

# Australia's *Fig* Parrots

Part II. In the Wild and in Captivity

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Photographs by  
Cyril Laubscher and Stan Sindel

Sightings of fig parrots can be most frustrating, for only fleeting glimpses usually are obtained of small green parrots in swift flight overhead or clambering amongst the dense foliage of a rainforest tree. In flight they are noisy, but seldom call while feeding, and often the only indications of their presence are the movement of leaves or a steady stream of debris falling to the ground below. The characteristic contact call is a sharp, penetrating tseet . . . tseet . . . tseet, which is given in flight and just after alighting or prior to departure. Once recognized, the call is of great assistance in locating the birds, but it is decidedly un-parrot-like and in the field can be mistaken for the call of a small passerine. I suspect that Marshall's Fig Parrot escaped detection on Cape York Peninsula for more than 20 years because its call-notes were overlooked.

Presumably, the three subspecies are similar in habits, but Marshall's Fig Parrot is the subspecies with which I am personally most familiar, for I have studied it extensively at Iron Range National Park, on Cape York Peninsula. During the breeding season, pairs maintain territories that appear to be centered on feeding trees, and the birds feed consistently in these trees, even returning to resume eating seeds from the same fruits. There are three discernible feeding periods early to mid morning, at about midday, and mid to late afternoon.

Outside the breeding season, these parrots move about in small flocks, and a communal nighttime roost is used.

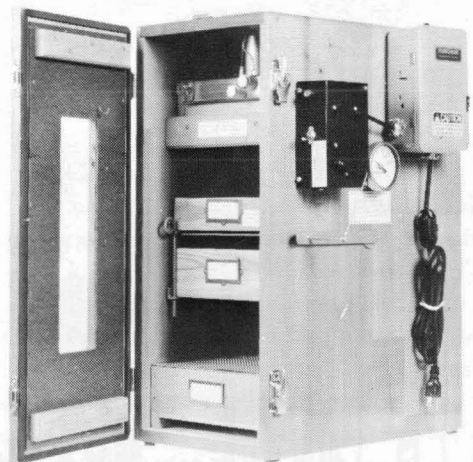
Soon after sunrise, small groups disperse from the roosting tree to spend the day in their feeding areas. I have noticed that in bright sunny weather they travel by means of short flights, pausing en route to preen and stretch their wings, but in overcast or wet conditions they fly straight to the feeding trees. While flying overhead, they will respond to imitations of their calls and I have caused them to circle back repeatedly to a tree near to where I was calling, and one male fluttered

down to the lowest branches only a metre or so above my head. Towards dusk, they return to the roosting tree, where many birds may congregate before nightfall.

My most memorable encounter with fig parrots occurred in January 1966, at a large *Castanospermum* tree, which served as a nighttime roost for large numbers of Marshall's Fig Parrots and Red-sided Eclectus Parrots *Eclectus roratus*. In the late afternoon I took up a vantage position overlooking this tall tree towering above the rainforest canopy at the foot of a hill, and towards dusk the Eclectus Parrots, accompanied by two Sulphur-crested Cockatoos *Cacatua galerita*, came in to roost.

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As the last rays of sunlight filtered through the clouds and danced across the forested valley, the harsh grating calls, that had been emanating from the tree since arrival of the first Eclectus Parrots, were joined by incessant high-pitched notes. The topmost branches became a hub of activity, with small birds hurtling into the foliage from the enclosing darkness; they were fig parrots and there were hundreds of them! By nightfall, 84 Eclectus Parrots, two Sulphur-crested Cockatoos and a great number of fig parrots were roosting in the topmost branches of this one tree.

Very early next morning, I and a companion returned to the same position to await sunrise, and soon the first light of the new day exposed a breathtaking panorama below us. Moisture trapped in forests of the valley rose as columns of fine mist, taking on the appearance of jets of steam. Birds started to sing and move about in the tree-tops. The loud booming call of a Cassowary *Casuarius casuarius* echoed up from the valley floor, while Purple-

crowned Pigeons *Ptilinopus superbus* and Wompoo Pigeons *P. magnificus* fluttered from treetop to treetop, their brilliant colors flashing in the now rapidly increasing sunlight. Buff-breasted Paradise Kingfishers *Tanysiptera sylvia* darted through the understorey, their long white tails streaming behind them, while the loud whistling call-notes of a Magnificent Riflebird *Ptiloris magnificus* carried across to the other side of the valley where another bird returned the greeting.

