



ROSELLAS;
AN AUSTRALIAN VIEWPOINT

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Aviculture of the Eastern Rosella

Platycercus eximinius

Introduction

The Eastern Rosella is one of the first birds that I kept and bred. It was recognizable to virtually everyone who entered our backyard as the "Tomato Soup Parrot." A popular Australian brand of soup called "Rosella" bears this species as its logo.

My pair of birds has probably given me the most fascinating sights and some of my favorite bird-related memories. The following aviary notes are based on this particular pair which bred for me over a period of many years, rearing two broods each year.

Being colorful and quite resilient, the Eastern Rosella is a most appropriate bird for anyone considering the larger Australian broad-tailed parakeets.

General Description

The Eastern Rosella is about 12 inches long with head, sides of neck, its chest, vent and under tail-coverts red. The lower breast is yellow blending to green on the abdomen. The nape of the neck is yellow and the bird sports white cheek patches. The back, mantle and scapulars are black and — typical of the rosella group — are given a scalloped effect by having the margins of each feather a different color; in this species, greeny-yellow. The bend of each wing is blue, lighter for outer secondaries and the under surface of the tail feathers but darker for the outer edges of the primaries. The bill is grey-horn color and the legs are grey. The rump is yellowish-green.

Sexing

The hens of the species have the same basic color pattern but the colors are less intense and the red is less sharply defined. Hens vary greatly, however, and some are difficult to tell from the less well colored cocks.

Interestingly, upon examination of the nestlings about one week prior to them leaving the nest, the sexes seem more distinct than when they fledge. The young leave the nest as dull replicas of their mother and carry a white under-wing stripe. Young cocks lose this wing-stripe after their first adult molt, which may take up to 12 months to complete. Hens retain this wing-stripe as adults. I have also noticed that

Photo by Dale R. Thompson



The true Golden-mantled subspecies has a rich yellow scalloped mantle instead of the green scallops of the Eastern Rosella.



Photo by Sheldon Dingle

When an Eastern Rosella has this much red coloration, it is called a Firey Rosella.

the heads of the male birds are noticeably flatter on top whilst the heads of females are more rounded. However, this can be variable.

Related Species and Subspecies

The rosellas comprise a fairly distinct group with their cheek patches and scalloped patterns on their backs. The Australian Ring-necked Parakeets *Barnardius* spp. share many behavioral and morphological similarities. [Editor's note: some taxonomists have merged the *Barnardius* genus into the *Platycercus* genus as can be noted in Distribution and Taxonomy of Birds of the World by Sibley and Monroe.]

Within the genus *Platycercus*, the Eastern's closest relatives seem to be the Blue-cheeked, *P. adscitus*, and the Northern Rosella, *P. venustus*. Easterns share with these other two species within the genus, certain characteristics such as variable sexual distinctions and their plumage patterns although the colors are different. In fact, recent ornithological thinking places all three species (and their associated subspecies) in the one, large complex called the White-cheeked Rosella.

In addition to the nominate subspecies, there are two distinct subspecies of the Eastern Rosella:

P. e. ceciliae, the Golden-mantled Rosella inhabits the northerly part of the species' range from northern New South Wales and into Queensland. Its rump is bluer than the nominate subspecies and its scalloped mantle markings are a rich yellow rather than green.

P. e. diemenensis, the Tasmanian Eastern Rosella, inhabits Tasmania. It is a larger bird being about 13 inches long. Bergmann's Rule states that birds of a species from the colder parts of its range are larger than those from the warmer parts. The cheek patches of this subspecies are also much larger and are snow white while the general coloration is somewhat darker and richer. Gloger's Rule states that birds of a species from the damper parts of its range are darker than those from the drier parts.

Distribution and Habitat

The Eastern Rosella inhabits open forest and grassy woodlands near



Distribution of the Eastern Rosella

water where it feeds on a variety of seeds, nuts, berries and other fruits.

This species is distributed throughout eastern Australia from about Gympie in Queensland through New South Wales and Victoria (except the dry north-west corner), Tasmania, some islands in Bass Strait, and ranges into South Australia as far as Tintinnarra. The species is also found around Adelaide including the nearby Mount Lofty Ranges in South Australia.

Calls and Behavior

This species exhibits all the typical behavioral characteristics of the rosella group:

- The undulating flight.
- The strutting, swaggering style of the male birds.
- The tail-wagging during various displays, and the high-pitched, piping whistle consisting of sharp notes repeated rapidly in quick succession. By mimicking this call, you can prompt most rosellas (and certainly the Eastern) to display and call in their typical style.

The Law

Australia has three levels of government and each can exert some effect on bird keeping. The Federal Government is the national government. It is responsible for import, export and the implementation of CITES. The Eastern Rosella cannot be legally imported into or exported from Australia.

