



Olde Tymer

Bill Rattray...

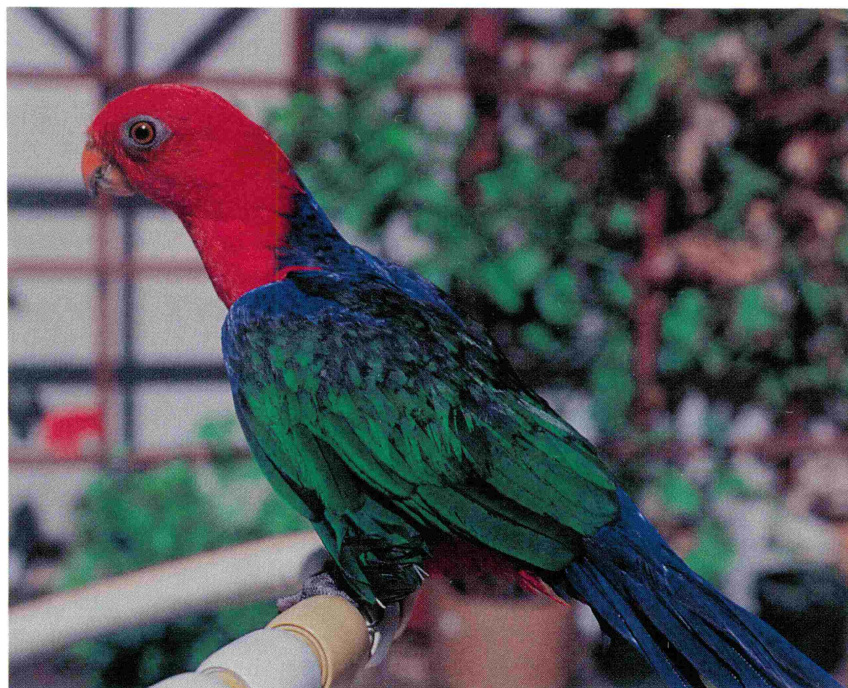
King of the
King Parrots

by Sheldon Dingle, Alhambra, CA

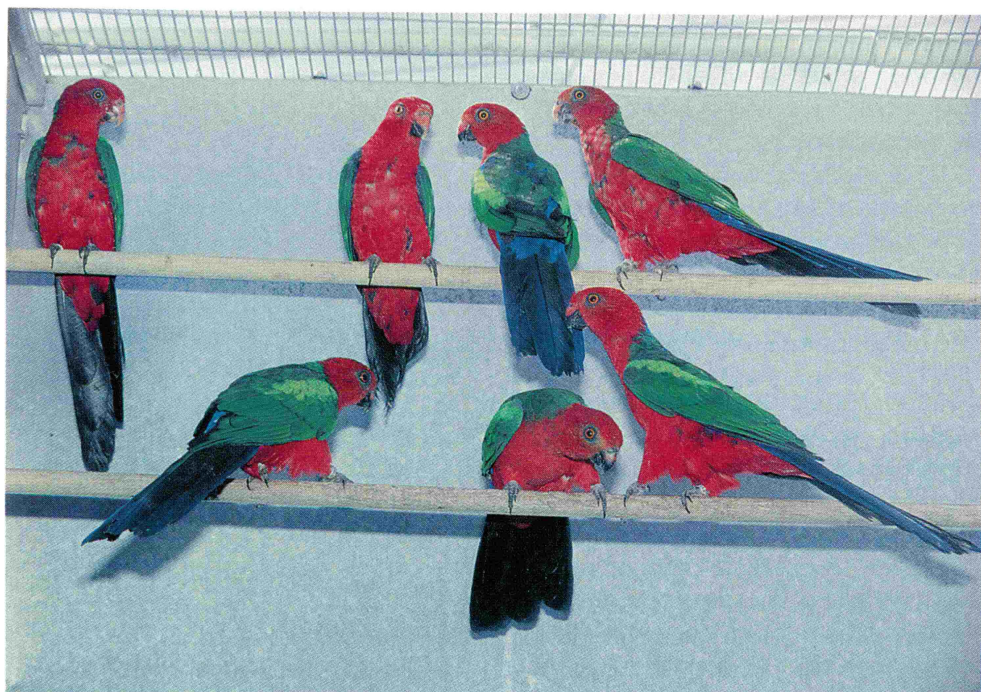
Photos Courtesy of Bill Rattray



*Australian King
male feeding
his female.*



Amboina King Parrot.



