

Which One Are You?

Identifying *Eclectus* Subspecies

by Laurella Desborough

[Editor's Note: In some cases subspecies, *E. r. vosmaeri*, for instance, or *E. r. Biaki* do not have common names. In such cases, for convenience of listing and discussion, the subspecific name will be adapted to the vernacular and the birds will be spoken of as the Vosmaeri or the Biaki, etc. S.D.]

When I first started working with *Eclectus* Parrots in the early eighties, I found them to be beautiful and also difficult to identify. After years of looking at many wild-caught and domestic-bred *Eclectus* Parrots and spending a significant amount of time studying museum specimens and reading the more technical literature, the unique characteristics of each pure subspecies became more readily apparent.

Commonly Available Subspecies in the United States

Red-sided *Eclectus roratus polychlorous* from New Guinea and surrounding off shore islands; **Aru Red-sided** *Eclectus roratus aruensis* from the island of Aru; **Grand** *Eclectus roratus roratus* from the islands of Buru, Ceram, Saparua, Haruku and Amboina; **Vosmaeri** *Eclectus roratus vosmaeri* from the larger north and central Moluccan Islands; and **Solomon Island** *Eclectus roratus solomonensis* from the Solomon Islands, Admiralty Islands and Bismarck Archipelago.

There also exists a small number of **Biaki** *Eclectus roratus biaki* from the island of Biak, and an extremely small number of **Cornelius** *Eclectus roratus cornelia* from the island of Sumba, and **Palau Red-sided** *Eclectus roratus polychlorous*, a slightly different race of *polychlorous* from the island of Palau.

These last subspecies are so rare that if one should die, the author recommends that it be properly necropsied by a veterinarian (so the skin remains useable by a museum) and sent to the Museum of Natural History in New York. Skins are of great importance for identification and study of avian species and, correctly prepared, remain useful for hundreds of years—including use for DNA studies.

It is also reported that a few individuals of the Australian subspecies *Eclectus roratus macgillivrayi* and *Eclectus roratus riedeli*, from the Tanimbar Islands, have been imported into the United States.

I believe the one subspecies we will not see alive in the U.S. is the so-called *Eclectus roratus westermanni* which, to my knowledge, exists only in museum collections. *E. r. westermanni*, several specimens of which I have studied personally, have clipped wings and the females are each slightly different in coloration. The birds are smaller than the other subspecies and, in my opinion, are a collection of hybridized *Eclectus*, bred down over several generations in captivity. Their dull colors are similar to those of many of the hybrids seen in the U.S.

When buying or selling *Eclectus* it is important to be accurate in the naming of the subspecies. For many years, when *Eclectus* were less commonly available, and even today when most breeders have at least seen or heard of *Eclectus*, the birds are still often called "Grand *Eclectus*." For this reason, it is always important that further questions be asked when someone describes their bird(s) as "Grand *Eclectus*." There still remains a serious lack of knowledge about the appearance of the Grand in comparison with the Red-sided or Vosmaeri, and, for some, even the Solomon. Because they are small and dark green, the Biaki were first thought to be crosses from Red-sided and Solomon pairings.

Most of the *Eclectus* subspecies have been separated by geographical features for many thousands of years, as they live on separate islands in the South Pacific. Thus, they have developed their unique variations in feather coloration, skeletal structure, vocalizations, breeding behavior and maturation time lines.

For example, the Solomon Island *Eclectus* fledge much earlier than the larger subspecies. Vosmaeri and Red-sided may be comparable in weight yet the Vosmaeri appears much longer when compared with the stockier Red-sided. Vocalizations also vary among

the subspecies. Most people identifying *Eclectus* subspecies use only feather coloration to determine the subspecies. Differences in conformation, eye color and vocalization are also important in accurately identifying a subspecies, especially in the males.

However, it is also important to know whether the bird is wild-caught (pure subspecies) or domestically bred (possible questions about purity). Domestically raised *Eclectus* were imported from Africa and the Philippines in the eighties. Many of them were hybrids and some of them have been set up here as breeders.

