

The Elusive Princess

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So, this is not the start of a fairy tale from the days of yore.

I'm writing because I have some local knowledge from "Down Under" concerning the Princess Parrot *Polytelis alexandrae* which may be of interest to *Watchbird* readers.

In Eb Cravens' excellent article entitled "Parrots for Dollars" (July/August 1995), he mentions that the Princess of Wales Parakeet (or Princess Parrots as they are known in Australia) has "Not been spotted in the wilds of Australia for nigh on 10 years." Cravens considers it rare and in this he is probably right. Unfortunately we know little of its habits in the wild and this is reflected in its status being categorized as insufficiently known in the Threatened and extinct birds of Australia (Garnett, 1992a).

Rare?

This species may only be rare because we have a hard time finding it. In some years and in some locations it may be common and then it will disappear for years. This nomadic or "irruptive" behavior (Carter, 1993) may be a response to the vagaries of rain in outback Australia. Basically, the birds have to go wherever food and water are available and be prepared to breed as rapidly as possible. In this, the Princess Parrot shares similar behavior with other species such as Budgerigars *Melospittacus undulatus*, Zebra Finches *Taeniopygia guttata* and Pacific Black Ducks *Anas superciliosa*, to name just a few.

Good News

Now the latest good news for lovers of this elegant desert beauty is that it is still alive and well in the wilds of Australia. With the advent of reliable 4 wheel drive vehicles, people are increasingly visiting such inhospitable regions as the Canning Stock Route in the Great Sandy Desert in Western

Australia. Almost 300 Princess Parrots were seen in a single traverse of this track in July, 1993 (Carter, 1993). Despite the fact that Princess Parrots can turn up in the Northern Territory, South Australia and even Queensland, an analysis of historical data suggests that this species' core population is in the Great Sandy Desert (but it is still a very big place in which to look).

The Princess Parrot may also be rare (or scarce) because its habitat can only support a limited number of its kind. Garnett (1992b) considers that there is no evidence of a reduction in its range in the sandy deserts of inland Australia. Hopefully, this indicates that the total number of wild Princess Parrots has also not declined.

It would seem unlikely that a definitive population count will be made in the foreseeable future, or at least until the current state of knowledge concerning this species' ecology is improved. The latest "head-count" is due to the efforts of a small number of

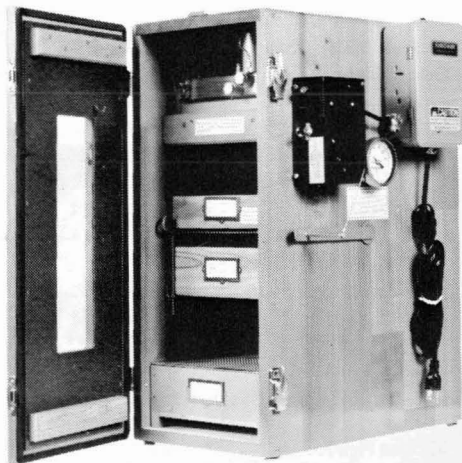
intrepid, private birdwatchers who are literally risking their lives in a region where intense and unremitting heat dries up water stocks in wells, tanks and waterholes or, conversely, tracks become impassable due to flood waters. Thus, for the time being at least, reports of the Princess Parrot in the wild will continue to come from the private sector. Indeed, the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service (now the Australian Nature Conservation Agency), in its "Action plan for Australian birds" (Garnett, 1992a), requests that ornithological societies and volunteer bird watchers be encouraged to report all sightings to a central office and include as much detail as possible on habitat, possible threats, behavior, etc. Let's hope that this will be enough information to ring alarm bells if the species starts a decline for whatever reason. This request for information is something which intrepid American travellers can keep in mind if they find themselves stranded on the Canning Stock Route.