Pair of Green-winged Kings with a flock of babies.

Thirty years ago it started as an evasive action. Bill Rattray's eldest son announced he wanted pigeons. Thinking of huge free-flying flocks, endless squabbles, heaps of soil on the neighbors roofs and patios, Rattray diverted his kid from pigeons to finches—those sweet, clean and beautiful little birds that can be kept in a cage in the house. Right.

The son laid in a pair of finches, set them up in his room and closed the door. A few days later, Mrs. Rattray opened the door and entered a blizzard of tiny feathers floating about and covering every thing. With a vigorous flourish of the old broom the finches *and* the son were removed to the garage. Eventually the son oozed back into the house but not the finches.

This situation prevailed for a few months until Bill Rattray, himself, and the younger son, too, each installed a pair of finches in the garage—it became only a matter of time.

Mrs. Rattray entered the garage one day and beheld the same feather storm she noted in the bedroom. With great overhead swings of the broom (wielding it as though it were a great claymore two-handed sword—after all, the Rattrays *are* from Scotland), out went the finches and *all* the male Rattrays. The broom was becoming well worn.

This is why Bill Rattray built his backyard aviaries.

When the sons discovered girls, Rattray bought out the sons' share of the birds and had the whole lot to himself.

Following a pattern most of us are familiar with, Rattray put up 18 aviaries and bred Cockatiels. At that time, the next logical move was to other species of Australian psittacines. Rattray wound up with four or five species of rosellas, some Crimson-winged Parakeets, and several other Australian species—then he saw an Australian King Parrot and was smitten.

It happened that at this same time, Rattray heard two different talks, one by Dale R. Thompson and one by Sheldon Dingle, your humble servant, advocating avicultural specialization. Rattray decided to specialize in king parrots, indeed, to become the King of Kings (I told Mrs. Rattray I wouldn't use that term).

His family and friends told him he was nuts to specialize in a species of bird that was very hard to find, was very seldom bred, and gave no evidence of being a prolific aviary specimen. Rattray said, nonsense, it is just another bird and if it's breedable I'll breed it. With predictable Scottish determination he proceeded to do just that.

During the next year or so the Cockatiels disappeared, the other Australian species were cut back and, finally, Rattray bought his first pair of Australian King Parrots. It took another six years for him, finding one bird here and another bird there, to finally accumulate a pretty good collection of king parrots.

Keep in mind that in those days it was still easy to buy birds in Europe and import them into the U.S. In fact, Rattray did get a pair of kings from Germany—a pair he still has and which is breeding at the age of at least 15 years. And there was a system of quarantine stations that imported birds from the wild. Circumstances prevailed then that we will never see again.

Rattray wound up with three species of king parrots, the Australian King *Alisterus scapularis*, the Green-winged King *Alisterus chloropterus*, and the Amboina King *Alisterus amboinensis*.