The Government of Victoria is a state government similar to the state governments in the U.S.A. It is responsible for wildlife management, conser-

vation on a regional level, agriculture, and animal welfare issues. Most breeders of native birds require a license, depending on the species kept. This license is needed to keep the Eastern Rosella. This same government, together with the Victorian Avicultural Council, developed a Code of Practice for the humane keeping of all birds. The standards are sensible and the Eastern is subject to this Code.

Local Governments include city and shire councils and these usually attend to noise and pest issues on a local neighbor-to-neighbor level.

Despite the need for a license, the Eastern Rosella is kept in modest yet safe numbers in my home state of Victoria, one of the seven states of Australia. Victoria's state wildlife licensing authorities list (as at 31 March 1997) 852 people keeping 2123 Easterns including subspecies and mutations. In comparison, the same source lists 1068 people keeping 4187 Princess of Wales Parakeets, *Polytelis alexandrae*.

The Eastern Rosella is, however, largely underestimated in both dollars and in "enjoyability."

Housing

My pair of Easterns were housed in an open flight aviary of timber construction (made from the wood of some old packing cases, in fact) and measured approximately 9 feet long, 4 feet wide and 4 feet high. The shelter was small but snug with the perch higher than any other perch — even the wire netting in the flight. Birds tend to seek out the highest point in the aviary where they prefer to roost. This shelter perch provided that spot and the birds soon became accustomed to using it each night.

The floor was sand (being built over my childhood sandbox). This drained very well indeed and no worm problems were ever evident. The brick-paved shelter floor was easy to clean.

The aviary faced south which is far from ideal but this was due to space considerations. In Australia, the bad weather emanates from the south. North gives us the winter sun and east, as in the Northern Hemisphere, gives us the morning sun. However, the aviary was very close to the house and

faced the kitchen window for easy observation. This provided enough shelter from the winter winds. Watching the Eastern Rosellas was some consolation for having to wash the dishes at the kitchen window. My parents did not possess an automatic dishwasher.

Mixing With Other Species

This species — as with the rest of the group (with the possible exception of the Western Rosella *P. icterotis*) — is extremely pugnacious. They will attack other birds and either kill or maim them in no time. I have seen terrible injuries such as toes and mandibles torn off through fighting, even through the wire mesh of adjoining aviaries.

Therefore, I believe they should be housed by themselves and should not even be housed next to other aggressive birds (including their own kind, of course).

Outside the breeding season, I have kept Chinese Painted Quail *Turnix chinensis* with them briefly. However, I did not entirely trust my pair of Easterns and so I promptly removed the quail when circumstances permitted.

Feeding

A dry seed mixture of two parts plain canary and one part each of panicum, white, grey, and Japanese millet was used and eaten efficiently by the birds. In a separate dish I fed a 50-50 mixture of hulled oats and grey sunflower seed. I rationed the larger seeds to one handful per day during the summer months but during the winter, when I felt that the birds needed the extra oil content, I gave them unlimited quantities.

Virtually every food scrap from the kitchen found its way to the rosella aviary and, from there what they didn't eat was placed in the compost heap in the finch aviary. My Eastern Rosellas took cooked meat, carrots, peas, beans and other fruits and vegetables of

many varieties. They had a smorgasbord every day to choose from and they sampled most of the items.

Grit and cuttlebone were provided at all times plus crushed eggshells as available. These provided the birds with calcium for bones and beaks plus aiding digestion.

Whilst breeding, seeding grasses were supplied daily. Being at high school, I was unable to escape nightly homework duties but was always allowed to feed and check the birds first. However, this feeding did not include scouring the back blocks of Ballarat (a Victorian country town) for weeds every night. I would have to collect a week's supply of greens at the weekends and divide this into daily portions. Each was placed in a plastic bag sprayed on the inside with water and tied around the stems then hung up in the shed which was cool and dry. Each day I'd untie one of the bags and distribute the still fresh grasses.

Dock *Rumex* spp. thistle *Sonchus* spp and chickweed, *Seellaria media*, were preferred and wild greens and herbs known locally as Prince of Wales feather, *Amaranthus retroflexus*, and fat hen, *Chenopodium album*, were eaten later in the season. Dock and thistle were literally demolished although the Prince of Wales feather was taken sparingly.

Breeding

This particular pair of Easterns bred like clockwork. During late August (the last month of winter), I would install the breeding log — the same one each year. It was a natural log about 3 feet long with an internal diameter of about 8 inches. The log had an entrance spout with an oval hole about 4 to 5 inches wide. It opened into a wide chamber which then narrowed down to a straight hollow in the nest area. Each year I would fill the hollow with damp hardwood sawdust to approximately one foot deep. The hen would then scratch and dig out most of the sawdust and start warming the nest, drying it out to her liking, so that about two weeks later the first egg would be laid.

Putting sawdust in the hollow meant that the hen would scratch it out and leave sawdust on the aviary floor.

