

A pair of Marshall's Fig Parrots *C. d. marshalli*, the northernmost of the Australian subspecies, feeds on figs at Iron Range National Park, on Cape York Peninsula.

Australia's Fig Parrots

Part I.

The Fascinating History of Discovery

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In Australia, fig parrots occur in three distinct populations which are confined to the three major tracts of tropical rainforest along the north-eastern coast. Although first discovered more than 130 years ago, these small, elusive parrots have remained somewhat mysterious, due mainly to their unobtrusive habits. In 1929, the noted naturalist, Alec Chisholm wrote "Is there any genus of Australian birds, containing more than one species, so little known as the Lorilets or Fig Parrots?" During the ensuing 70 years we have learned much about the behavior of these exquisite parrots, but to a large degree the enigmatic aura persists, and this seems to be a consequence not of their rarity, for two populations are quite common, but to the difficulty of observing them. Small green parrots living among the foliage of rainforest trees are easily overlooked.



Photograph by Len Robinson

Although described originally as separate species, the three forms present in Australia now are considered to be subspecies of the polytypic Double-eyed Fig Parrot *Cyclopsitta diophthalma*, which is widespread throughout New Guinea and the adjacent islands. In size and plumage coloration, all three forms resemble the nominate subspecies from New Guinea, which is the form that is held in some aviaries in North America and Europe.

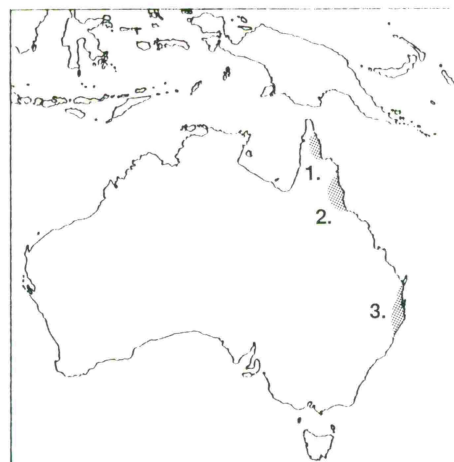
The northernmost subspecies, Marshall's Fig Parrot *C. d. marshalli* is quite similar to *C. d. aruensis* from the Aru Islands and southern New Guinea, so presumably is a recent immigrant to Cape York Peninsula.

Conversely, the southernmost subspecies, Coxen's Fig Parrot *C. d. coxeni* and, to a lesser extent, the Red-browed Fig Parrot *C. d. macleayana* are approaching the degree of differentiation typical of a species, so obviously have been isolated for a very long time.

Events pertaining to the discovery and naming of all three forms are most intriguing. In 1911, while camped a few miles from the Jardine River on Cape York Peninsula, a prominent collector and fieldworker named William McLennan noted a pair of small "lorikeets" feeding high up in a flowering eucalypt; one was shot, but fell into thick brush and could not be located. McLennan stated that he was sure that

these birds were fig parrots. Nothing further was heard of the presence of fig parrots on Cape York Peninsula for more than 30 years.

In the latter part of 1942, while engaged in military operations near the Lockhart River, Captain A. J. Marshall observed fig parrots feeding in flowering trees on the fringe of rainforest. Three specimens were collected and forwarded to the Australian Museum, in Sydney, where they were examined by Tom Iredale, who noted that the total absence of red from the facial pattern of the female differentiated them from the Red-browed Fig Parrot, and



Distribution of the Double-eyed Fig Parrot *Cyclopsitta diophthalma* in Australia. 1. Marshall's Fig Parrot *C. d. marshalli*; 2. Red-browed Fig Parrot *C. d. macleayana*; 3. Coxen's Fig Parrot *C. d. coxeni*.

so he described them as a new species — *Opopsitta marshalli*, in honor of the collector.

At the American Museum of Natural History, in New York, Ernst Mayr compared Iredale's description and drawing of *marshalli* with specimens of *C. d. aruensis* from southern New Guinea and declared that he could not find a single difference. He stated that absolute identity could not be established until the Cape York Peninsula specimens were compared directly with specimens of *aruensis*, but, until a valid distinction was found, birds from Cape York Peninsula would have to be treated as *aruensis*.

Insects had caused such severe damage to the three specimens of *marshalli* that they were totally unsuitable for comparison with *aruensis* specimens, so identification remained unresolved for 20 years.

Despite extensive work carried out on Cape York Peninsula by collectors and field observers, no further sightings were made of Marshall's Fig Parrot, and it was presumed to be very rare.

