

# The Red-capped Parrot

*Purpureicephalus spurius*

The  
Australian  
Red-capped  
Parrot is  
monomorphic.

## Another Australian Gem

by Mike Owen, Sunshine Coast,  
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Australia is known as the "Land of Parrots" and not without good reason. With over 50 species ranging from the majestic Black Cockatoos to the raucous Sulfur-crested Cockatoo, from the subdued Bourke's Parrot to the beautiful Scarlet-chested, and from the humble little Budgie to the magnificent King Parrot, Australia's parrots are renowned the world over.

One of the most colorful and unique of our parrots is the Red-capped Parrot *Purpureicephalus spurius*, a true kaleidoscope of colors. From the ruby-red head, to the lime-green cheeks and neck, purple chest, green back, yellow rump, red under tail coverts, and deep blue wing and tail feathers, it is truly an amazing mix of color.

While not uncommon in Australian aviaries, it is rare in North America and Europe, but the Red-capped is a bird well worth trying to add to any collection of Australian parrots.

The Red-cap, often known as the Pileated Parrot outside of Australia, is a medium sized bird, length about 35 cm. (13.65 inches) and weight in the 120 to 140 gram range. It is sexually dimorphic, with the hen being a duller version of the cock, particularly with the purple chest color. Hens also tend to have a smaller, rounded head and

to have an underwing stripe. A distinctive feature of both sexes is the elongated upper bill.

### In the Wild

In the wild, the Red-capped Parrot is restricted to the Southwest corner of Western Australia where it mainly inhabits Eucalyptus forests and woodlands within 100 km (65 miles) of the coast. However it has also found suburban gardens, and particularly orchards, in its range to be a rich source of food. Its main food is the large seed capsules of Eucalyptus trees, especially the Marri, and its large upper beak is well adapted to remove the seed from the capsules. It also is known to eat insects and nectar and is a pest of fruit orchards.

Adult birds are normally seen in pairs or small family groups, but younger immature birds often form quite large flocks, and are the most likely to invade orchards as the fruit is ripening. It is this destructive behavior that has resulted in large numbers of Red-caps being legally culled each year by orchardists keen to preserve their crops from destruction.

Until recently, large numbers were trapped for the avicultural trade in Australia, but this has now stopped and only culling is presently allowed. It is because of this large trade in wild

caught birds until recent times that the Red-capped has a reputation as a difficult bird to keep in aviculture. These wild birds often remain high-strung and nervous for their entire life in aviaries and will fly in panic when approached by their keeper. As a result, they are difficult to induce to breed.

### In the Aviary

By using birds that have been hand-raised before returning to the aviary, much better success can be achieved and they can become a relaxed aviary bird and a ready and reliable breeder.

In North America, where they will have gone through many generations of captive breeding and hand raising, this nervous behavior should not be a problem.

My first introduction to the Red-capped was many years ago in a bird park in Southeast Queensland. I was wandering past a group of aviaries when a cheerful "Hello" came from behind some bushes almost hiding the last aviary on the block. A look behind the bushes showed this most amazing bird. Between displaying and trying to mate with his hen, he kept running along the perch to say hello to me and to get a quick tickle on the top of the head through the wire. All the while, his hen waited patiently for him to



Photos by Mike Owen

The Red-capped Parrot is one of the most colorful of all parrots. It is rather uncommon in American aviaries.



return to her.

I soon acquired a pair, but, being blissfully ignorant of the problems of wild Red-caps in an aviary, ended up with a pair that almost had a coronary whenever I went near their flight. That pair never looked remotely like breeding and I soon gave them to someone with a very large display aviary and went looking for a quieter pair.

My next pair was much better, still not hand raised but aviary bred and parent reared. They were always nervous but at least not in danger of doing mortal damage to themselves whenever the flight was being serviced.

During their first breeding season in the aviary they gave every indication of wanting to breed. They checked out the nest boxes; the cock fed the hen; they were even seen mating a couple of times. Evidently, though, they still were not settled and nothing came of it.

