a height of 20 cm in locations, identified by a suitably qualified and experienced ornithologist, where there is suitable pihoihoi nesting habitat."

27. The Terrestrial Ecology Management Plan should be corrected.

Protection of pipit chicks

28. Pipit young are altricial and will remain in the nest for the first approximately two weeks post-hatching. I recommend that in the event that a nest is found at this later stage of the breeding cycle, that all attempts are made to avoid the area and allow the nest to continue fledging, given the substantial investment the breeding pair have put into the nest at this point and it may be too late for them to renest that season. This needs to be made clear in conditions/the Terrestrial Ecology Management Plan.

Comments on Wildlife Approval Conditions

29. Under condition 2.1 (d) and (e), there is no description of how a pipit nest found at chick stage will be dealt with, only a detailed description for the humane destruction of eggs. Works within the applicable disturbance or exclusion area should cease until a suitably qualified ornithologist confirms that the chicks have fledged.

Comments on Resource Consent Conditions

30. A tracked changes version on the proposed resource consent conditions will be provided by DOC with its comments under s53 of the Fast Track Approvals Act 2024; to seek to ensure appropriate management of avifauna should approval be granted. Initial concerns with the conditions include:
31. **ECO.21** – there is inconsistency here between the Ecological Impact Assessment (see Mitigation Measures in Table 18 – Assessment of Residual Effects), the Wildlife Permit, and the Terrestrial Ecology Management Plan in the number of days prior to works beginning that nest surveys for pipit and falcon must be carried. Some of these documents say “no longer than 5 days prior, however this condition says “no longer than 8 days prior”. All references should be to no longer than 5 days prior for both species.
32. **ECO.22A** – Under part 1, the sentence: “Unless otherwise specified by a suitably qualified and experienced ecologist” needs to be removed. This is not appropriate and there should not be grounds to create an exception to this condition.
33. **ECO.22A** – The paragraph numbered ‘2’ below is no longer required because falcon will not be being handled, and it already states that surveys must be undertaken by a suitably qualified and experienced ecologist/ornithologist:
- a. *“2. All works required under Condition ECO.22A(1) must be undertaken and managed by a suitably qualified and experienced ecologist / ornithologist and in accordance the best practice capture, handling and release measures set out in the Department of Conservation’s New Zealand National Bird Banding Scheme bird bander’s manual.”*
34. **ECO.22B** – Works should cease until the chicks have fledged the nest.
35. **ECO. 23-** Not all of the measures listed here need to be undertaken under the supervision of a qualified and experienced ecologist/ornithologist to minimise

the potential for kea interaction. If a 'kea playground' is planned to be installed, this however, should be under the advice of an experienced kea conservation husbandry or conservation practitioner. Under condition part (b) '*Interactions with kea must be avoided to the extent practicable, and otherwise minimised to reduce potential habituation;*' this should include the example of (staff, contractors and visitors) not feeding kea as this is a particularly harmful interaction encouraging habituation of the birds to the area. These measures should remain in place throughout the lifetime of the proposed permit, not just during construction. Currently, it says "*All measures must remain in place until construction in the affected area has been completed.*"

Conclusions

36. The proposed project will have direct and ongoing residual negative effects on the three threatened and at-risk bird species who occupy this area (New Zealand pipit, eastern falcon and kea) through loss of high-quality foraging and/or nesting habitat, increased human activity and infrastructure impediment. During the construction phase, there is also likely to be destructive direct losses of pipit nests during the breeding season. Further, these species will be affected indirectly from construction noise and ongoing light, operational noise and increased human presence.
37. These effects should be compensated for.
38. However, at the population level, the long-term persistence of these threatened and at risk bird species throughout their natural range will not be affected by the proposed development.

References

Robertson, H.A., Baird, K.A., Elliott, G.P., Hitchmough, R.A., McArthur, N.J., Maken, T.D., Miskelly, C.M., O'Donnell, C.F.J., Sagar, P.M., Scofield, P.R., Taylor, G.A. and Michel, P. 2021. Conservation status of birds in Aotearoa New Zealand, 2021. New Zealand Threat Classification Series 36. Department of Conservation, Wellington, New Zealand.