When I came home from school, I could see the sawdust on the floor and know that breeding had commenced.

Between three and eight eggs are normally laid and the hen does all of the incubation. She commences seriously incubating with the second or third egg. Incubation lasts about 21 days. I have had as many as seven babies reach independence from the one clutch of eggs. My pair was double-brooded.


I read once that it is a good idea to provide two nesting sites because the hen may go back to nest before the first clutch fledges. I only provided one log and my pair was fledging young from the second clutch as late as 2 February, the last month of summer.

In my experience, young remain in the nest for between 33 and 35 days. At this stage, when the young are about to leave the nest, I have had some of my fondest memories in the bird world. The mother would feed the young at the entrance hole and then fly to the wire opposite, calling for them to come out. We had a bird's eye view of this procedure from the kitchen window. The sight of the young birds with their yellow bills, bobbing their heads up and down, begging for food was an amusing sight. Mother "Rosie" would be coaxing them out and they would appear to hesitate, at times almost losing their balance. This would often occur just before dinner when my mother would be preparing the evening meal herself so I could sympathize with the baby birds. The name "Rosie" — derived from the colloquial term for rosella — is the name our family gave the mother.

At this time of fledging, it is also very important to watch the father. I found that, here again, the birds worked like clockwork. Exactly seven days after fledging, the cock bird would seriously attack that particular young bird. If two left the nest on the same day, he'd attack both exactly one week later. If none fledged on a particular day, then all would be calm for that day the next week. The father was aggressive but, fortunately, predictable in this regard.

I had to remove each young one on the morning of its seventh day out of the nest.

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Hybrids

The Eastern Rosella has produced hybrids with a number of related species. However, I believe that this is not in the best interests of aviculture nor of the species involved. The hybrids are often fertile and second generation birds can be difficult to pick.

In the wild, however, a small natural hybrid zone exists between the Eastern and the Pale-headed Rosellas where their ranges meet.

Mutations

A number of mutations for this species have been recorded over the years. In Australia, there are lutino, cinnamon, red (also called "fiery" parakeet or rosella), and melanistic mutations being regularly bred. It appears that all are sex-linked recessive except for the melanistic trait, which is autosomal recessive. This means that hens may be split for the melanistic trait.

The Pet Bird

In my opinion, the Eastern Rosella is not an ideal pet bird. This bird is built for flight in open spaces. Whilst becoming tame when hand-reared, they are still easily startled and try to take flight quickly and strongly. This results in fluttering and crashing into a corner of the cage.

When tamed, Easterns can become too familiar. Losing their fear of humans, they can then become bossy little feathered imps with ear-nipping and other mischief not uncommon.

Nonetheless, the Eastern has a great gift for whistling and has been a common pet bird in Australia in the past. I would suggest, however, that most such pet birds — orphaned and/or hand-reared from the wild — were caged and looked at, not petted and handled as are the pet birds of today.

Conclusion

The Eastern Rosella is a hardy and beautiful bird largely underestimated and overlooked by many aviculturists. I find it a fascinating species full of character and boisterous charm. This is a bird worthy of any breeder's attention and most suitable for the novice breeder of Australian parrots.

References

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Acknowledgment

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Further Reading:

Eastern Rosellas on the World Wide Web

A superficial browse through the internet uncovers some information on this species. However, most sites give only general field information. These sites include:

The Australian Rosella

<http://rosella.apana.org.au/bird-det.htm#Eastern>

Healesville Sanctuary, Victoria, Australia

<http://www.zoo.org.au/hs/hs113.htm>

Lexicon of Parrots

<http://www.amdt-verlag.com/>

The On-line Book of Parrots Index of Parakeet Pictures

<http://www.ub.tu-clausthal.de/PAhtml/inde002g.html>

Footnote

Australian Aviculture is the monthly Journal published by the Avicultural Society of Australia, Inc. The Department of Natural Resources & Environment (DNRE) is the Victorian State Government wildlife authority. The *VAC Newsletter* is the monthly publication of the Victorian Avicultural Council (VAC), the state body representing aviculture to government and the state affiliate of the Avicultural Federation of Australia (AFA).



ROSELLAS; A U.S. VIEWPOINT

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The Eastern Rosella in the U.S.

The parrots known as rosellas have been favorite avicultural subjects for many years. They are noted for their beautiful colors, conspicuous cheek patches, and the scalloping on their back feathers. There are eight species of rosellas, all inhabiting Australia; the Green (Yellow-bellied), the Crimson (Pennant's), Yellow, Adelaide, Eastern (Golden-mantled), Pale-headed (Blue or Mealy), Northern (Brown's), and the Stanley.

The Eastern is probably the best known of the rosellas. It is one of the most beautiful parrots in captivity. From its scarlet head and breast to blues, greens, and golden yellows on other parts of its body, it is vividly col-