The next year hopes were high as the birds were relatively calm (but still the most nervous in the aviary by a long way) and I had learned more about their requirements for breeding satisfactorily. That year they did indeed lay, in fact they laid five eggs, and I eventually ended up with three young birds successfully fledging, and one of my ambitions was achieved.

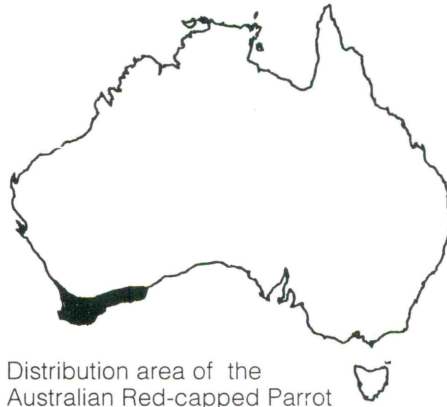
### Aviary Size

In Australia, because of their nervous behavior, a relatively large flight, around 18 by 4 by 8 feet is preferred, although my own success was achieved in a smaller flight of 12 by 3 by 6 feet. Ideally, the aviary will have one end (with the breeding box in it) partly closed off to give the birds the privacy they require. Even with calmer, hand-raised birds, a long flight will allow them the exercise that their strong flying ability demands.

They can be quite pugnacious and should never be housed with other pairs, nor even adjacent to either those of their own species or members of the Rosella group.

### Nestboxes

The nest box should be relatively deep, around 90 to 100 cm (approximately three feet), and about 20 cm (approximately eight inches) across,



Distribution area of the Australian Red-capped Parrot

but individual pairs vary considerably in their preferences and they may need to be given a choice of nest boxes. Even a Cockatiel box has been known to be preferred. Once a pair has selected a box to use, they will happily continue to use it in successive years.

Sawdust and peat moss form a suitable nesting material for the box, and I found it was desirable to put in plenty. Part of the stimulus to breeding for a hen seems to be giving the box a thorough working over, and she delights in removing much of the material placed in the box.

### Breeding

Nesting is in the late spring, with most pairs in Australia going to nest in October or even November. Red-caps often are able to breed at the age of

one year. Courtship is an entertaining spectacle to observe unobtrusively. The male is able to raise the feathers on the top of his head, and also drops his wings, fans out his tail, and prances along the perch toward his hen, quietly crooning to her.

Four or five eggs are usual, but up to seven may be laid. Incubation is about 20 days, with only the hen incubating and being fed by the cock. The nest should be disturbed as little as possible during this period as desertion or egg-destruction may result from disturbances.

The babies leave the nest after about five weeks but may continue to be fed by the parents for three or four weeks. The babies are erratic flyers initially and it is wise to place a soft barrier such as sacking at the ends of the flight to ensure that they do not hurt themselves by flying into the wire.

It is unusual for a pair to double clutch, even if eggs are removed for incubation or babies are removed for hand rearing.

The young Red-caps are remarkably dull compared to their parents, with a predominantly green body that takes around 12 months to attain its full potential.

They are an easy bird to hand rear and they make a most delightful pet bird. They are alert, intelligent, playful



Photo by Mike Owen

The aviaries of Damian and Sheryl Dunemann of Yandina, Queensland, Australia – home to some Red-capped Parrots in aviculture.



and the cocks can be quite good talkers. Parent-raised birds are difficult to tame and inherit some of the nervousness of the wild bird. They are one species that should be hand reared even if the babies are to return to the aviary for breeding rather than to become pets.