Eclectus Subspecies Descriptions

Only the more commonly available subspecies will be described. Feather color is accurately seen only on clean birds that are not in a molt. Dirty feathers are dull due to microscopic debris. Old perfect feathers on a bird in molt appear very dark in comparison to the new feathers. The following descriptions are based on birds with clean feathers in good condition, not in molt.

The **Red-sided *Eclectus* female** has a bright red head and breast feathers coming down in front of the breast to form a red bib. The feathers below the bib are bright, royal blue, sometimes with a hint of purple (from an occasional reddish coloration to some feather strands). The blue extends under the wings on the lesser wing coverts, and up around the back of the head on the nape to form a mantle, or collar of blue. The feathers of the back and the upper wing coverts, secondaries and tertials are a deep maroon red. The lower back and upper tail coverts and thigh feathers are a deep, dark red. Actually, the feathers are composed of more or less strands of red along with strands of black, which appear to us as dark red or maroon. The rump, upper tail coverts and tail are also a maroon red. However, the inch wide (2 ½ cm) band at the end of the tail is red, sometimes towards a pinkish red or an orangish red but never pink and never orange. The tail band is a more transparent, lighter red than the color on the head. The under tail coverts are as bright red as the head feathers. The eye is completely circled by tiny blue feathers, (which can be seen from two or three feet in good light) providing a marked contrast to the red head feathers.

The **Aru Red-sided female** is on

average 100-150 grams heavier and appears much bulkier when compared to the slimmer New Guinea females. Some Aru Red-sided females weigh over 600 grams. Both subspecies have creamy white eyes as adults. All adult female Eclectus have entirely black beaks. Red-sided females do not have any normal feathers that are yellow.

The **Red-sided Eclectus male** has a deep dark forest green plumage covering the entire head and body except for wing primaries, under wing coverts, and tail feathers, with more iridescence on the head and throat areas. The primary wing feathers are a dull black along the shaft with bright dark blue feather vanes. The secondaries are the same forest green as the upper back and tail. The two central tail feathers are green, with the side feathers being a dark royal blue with black next to the shaft. Under wing coverts are a bright red which extends down the side of the bird, and is visible when the wing is closed, extending out from under the wing, excepting juveniles who have not reached one year of age. These youngsters have less red showing under the wing. The male has a

deep rich orange upper mandible which at the midpoint becomes a dark yellow that extends to the tip as in most other male Eclectus. The lower mandible in all male Eclectus is black.

Aru Red-sided males are larger than the New Guinea males and of a darker emerald green, with bluish tints on the head feathers. Their eyes are a translucent orangish red rather than the more yellowish orange of the New Guinea male. Their tail feathers have approximately a half inch (1 1/2 cm) tip of rich lemon yellow as compared with the one-quarter inch (8 mm) tip of lemon yellow on the New Guinea male. With the exception of the Reideli male, the Aru has the greatest amount of yellow on the tip of the tail—more than that of the Vosmaeri male. The Aru Red-sided male is considerably larger than the New Guinea Red-sided, being comparable in weight to the Vosmaeri males (400-600 plus grams) but exhibiting the stockier body quality of the New Guinea bird rather than that of the longer, lankier body type of the Vosmaeri. The Aru Red-sided also has a much deeper reddish orange upper beak than all the other Eclectus

males. In my experience, the Aru takes much longer to fully mature than does the New Guinea subspecies which would indicate that the Aru is distinct from the New Guinea. I recommend against pairing the New Guinea and the Aru Red-sided subspecies together as the maturation time lines are so different.

Solomon Island Eclectus are the smallest of the Eclectus, adult females weighing between 350 and 425 grams on average. Young birds up to a year old generally weigh less than adults. The females are colored similarly to the Red-sided females except that the blue eye-ring is generally much more distinct. Solomon Island Eclectus with wing folded generally have the tips of the wing primaries reaching to the tip of the tail. These birds have rounded heads and generally rounded, small bodies with shorter tails. The Solomon Island males are a lime green color with the pattern of green and red similar to that of other male Eclectus. One marked difference is that the beak color is generally a light orange color with a yellow tip, in contrast to the deep orange colored beak of the Red-

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sided. Adult eye color in the female is a creamy white and in the male a light orangish yellow.

