



ROSELLAS;
AN AUSTRALIAN VIEWPOINT
by Ken Kleesh, Eltham,
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the Northern Rosella

Platycercus venustus

Preamble

In addition to the nominate species, *Platycercus venustus venustus*, there is a subspecies *P. venustus hilli* which has violet-blue cheek patches instead of white and underparts that differ slightly to *venustus*. The nominate race is the one kept in captivity in Australia (Hutchins & Lovell). However, Barry Hutchins advises me there are a few Northern Rosellas held in captivity in Australia with violet cheek feathers instead of white and the several (living) specimens he has studied do not show the underparts coloration as described for the subspecies *P. v. hilli* in *Australian Parrots: A Field and Aviary Study*. Although some aviculturists call them *hilli* he is not convinced they are the *hilli* race (pers. comm.).

This attractive rosella is also called Smutty Rosella and Brown's Parakeet. It is well known by the latter name in Europe and the United Kingdom whereas in Australia its popular common name is Northern Rosella. It was discovered in the early 1800s by the Scottish biologist, Robert Brown, who

travelled with Matthew Flinders on the ship *the Investigator*.

It was first bred in the United Kingdom in 1928 by (the late) Duke of Bedford. The first official breeding in captivity in South Australia was by Alan H. Lendon in 1939.

Introduction

I first saw the Northern Rosella in the wild at Turkey Creek, Western Australia, in 1989 where my wife, Audrey, and I were camped prior to visiting the Bungle Bungles in the Kimberley. A small party of three birds came in to drink at a tap which was dripping. They would land on the tap and take the water as it dripped from the tap. (Unfortunately the photograph I took of a Northern Rosella sitting on the tap is not good enough for reproduction in *Watchbird*.)

The Bungle Bungle Range covers approximately 791,000 acres in the top-end of Western Australia, with numerous gorges, towering cliffs and canyons. Either driving through them or flying over them, the total structure is one of beehive-shaped domes of sandstone. It must rate as one of the most fascinating of the National Parks in Australia.

Distribution and Habitat in the Wild

In its native state "the northern rosella exists in a monsoonal climate across the northern parts of two

Australian states and extending into a third. From the Kimberley Division of Western Australia across the northern parts of the Northern Territory into Queensland, where it occupies a small area of that state near the bottom of the Gulf of Carpentaria eastwards to Burketown" (Hutchins & Lovell). It also inhabits some islands such as Melville, Bathurst, and Milengimbi off the northern coast of Australia.

Their habitat varies from coastal mangrove and *pandanus* thickets to



Distribution of the Northern Rosella on the Australian mainland.

savannah woodlands in the vicinity of watercourses. The birds feed on the pollen, nectar, and seeds of many native trees. They also take many species of grubs, beetles and other insects, in addition to seed from native grasses.

Sexing

The sexing of this rosella is difficult. The adult female is similar to the adult male with the only noticeable difference being in the size and colour of the head. The head of the female is smaller and narrower and the black on the male is generally more intense than in the female.

Immature birds are a duller version of adult birds and may show red flecking in the black of the head. They take 12 months to attain adult plumage.

A special feature of this rosella is that both the adult male and adult female have a black forehead, crown, nape, lores and ear-patches. In addition there is little plumage variation in adult male and female throughout the year.

As an avicultural subject this bird is unique because of its unusual coloration of black, blue, yellow, and red.

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Feeding

I feed my Northern Rosellas a variety of seed including sunflower, hulled oats, canary, Japanese millet and white (French) millet. They readily take seedling grasses and apple which I provide. I also supply a small amount of soaked seed on a daily basis. Cuttlefish bone, shellgrit and clean water should be provided at all times. They also appreciate the addition of *eucalyptus*, *acacia* or *grevillea* branches in flower and will spend much time nibbling the flowers and leaves.

Breeding

My pair of Northern Rosellas were purchased in March 1995 and were placed in a fully roofed aviary measuring 16 feet long, 4 feet wide and varying in height from 6-9 feet. They were purchased as a mature breeding pair, along with their nestbox which undoubtedly assisted in their breeding performance that began in May of the same year. They laid a clutch of four eggs, three of which hatched and were reared to maturity in July.

The nestbox measured 8 inches x 8 inches x 18 inches deep. In the bottom of the nest I placed a mixture of sawdust, rotten wood, and earth which was rammed together. Heat was supplied to the side of the nesting chamber by a 60 watt electric globe enclosed in a 30 ounce fruit tin. The globe was turned on as soon as the young hatched and kept on until they fledged. This heating was found necessary because the female leaves the young for long periods of time to feed, and being in the middle of a Melbourne winter, the young quickly lose body warmth.

Following this successful nesting, the hen went down again in the spring when she reared another two young to maturity in November.

The aviary I housed and bred my Northern Rosellas in is of timber construction with a rear walkway. At no stage did they chew the timber frame. The addition of an enclosed safety porch (i.e. walkway) is, in my opinion – and from my experience, a wise addition to any aviary used for housing fast-flying parrots such as the Australian rosellas.

Summary

Although a popular and hardy avicultural species in its home country of Australia, the Northern Rosella is "not as commonly kept in comparison to the other species of the genus; as it is, usually, less readily available than many others" (Hutchins & Lovell). However, from my experience, I can recommend this species as an attractive and interesting parrot for those who are interested in Australian

psittacines – especially the strikingly colored rosellas.

References

Hutchins, B. R. & Lovell, R. H. *Australian Parrots: A Field and Aviary Study*. The Avicultural Society of Australia, Melbourne, Australia: 1985.

Hutchins, Barry. Personal communication 1998.

Acknowledgement

Map: John E. Buchan, Glen Waverley, Australia. Reprinted from *Australian Parrots: A Field and Aviary Study* with permission of the Avicultural Society of Australia.



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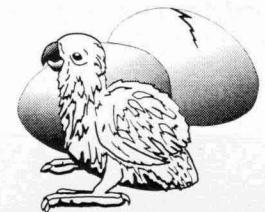
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