Their diet is typical of most small to medium Australian parrots. Most Australian aviculturists do not use pellets, preferring seed based diets, and a Red-cap will do well on a Cockatiel type seed mix with abundant fresh fruit and vegetables also being provided. I use a seed mix of about 5% sunflower, 20% canary seed and the remainder a mix of millets and panicum seed types. Favored fruits and vegetables include apple, pear, grape, corn, celery, kale, capsicum and endive. If you live in an area that has Australian eucalyptus growing, a feed of fresh seed pods will be especially appreciated. I also give large amounts of sprouted seed leading into and during the breeding season.

The Red-capped Parrot is one of those species that is at peril of becoming endangered in Australian aviculture. When the market was flooded by very cheap, but very neurotic wild birds, few bothered to waste their time with them. Most of these birds would be purchased by inexperienced aviculturists unaware (as I was initially) of the problems that these birds have. Many birds would die early from stress, while those that survived would be passed from aviary to aviary, never getting a chance to settle down.

However, now that the supply of wild birds no longer is available, attention is being re-directed to the species, and discerning aviculturists are making an effort to properly establish a reliable, quiet stock of birds before it completely dies out in our collections.

I have always regretted selling my pair, and intend in the near future to acquire some hand-reared birds to do my part to ensure their continued presence in Australian aviculture.

#### Acknowledgements:

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by Jack C. Eitnrear,  
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## In Search of Mexico's Endangered Bearded Wood-partridge

"...in the highland forest of Veracruz [Mexico] there is not a rarer bird than the Bearded Wood-partridge" Salvin and Godman (1888-1904)

### Veracruz, Mexico

A cool fresh mist coated the mountainside as we hiked up the narrow cobblestone path. Giant tree ferns towered over the trail. In the distance the snow covered mountain peak "Orizaba" was framed with cottonball-like clouds. Rounding a bend in the trail our local guide Pedro Mota produced a long sustained single note whistle. Our group, previously talking, became silent. Pedro repeated the whistle. In the distance a response came sounding like a cross between a dog barking and a Guineahen scream. The chorus began then stopped as abruptly as it began. We had just heard the "chorus call" of the Bearded Wood-partridge *Dendrortyx barbatus*.

Similar to other Mexican birds that inhabit remote places, the woodpartridge's status and distribution greatly reflects the history of ornithological investigation in Mexico. Some of the first (and last specimens) of this species were collected along the lower slopes of Cofre de Perote, Veracruz in 1893. The bird then seemed to have disappeared from science until 1947. During the period of 1940-1970s, ornithological expeditions within the wood-partridge's range reported that the bird could only be found to inhabited cloud forest. With the rapid clearing of cloud forests the Bearded Woodpartridge was considered at "risk" therefore was included in the 1992 ICBP/IUCN publication *Threatened Birds of the Americas*.

Unfortunately listing a species as "endangered" does not guarantee action. The next document however

played a greater role in the species recovery. Hundreds of birds are included in one list or another but priority action is seldom taken until the species is included in one of the IUCN Action Plans. In 1995 the "Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan for Partridge, Quails, Francolins Snowcocks and Guinea fowl" was published. In order to draft the plan a group of experts gathered for a conservation Assessment Workshop. During the workshop they use the Mace-Lande threat categories to prioritize what actions should be taken with the endangered members of this group of birds.

Of course Mace-Lande categories are based upon population theory (considering; probability of extinction, effective population, sub populations, population decline, impact of catastrophe, habitat change, and impact of commercial exploitation or introduction of exotic taxa) so they are only as reliable as the data being used to draw the conclusions. When it came to the Bearded Woodpartridge the Mace-Lande Conservation status was "critical," the highest level of priority for action. What soon followed would change forever the way we think about this 13.5 inch rich brown and cinnamon forest quail, with a pale gray throat.

As newly appointed Mexico and Central American coordinator for the World Pheasant Association / Birdlife / Species Survival Commission (IUCN) Partridge, Quail and Francolin Specialist Group, I had two projects to tackle within the 5-year plan period. They included #4.2.1 "Assessment of the conservation status of neotropical quails in northern Central America," and #4.2.3 "Status and conservation of the Bearded Wood-partridge in Mexico."