Captive Princess

There is, however, less of a problem in estimating the captive population and there appears to be more birds in captivity in Australia and overseas than in the wild. It has been estimated that there are about 25,000 held in

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Australian collections alone (Phipps in Garnett, 1992b). This fortunate situation has arisen because of the Princess's confiding nature which has enabled it to settle down very quickly in captivity, its polygynous, colony-nesting habit and an ability to breed in its first year and have multiple broods. To quote an example of this huge fecundity rate, Shephard (1989) states that in April 1983 there were 2,753 registered in South Australian aviaries. In only three years, this figure had climbed to 4,690, an increase of 70%. This augurs well for a recovery effort based on captive breeding if the unfortunate situation arose where this technique was required.

As well as being known for their beauty and gentle natures, Princess Parrots are unfortunately also known for their susceptibility to parasitic worm infestation, particularly roundworm (*Ascaris*, sp). In an aviary situation, Princess Parrots are extremely susceptible to internal parasites because of the amount of time that they spend on the ground fossicking for food, and they inadvertently pick up roundworm eggs. In the harsh, dry climate of their natural habitat, this is probably not a problem because roundworm eggs would not survive. But, move them to a wet environment and they quickly succumb to this parasite.

"This species may only be rare because we have a hard time finding it."

I learned this by bitter experience years ago as a keeper at Sydney's Taronga Zoo. At the post-mortem of one of "my" Princess Parrots, I was horrified to see a completely impacted gut full of roundworms. Regular drenching with one of the proprietary anthelmintics is recommended if the birds are kept on a natural floored enclosure.

Of course, this problem of internal parasites in captivity is alleviated by using a suspended wire cage, but we

should bear a thought for the species' natural lifestyle. In the wild, Princess Parrots lead a rich life involving a daily search for food, finding and competing for a mate, while always on the lookout for danger in the form of a swift raptor or, unfortunately, a feral cat *Felis catus* or fox *Vulpes vulpes*. They would have to search for a suitable nest hollow and roosting site, and be prepared to navigate over hundreds of kilometers of trackless sand dune scrub.

Contrast this to life in a suspended wire cage. There is no argument that these birds are extremely adaptable, but we as aviculturists should endeavor to provide as much stimulus as possible. This can be done simply by providing browse for investigating and chewing, a social group or at least one other partner for company and/or breeding, and a nest box. Another form of behavioral enrichment can be added by providing a shallow pan of clean sand in which are added mealworms, seeds, leaves and other tit bits for the birds to fossick for. We should always try to make life as interesting as possible for our birds.

Desert Lories?

On the subject of diet, recent observations by Carter (1993) suggest that blossoms of flowering plants (*Grevillea wickhamii*, *Crotalaria cunninghamii* and *Hakea suberea*) can comprise a major part of the diet of wild Princess Parrots. This dietary preference may not only be because the birds are using the pollen and nectar as a food source (desert Lories?), but they are probably deriving a considerable (if not total) part of their water requirements from these plants. Carter (1993) reports that none of the latest reports from bird-watchers make any reference to drinking. So, apart from the usual dry seed and chopped fruit, a commercial lori-keet mix would probably be appreciated by captive stock. I have tried giving nectar to the Bird Park's Princess after reading about these field observations, but so far they have not been tempted to try something new. These observations from the wild underscore the usefulness of researching field studies as a means of better providing for our birds aviculturally. Of course, other behavioral enrichment could be offered in the form of sprigs of non-

toxic, nectar-producing shrubs.

Sex and Other Peculiarities

Sexing Princess Parrots is relatively straight forward if your birds are over two years old. Adult males have a curious structure which projects from the end of the outermost third primary feather (primary feather number 3 if you are in Australia or number 7 if you are in the U.S.). This structure is


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shaped like an elongated spatule and gave rise to the now obsolete generic name *Spathopterus* (Crome and Shields, 1992). Females lack this structure and young males only acquire adult plumage slowly in their second year (Forshaw and Cooper, 1981).

Another peculiarity of this species is its habit of perching lengthwise along a thick branch, presumably to avoid detection by terrestrial and avian predators (Forshaw and Cooper, 1989). I have not observed this behavior in captivity but this could be due either to my lack of observation or to an example of domestication altering a species natural defense mechanisms.

Finally, this Princess is indeed fortunate to be living in an area of the world that humans don't care for much. Let us hope this continues to be the case and that their beautiful pastel shades of green, mauve, blue and pink continue to grace Australian deserts.

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