Then in November 1963, during a brief visit to Iron Range on the Claude River, I rediscovered Australia's smallest parrot when an adult male was seen feeding from the trunk of a small tree growing on the riverbank. This was my most memorable field experience, and Marshall's Fig Parrot has always been a very special bird for me. Specimens collected at Iron Range in 1966 enabled me to make the direct comparison with specimens of *aruensis*, and *marshalli* proved to be a valid subspecies. Though its exact range has yet to be determined, Marshall's Fig Parrot is quite plentiful in the Claudie River district, where, on one occasion, I watched more than 200 birds leave a roosting tree.

No less interesting are events leading to the formal naming of the best-known of the Australian fig parrots — the Red-browed Fig Parrot from north Queensland. In 1874, specimens of a new fig parrot were collected by Kendall Broadbent in forests near Cardwell, on the north Queensland coast, and immediately he contacted Dr. E. Ramsay at the Australian Museum in Sydney, Professor F. McCoy

at the Museum in Melbourne, and John Gould in London. There followed a less than dignified scramble by these three eminent scholars to be the first to describe and name this new fig parrot.

Presumably because of his reputation, Gould won recognition and general acceptance was given to his *Cyclopsitta maccoyi*, named ironically in honor of McCoy. However, it was realized subsequently that McCoy's name of *Cyclopsitta leadbeateri* had been published one month earlier than Gould's description, so it became the accepted name.

Then in 1929, Alec Chisholm found the description published by Ramsay in the Sydney Morning Herald dated 5 November 1874, more than six months before the descriptions of Gould and McCoy. For some time debate continued about the validity of a scientific description published in a newspaper, but eventually Ramsay's name of *Cyclopsitta macleayana* was adopted and remains in use today. We trust that there are no other names waiting to be resurrected.

It is in keeping with the fascinating history of fig parrots in Australia, that the form first discovered remains the least known, and after more than 130 years its nest and eggs are yet to be described. Gould described Coxen's Fig Parrot *C. d. coxeni* in 1867, and named it after Charles Coxen, his brother-in-law, who lived in Brisbane and sent to Gould drawings made from two specimens obtained by Eli Waller, a Brisbane bird dealer. Waller obtained the specimens in June 1866 from a logger who had shot several birds from a flock seen in mountain forest near his camp, about 30 miles from Brisbane; three or four specimens were preserved, but the remainder were cooked in a pudding!

By the turn of the century, land-clearance for agriculture had already reduced greatly the rainforest in the range of Coxen's Fig Parrot, and fears were being expressed about future survival of the birds. Writing in the *Queensland Naturalist* of November 1924, R. Illidge recalled his field experiences of 40 years earlier in mountain forests in south-eastern Queensland, where pairs or small parties of these fig parrots often were encountered with

fruit pigeons feeding in fig trees, but most of these forests had since been cleared.

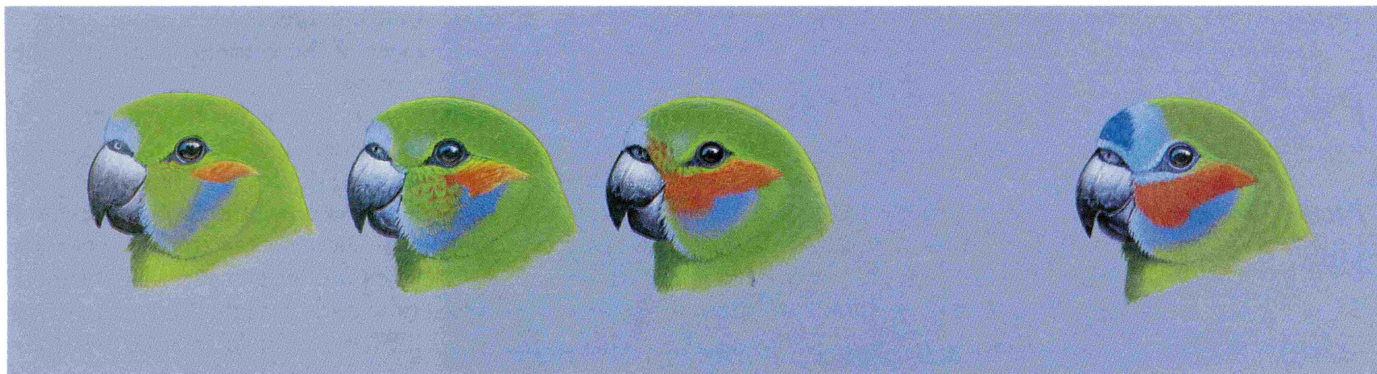
Very few of the museum specimens of Coxen's Fig Parrot were collected after 1901, and sightings have been reported only at irregular intervals. My sole encounter was in October 1955, when a brief glimpse was obtained of three birds in flight. Between 1977 and 1981, when field records were compiled for the Atlas of Australian Birds, there were no reports of Coxen's Fig Parrot, so this southernmost subspecies was considered to be extremely rare.

