

Major Mitchell's Come to Supper

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A sheep and cattle ranching couple from New South Wales, Australia happen to own a property in the south west of that State in an area known as the Riverina. As the name suggests, this is an area with many rivers, consisting of the Murray river on the south boundary and intersected by various Murray tributaries to the north.

This is a rather dry 200 mm - 300 mm (7.8 - 11.7 inches) annual rainfall region.

An area of river flood plain forest is adjacent to this property, with the main tree species being River Red Gums (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*). These grow to large trees, with the older ones providing many hollow branches, ideal for parrots and cockatoos to nest.

In the early nineties the owners noticed odd Major Mitchell or Pink Cockatoos (*Cacatua leadbeateri*) on their property and during 1995 eight were seen together on one day. During May-June 1996 eight to 10 birds were regularly seen close to the house on this property.

This prompted the owners to start offering feed to the birds, using a proprietary wild bird seed mix, fed in dishes on the ground under the trees near the house. The birds soon started to feed making it clear they preferred sunflower seed, and this seed was fed twice daily from then on.

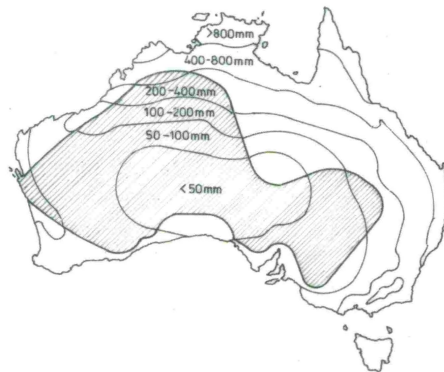
The Major Mitchell or Pink Cockatoo is a dry land or desert evolved bird and thus eats predominately dry seeds of various types in the wild. They therefore adapt easily to aviary type whole seed diets as is often used in Australia.

These birds became tamer and tamer in a short time, and also more demanding for feed, especially if feeding was late. By September they appeared to become dependent on the hand out, and many would come to within one metre (about three feet) of people in their quest for feed. It was presumed by then that many were feeding young in the nest at the time.

The birds would hover over people

walking in the garden and screech for food or perch close to the house, where they could look into the kitchen window, and appeal for food. Many would walk onto the wide verandah, and go right up to the wide glass door peering in as if to say, "where is my dinner?"

During early December when I vis-



ited the property, some adult birds were visiting with their recently fledged young.

The numbers had swelled to 24 regular birds (all Major Mitchell's Cockatoos) of which about eight appeared to be new season young. At that time, several adults were seen to eat their fill of sunflower from the dish on the ground, prior to feeding their waiting offspring in nearby trees.

The fact that no dogs or cats are present on this property is a key factor in this remarkable story.

The rather destructive nature of these cockatoos produced the only down side to this happy tale.

Not long after the feeding began in earnest a fair amount of tree damage was apparent in the house yard as you would expect, but early in the morning while awaiting breakfast the birds started chewing the plastic flashing around the doors and windows, the T.V. aerial lead, the wooden edge of the verandah and the house corners, and laid waste many feet of garden hose. At one stage, feeding was suspended to try and stop the damage, and some improvement was noted, but when it became apparent that the future of the nestlings could be at risk, the feeding was resumed, morning and evening. The ranch owners now plan to maintain feeding until all young should be independent.

Two dishes were used when feeding, and up to eight birds were seen feeding together shoulder to shoulder round each dish with remarkably little argument.

The owners said that in spite of the problems, they still love "their" Major Mitchell's Cockatoos. Sitting with the owners watching these beautiful Australian birds perform for us so close, yet still in the wild was a truly unforgettable experience.

A small number of Yellow Rosellas (*Platycercus elegans flaveolus*) were also seen feeding on the ground under trees and are regular visitors but are not tame and keep well clear of humans.

The Cockatoos and other native birds being protected in Australia are not permitted to be taken from the wild. The owners of this property strongly support this policy. ➔



These wild Major Mitchell's Cockatoos are accustomed to being fed at an Australian ranch.

Photo by Keith L. Ward