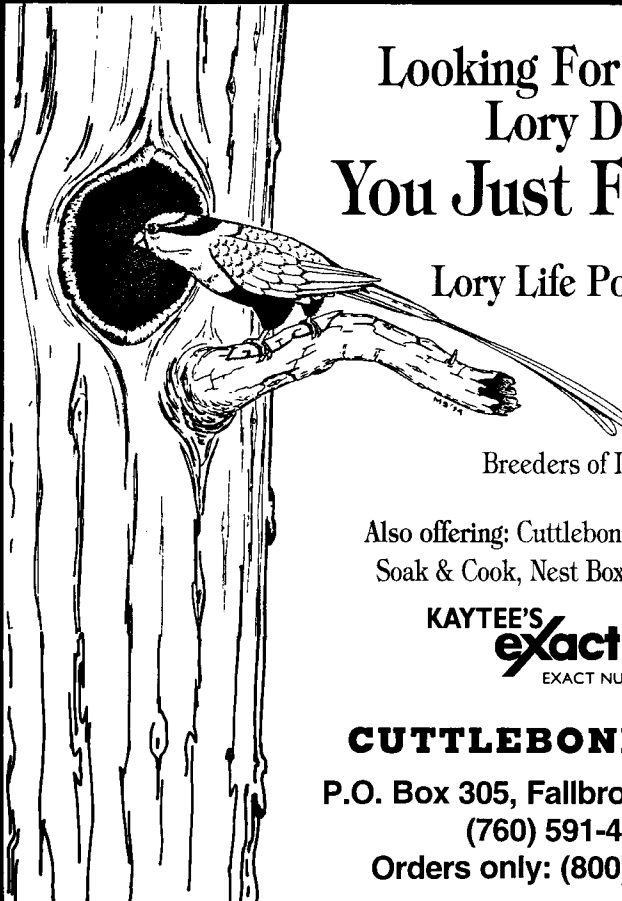
Torres Strait Pigeons *Ducula bicolor* and Rainbow Lorikeets *Trichoglossus haematodus* were passing overhead on their way to the feeding grounds, and the large roosting tree became a scene of intense activity. Eclectus Parrots were preening their feathers and stretching their wings, and fig parrots were fluttering from branch to branch. Suddenly there was an eruption and fig parrots flew from the tree in all directions. As if this was a signal, the Eclectus Parrots rose high into the air and, while calling loudly, made their way over the hilltops and then down

towards the river.

During the next 40 minutes an estimated 200 or more fig parrots left the roosting tree. In another tall tree below our observation point a Palm Cockatoo *Probosciger aterrimus* raised its crest and whistled loudly before leaving its perch atop a leafless uppermost branch. A pair of Red-cheeked Parrots *Geoffroyus geoffroyi* paused momentarily in the eucalypt under which we were standing, and then continued their flight down to the valley. On the way back to camp, we agreed that this sighting of hundreds of Marshall's Fig Parrots was the highlight of an unforgettable experience.

As implied by their name, fig parrots feed predominantly on seeds of native figs, and at Iron Range National Park, feeding is almost exclusively in *Ficus hispida*, a tree that grows at the forest margins or in clearings in rainforest. Occasionally, birds were seen feeding in sandpaper-leaf figs *F. opposita* or *Croton* bushes, and once in a flowering eucalypt. They are methodical feeders, returning to the same fruit until its seed supply is exhausted. On one occasion, I watched parrots taking seeds from certain figs but ignoring other seemingly identical figs, and subsequent investigation revealed that many figs were parasitized by fig wasps, thus suggesting that these birds were eating the larvae. This observation was made during the breeding season, and is most interesting in the light of our knowing that captive fig parrots have a high intake of mealworms when rearing chicks.

