



A wild-caught pair of Shell Parrots (*Budgerigars*).

## The Shell Parakeet

by Warwick Remington, Ballarat, Australia

I have deliberately referred to the species in this article as the Shell Parrot (*Melopsittacus undulatus*) in preference to its more common name Budgerigar. The wild-type birds to which this article is dedicated now bear only scant resemblance to the domesticated cage bird so well known to all birdkeepers.

In the wild this species ranges over most of the Australian mainland. It is, however, absent from coastal regions and tropical rainforest areas. Drier inland habitat is the home of this little parrot which can be seen in vast flocks when conditions have allowed their numbers to explode after taking advantage of abundant food supplies. Obviously the reverse applies in times of drought when birds not only fail to breed but fall victim to the harshness of Australia's inland.

I will always remember the quote from the late Alec Chisholm's book *Bird Wonders of Australia* when he says "another man recorded 60,000 dead budgies at a single dam — the birds seemed to be stunned by the heat and simply smothered as they dashed into the water in great clouds." This species' adaptability to such conditions is probably the reason for its success as a cage bird.

Forshaw (1981) believes that this species belongs to a monotypic genus transitional between the *Neophema* and *Pezoporus*, its field habits being similar to the *Neophemas* whereas its coloration more closely resembles *Pezoporus*, ie, the Ground Parrot.

I am sure all aviculturists are aware of the beautiful greens, yellows and blacks of the wild type bird. The size, however, is another matter with wild-

type birds being seven inches in length which compares to some domesticated birds reaching 9.5 inches in length. Not only is the length of the body increased in some domesticated birds but also the overall build is much greater than in wild-type birds. In earlier times Australian Budgerigar breeders would introduce wild blood into their show birds to improve both color and strength in blood lines. With the great variation in size between wild-type birds and show stock this practice has largely ceased.

This little gem of a parrot (ie, the "normal" wild bird) has only rarely been seen in Australian aviculture in the last 30 years. The domesticated type being so common has, no doubt, led breeders to consider the keeping of the wild-type bird a waste of time. In recent years a few purist breeders have begun to devote some time and aviary space to the Shell Parrot.

My first opportunity to procure some breeding stock occurred in October 1992 when I obtained two hens and one unrelated cock bird from a breeder. The birds were only youngsters so I was looking forward to the 1993-94 breeding season with great anticipation. I kept all three birds together as the breeding season approached with the thought that I would remove an odd hen if the cock bird showed a preference for one particular hen.

In aviculture the best laid plans often fall apart and this certainly happened when the young cock died suddenly for no apparent reason. The lesson to be learned from this is that with any breeding program two, or perhaps three pairs, should be seen as a minimum requirement. This will assist in cases where losses occur and it also provides a measure of flexibility to change pairings to achieve greater compatibility.

In March 1994 I was able to exchange a spare female for a young male which was only four months old. Everything went well with this pair through the early winter with the hen laying in June which is rather early for a species known to nest in the Australian spring (ie, September-November). The hen incubated for about seven days when I had the misfortune of again losing the cock bird

for no explainable reason. My own autopsy did not reveal any abnormalities. The female continued to incubate her four eggs which eventually proved to be infertile.

This setback made the outlook for the 1994-95 breeding season look rather bleak. As mentioned, these birds, although not being expensive, are not easy to obtain so I did not have great expectations of obtaining a cock bird in the short term. I was, however, able to purchase a three-month-old cock bird in November 1994 which provided a mate for the hen, although I did not anticipate any breeding results in the current season due to the immaturity of the new male.

Following the introduction of the young male, the female laid two further clutches of infertile eggs which she incubated enthusiastically. I did observe the young male entering the nesting log at numerous times during these two failed attempts. Prior to a third clutch of five eggs being laid in January 1994, I observed the two birds mating on the front perch of the aviary on a number of occasions. The young male would have only been five months old at this time. This clutch hatched in 18 days with the hen carrying out all incubation duties. The cock, however, spent quite some time in the log whilst the hen was incubating and brooding the youngsters.

To assist the parents with the rearing of these youngsters I provided them with a choice of greenfoods and seeding grasses but little interest was shown in these food items. The only time I have seen this species take such food was when millet grew naturally in their aviary. Soaked seed was also fed and this provided the parents with their sole source of supplementary food during the rearing of the four young ones. When feeding soaked seed I always sprinkle Soluvet powder (a vitamin supplement) over the soaked seed prior to feeding. The first of the youngsters left the nest at 31 days and the remainder fledged within the following two days.

The aviary in which my "normal" wild-type Budgerigars bred measured 12 ft. x 3 ft. x 6 ft. high. Half of the aviary is open flight with the rear section being enclosed. Young birds can be sexed at three months when the



*A wild-caught hen (left) with a show sized domesticated cock.*

juvenile striped forehead turns into a clear yellow. The cere at this age also changes color with males being blue and females showing a fawn coloration.

As there was no information recorded with regard to nesting facilities required for this species in aviculture, I was forced to experiment a little. My birds were given the choice of two natural hollows and two conventional Budgie nestboxes. At different times the hen was seen investigating each of the nesting facilities. She eventually choose a natural hollow which measured 18 inches in length with an internal diameter of 4 inches. The entrance hole to the log was very small being 1.5 inches in diameter which I am sure provided the hen with the feeling of security she required.

During the next 18 months this particular pair nested continually raising a total of 28 healthy youngsters. I was finally forced to remove the female from the aviary in an attempt to rest her as I am sure she would have con-

tinued to breed. In their last clutch they only reared one youngster which was left with the male bird. At four months of age I noticed this youngster missing and further investigations revealed that she was incubating eggs. The urge to breed in this species is obviously very strong. This father/daughter pairing raised three healthy youngsters after which the pair were split up to allow the original breeding hen to return to her mate.

My experiences with this species would suggest that breeding is not difficult although the birds are a little soft in cold weather conditions. It is to be hoped that my fellow Australian aviculturists will now put some time and effort into this little parrot so that a viable aviary population can become permanently established.

#### References

- Chisholm, A H. 1948 *Bird Wonders of Australia* (Third Edition). Angus & Robertson, Sydney, Australia.
- Forshaw, J M. & Cooper, W T. 1981 *Australian Parrots* (Second Revised Edition). Lansdowne Editions, Melbourne, Australia.