The **Vosmaeri Eclectus female** has golden yellow eyes and a lighter red head than other Eclectus females. The red blends under the beak into the mauve or lavender feathers of the breast. This area of blending may be brief or extend almost to the breastbone. There is no bib or distinct separation of red head and breast feathers from the mauve feathers of the lower breast and belly. This is a critical difference in determining subspecies identification. There is no blue eye-ring on the Vosmaeri female. The other major characteristic of the Vosmaeri is the large pure golden yellow tail band, varying from one to two-and-a-half inches (2 1/2 to 6 cm) in width. The lavender of the breast extends up around the neck. It is quite broad and may peak at the back of the head. The red on the upper and lower back, wing coverts, wing secondaries and tertials and tail coverts is a brighter red than that of the Red-sided or Grand Eclectus. The under tail coverts are a bright, pure golden yellow. I have never seen a female Vosmaeri with a yellow tail band less than three-quarters of an inch wide. There is generally little variation in color patterns in these birds. The amount of yellow on the tail will help to determine purity of the subspecies, but all factors must be taken into account—the type of red on the head and body, the blending of red and mauve on the breast, the yellow under tail coverts and the width of the tail band. Small yellow tail bands generally indicate a hybrid.

Vosmaeri Eclectus males are an iridescent lime green, which is a light green, especially noted on the head, throat, neck and breast. The under wing coverts are a rich bright red. Red feathers extend down the sides of the body and are visible when the wings are closed. The tip of the tail is a pale lemon yellow, wider than the New Guinea Red-sided but smaller than the band on the Aru Red-sided and of a paler yellow. The yellow tip of a male's tail is more noticeable from underneath. Vosmaeri males are very long bodied in comparison to all other Eclectus males and are also longer than the female Vosmaeri. There is a difference in the appearance of the head and beak shapes between the various Eclectus subspecies. The most out-

standing characteristics of the Vosmaeri male is the large size, the strong iridescent lime green feather color and a slightly less orange tint to the upper mandible. Eye color is a translucent dark amber.

The **Grand Eclectus female** has a red head, red throat and bib. I have seen pictures labeled "Grand" that do not show a bib; but all the museum skins of Grands I have seen *do* have bibs. I am therefore convinced that all Grands have bibs. The Grand's red is darker than that of the Vosmaeri. The female has no blue eye-ring. The breast and mantle feathers are a deep purple, not blue or lavender. When the feathers are dirty, the purple is dull. The under tail coverts are orangish red in color, not yellow and not red. Depending on the island of origin, the tail band is a dusty orangish red with just the smallest rim of yellowish orange at the very tip, or about a half-inch (1 1/2 cm) of a dark red-orange that becomes a dark orange-yellow at the tip—never a golden yellow as in the Vosmaeri. The tail and wings of the Grand Eclectus female are much shorter than those of the Red-sided or Vosmaeri. The Grand female is a stocky bird while the male is quite slim in comparison. The true Grand female is the most difficult bird to distinguish among Eclectus females in the U.S. Many hybrid Eclectus females are similar enough to the Grand to cause confusion. However, the hybrids often have full or partial blue eye-rings which are a sure sign they are not Grands. When you are unsure of a Grand female, consistency of coloration in her female progeny will assure you that she is pure. Generally, hybrid females (or incorrectly paired Grands) throw a variety of color variations in the young females they produce.

Grand males are a forest green, with the most iridescent green on the head and neck. These birds also have bright red under wings similar to other Eclectus males. The tail feathers are tipped in a faint hint of lemon yellow, best seen from underneath. Grand males are slim birds in comparison to their stocky mates. Their eye color is an orangish gold.

Hybrids

As it may be impossible to import additional Eclectus from the wild, or even captive-bred ones from Europe,

due to restrictions imposed by the WBCA, it is extremely important that all known individuals of pure subspecies are correctly paired and that hybrid Eclectus are so identified and paired only with other hybrids. It will only confuse the issue to pair a hybrid with a bird of a pure subspecies. Some of the resulting youngsters may closely resemble the pure subspecies in feather coloration but they will still carry the hybrid genes.