Breeding has been recorded during August to November and the nest is at the end of a tunnel excavated by the birds in a rotten tree trunk or dead limb of a living tree. Pairs excavate new tunnels each year, often in the same trunk or limb alongside old holes from previous years. At Iron Range National Park, I examined a nest that contained an addled egg and a well-feathered chick. The entrance hole was 38 mm in diameter and the access tunnel turned down to a depth of 23 cm; the bottom was lined with fine wood chips, obviously originating from the excavation, and what appeared to be moth or fly larvae also were present. A normal clutch comprises two eggs, but very little is known of nesting in the wild. I have



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observed both parents coming to the nest to feed advanced chicks, the transfer of food taking place at the entrance hole.


Only the Red-browed Fig Parrot is held in Australian aviaries, but at this time could not be considered to be well established. My experience has been that given adequate care and attention, fig parrots will thrive in captivity, but breeding them can be a frustrating experience. In adult plumage when acquired, my original male survived in captivity for more than 13 years, and the Sydney aviculturist, Stan Sindel tells me that a male obtained while in juvenile plumage died in his aviaries at the age of 17 years!

Persuading pairs to go to nest has not proved difficult and, despite the somewhat specialized nest construction by wild birds, captive pairs are not particularly selective in choosing a nest site. Problems usually arise at three stages in the nesting cycle – well-formed embryos die before hatching, nestlings die within five days of hatching, or chicks succumb soon after fledging. After a number of failures, my pair successfully reared a youngster in 1978 and, as far as I am aware, this was the first recorded successful breeding in captivity of Australian fig parrots. It occurred only after mealworms were included in the diet, and subsequent successes in the aviaries of Stan Sindel and at Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary have confirmed the remarkably high intake of up to 200 mealworms each day by a pair feeding advanced chicks.

My birds consumed mealworms at all times, though the daily intake was low outside the breeding season. The basic diet comprised dried figs and a mix of 2 parts white (French) millet to 1 part panicum, with very small amounts of plain canary seed added during winter. Because of the need to minimize the risk of injury to these swift-flying parrots by housing each pair in a suspended cage or a small aviary, obesity can be a problem, so fattening foods such as sunflower seed, oats, or even plain canary seed, should be excluded from the diet. Seeds only are taken from the dried figs, which can be reconstituted by soaking overnight in boiled water to which is added vitamin and mineral

supplements. Fresh cultivated figs are not suitable because they do not contain viable seeds. Fresh fruits, including apple, cherries, loquats, blackberries and grapes, should be provided as supplements, together with green peas, beans or silverbeet, and most birds will eat dry lory mix. My pair was very fond of *Pyracantha* berries, from which they extracted the seeds, and they readily stripped the leaves or chewed the bark from fresh *Eucalyptus* branches.

Nestboxes of the type intended for budgerigars or African lovebirds are suitable for nesting, and I favor the practice employed by some breeders of filling the box to the top of the entrance hole with compacted wet wood-shavings, which then are allowed to dry for a month or so prior to the box being placed in the aviary. This dry, hardened fill is excavated by the female, an activity which I believe to be important in bringing her into breeding condition. A normal clutch comprises two or three rounded eggs, which are laid at intervals of 48 hours and incubation by the female lasts approximately 20 days. Chicks are closely brooded by the female for up to 20 days after hatching, and fledging occurs at about 40 days. When approximately 10 months old, young males show the first red feathers on the cheeks, and adult plumage is attained at about 14 months.

A captive breeding program for Red-browed Fig Parrots is being undertaken at Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary, near Brisbane, as a prelude to a possible program for the endangered Coxen's Fig Parrot. As part of this effort, the Sanctuary will be hosting, in June 1999, a Symposium on the Biology and Captive Breeding of Fig Parrots. In association with this Symposium, I shall be leading a field excursion to Iron Range National Park, on Cape York Peninsula, to observe Marshall's Fig Parrots, together with Palm Cockatoos and Eclectus Parrots. The excursion will be restricted to 15 participants, and any reader interested in joining with us on this visit to the most exciting bird-watching location in Australia is invited to contact the organizer: Ms Liz Romer, Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary, 28 Tomewin Street, Currumbin, Qld. 4223, Australia; Fax +61 7 5534 7427. 

Adult female Red-browed Fig Parrot *C. d. macleayana* is distinguished from the male by its buff instead of red cheeks.

Adult male Red-browed Fig Parrot *Cyclopsitta diophthalma macleayana*; this subspecies takes its name from the prominent red spot on the central forehead