In 1996, much excitement was generated by a report from the naturalist/photographer John Young that he had found nesting fig parrots in the Hastings River valley, on the north

Photograph by Cyril Laubscher



Adult male Red-browed Fig Parrot *Cyclopsitta diophthalma macleayana*; this subspecies takes its name from the prominent red spot on the central forehead. Here it displays the prominent orange-red marking on the inner tertials — a diagnostic feature of the fig parrots.



Facial coloration in Coxen's Fig Parrot *C. d. coxeni*. From left to right: heads of museum specimens showing the gradual acquisition of red from the ear-coverts (fig. 1) to the cheeks (figs. 2 and 3), and the head of a presumed adult as depicted by Elmer (fig. 4).

Artwork by Peter Slater, with kind permission from S. Elmer


coast of New South Wales, and well to the south of the assumed southern limits to the range of *coxeni*. Furthermore, he stated that these birds were quite different from museum specimens, and this gave rise to rumors about a

Photograph by Cyril Laubscher

new species being discovered. The birds seen at the nest were more richly colored, with entirely red cheeks and bright blue forecrowns, prompting Young to suggest that they were the previously unknown adults of *coxeni*, and all of the 55 or more museum specimens are juvenile or subadult birds. What an astounding proposition, but it could be true.

A painting of Coxen's Fig Parrot prepared by Queensland artist Sally Elmer from information supplied by John Young, has just been published, and this prompted me to re-examine museum specimens. I found evidence supporting the claim that the specimens may not be adults. In the accompanying drawing, Peter Slater has depicted the heads of three specimens from the Australian Museum (figs. 1, 2 and 3) together with the head of the presumed adult as shown in Elmer's painting (fig. 4). In fig. 1, red is restricted to the ear-coverts and the cheeks are wholly green, features which are presumed to indicate juvenile plumage. In figs. 2 and 3, there is a gradual acquisition of red on the cheeks, but no specimen shows the bright blue forecrown that is a key feature in the facial pattern of the presumed adult (fig. 4). It seems that we may have waited 130 years to find out what an adult Coxen's Fig Parrot looks like.

Juveniles of both *marshalli* and *macleayana* resemble the adult females, so if further investigations confirm that juveniles of *coxeni* differ from adults of both sexes, further consideration must be given to treating Coxen's Fig Parrot as a separate species. Surely there could not be more startling proof of our grossly

inadequate knowledge of Australia's fig parrots more than 130 years after their discovery! 

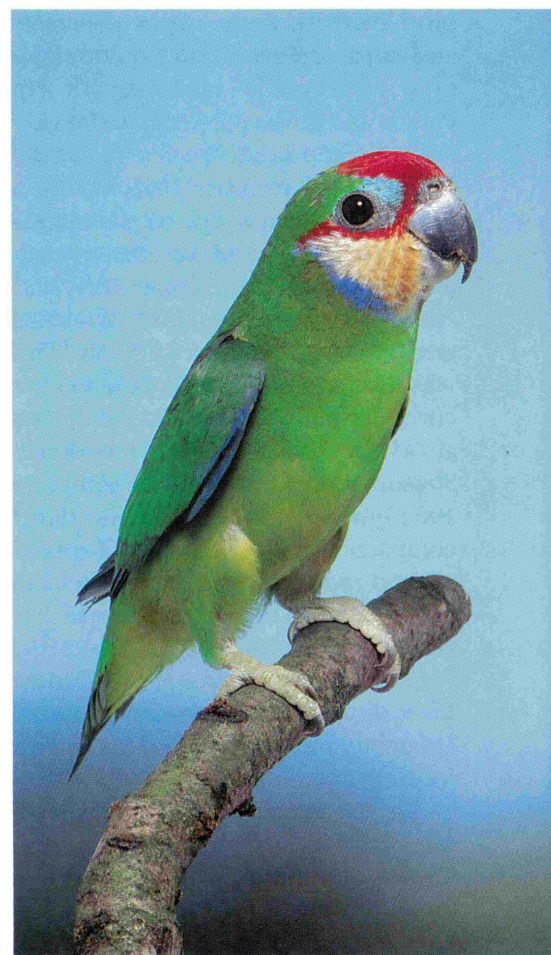
In Part 2, we shall look at these fascinating parrots in the wild and in aviaries.

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Photograph by Cyril Laubscher



An adult male Double-eyed Fig Parrot *Cyclopsitta diophthalma diophthalma* of the nominate subspecies from New Guinea; this subspecies is held by some aviculturists in the UK, Europe, and North America, and is similar in appearance to the Australian subspecies.



Brownish-buff instead of red cheeks distinguishes the juvenile and adult female Double-eyed Fig Parrot, and this same feature differentiates the sexes in most, but not all subspecies.