Hybrid youngsters should be so identified and used as pets. Adult hybrids that are not pets should be used as foster parents rather than as breeders of more hybrids. Obviously, keeping accurate records and banding the birds are essential for identifying and tracking both the pure birds and the hybrids.

For people simply raising birds to sell to the pet market, purity of subspecies may be of no interest or concern. For the long range future of each Eclectus subspecies, however, it is of *great* concern. Eclectus are endemic to New Guinea and certain Indonesian islands. Island species are at the greatest risk of extinction due to habitat destruction—deforestation resulting from subsistence farming, timber production, and mining. At the present time, aviculturists in the United States probably hold the largest number of pure Eclectus subspecies in the world. During the next 10 to 20 years decisions made by individual breeders about the pairing of their Eclectus will determine whether or not viable gene pools of the pure Eclectus subspecies remain.

Hybrid Eclectus vary in coloration from being almost, but not quite, identical to one or another of the pure subspecies, to being nothing like any of the pure birds. Often females tend to have a dark purplish breast and dark red body feathers. Some hybrids will have blue eye-rings and small yellow tail bands, indicating a Red-sided/Vosmaeri cross. Others will have a partial blue eye-ring. Often female hybrids will have a shorter, rounded red bib over a purple breast. Male hybrids may be determined by a blocky and square head shape which is unlike the various pure subspecies.

Hybrids can make fine pets and excellent foster parents.

[Editor's Note: Desborough's fine paper on all aspects of pairing, breeding, parent-rearing, diet and disease will be a part of the upcoming Proceedings of the AFA's 1996 Convention.] ➤

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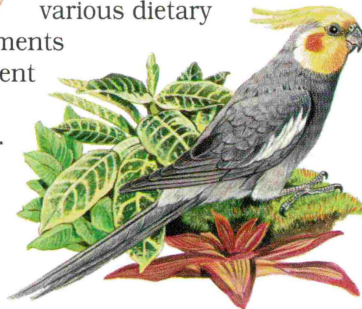


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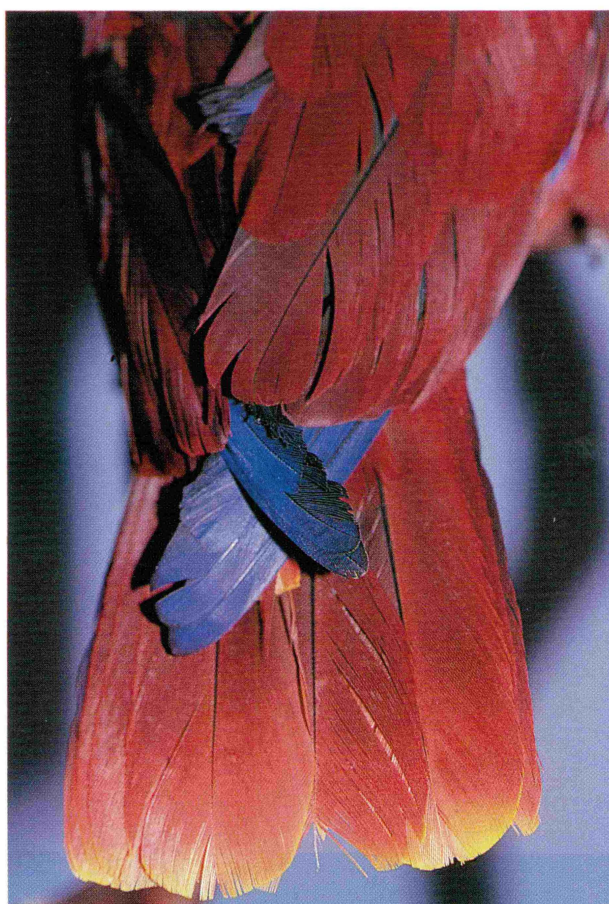
A pair of Eclectus roratus vosmaeri. The red of the female's head and breast is not distinctly separated from the mauve of her lower breast and belly.



A Vosmaeri female. Note the wide pure golden yellow band at the tip of the tail.



A pair of Grand Eclectus E. r. roratus. All Grand females seem to have a well defined bib.



The tail band of the female Grand is a dusty orangish-red with just the smallest rim of yellow at the very tip.

Photo by Everett Webb

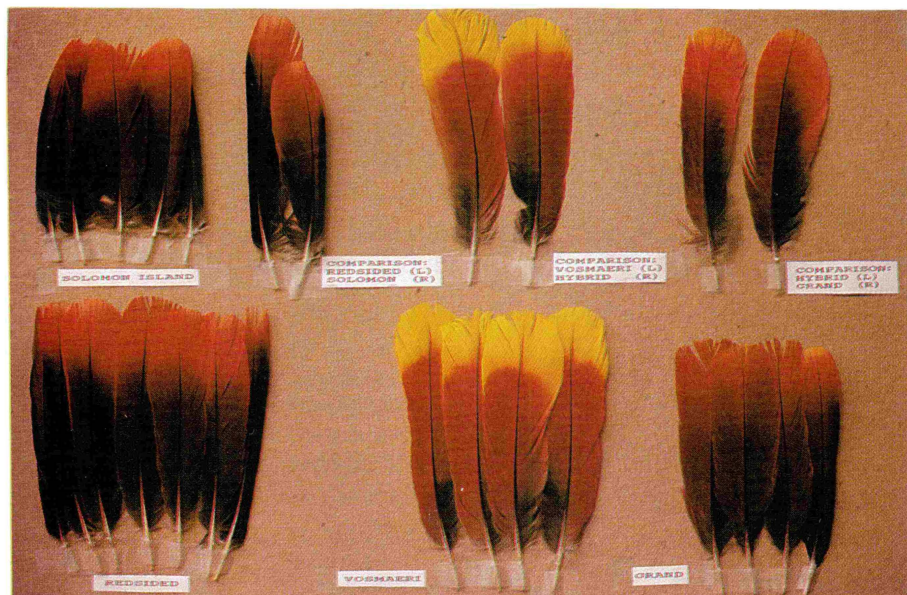


Red-sided Eclectus. Note the male's deep, dark forest green plumage.

Photo by Everett Webb



Red-sided female has no yellow band on the tip of the tail.



This collection of tail feathers may be used for making comparisons between Eclectus subspecies. If necessary, get out your glass to read the tags describing the feathers.

Photo by L. M. Whithey

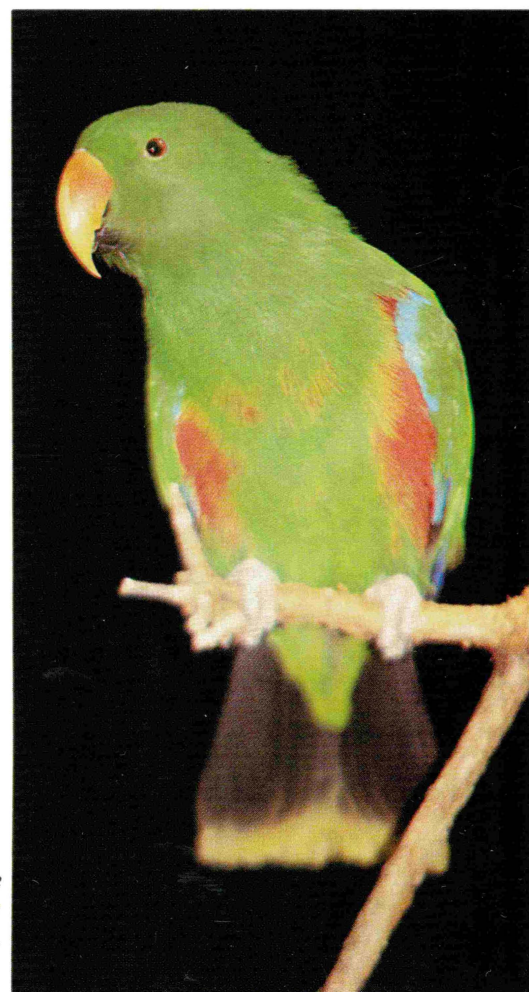


Photo by Susie Christian

The Aru Red-sided male is larger than its New Guinea relative.