Rattray believes the Australian King makes the best pet and that they are

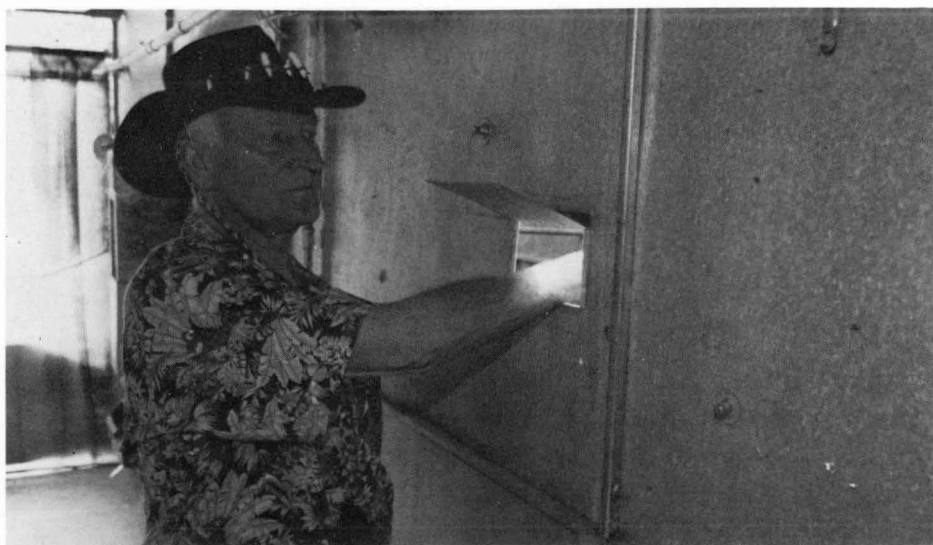


Photo by Sheldon Dingle

Rattray uses this small door to put young birds into a large holding pen when they are fledged. The pen is attached to the breeding aviary so the babies never go outside of the safety zone.

sometimes kept as pets in Australia. The males are prettier and most popular. Of course, the Australian King is dimorphic with the male having much more color. Even among the young, males have a darker blue on the rump while the females have a lighter blue. Rattray has never made a mistake sexing young Australians. The Australians lay four or five eggs and are good parents. They are very docile and get along well with their mates. When once a pair breeds, they will usually settle down and breed regularly for many years.

Rattray prefers the Australian and Green-winged Kings as they are better breeders and more stable in personality than is the Amboina.

The Green-winged Kings have been even better breeders than the Australians, possibly because during the mid 1970s the vast majority coming into this country were males. They

were wild caught birds imported from New Guinea through Singapore. The importers sent the best and most beautiful males and no females. No one here had a chance to breed the Greenwings because they couldn't make pairs. Greenwings are monomorphic but sometimes display subtle clues to sex. The female has green across the back of the neck, is not as bright red, and has a few other subtle signs but should be surgically sexed to be sure.

When at last some female Greenwings arrived, the long deprived and lonely males made up for lost time and were *really* interested in breeding. They became so good at it that Rattray often used the Greenwings as foster parents for other king parrots.

The Amboina King is less stable. It makes a good pet and mate to another Amboina—except when in breeding condition, then it becomes nasty and may kill its mate. Rattray kept Amboinas

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for seven years but numbers were not good. He bred them with only reasonable success and at the end of each year had to replace some females that had been killed by their mates—and even the young males were often killed by the adult male. And, to make matters worse, this species does not seem to raise many babies.

When setting kings up for breeding, Rattray believes that they breed better if there are other kings in proximity—proximity, not in *sight*. If kings are set up so pairs can see each other, the male in this aviary will always think the female in the other aviary is prettier than his own mate. He'll spend all his time courting the neighboring female while his own mate sits rejected. To prevent this great distraction Rattray uses solid partitions between aviaries or flights. The birds can hear one another but cannot *see* each other.

A case in point is the time Rattray saw a male Australian flat on its back on the bottom of the flight. Dead as a doornail, thought Rattray. But when he looked again, the birds was flying with joy and verve—a perfectly healthy bird. Perplexed, Rattray watched the bird from the shadows. Soon the female in the next cage landed on the wire floor. Instantly the suspect male dropped to the bottom of his cage, turned onto his back and craned his neck so as to peep under the partition at the neighboring female. Bad bird! Pervert. A regular Peeping Tom.

Don't leave any cracks or holes in your partitions.

Rattray's aviaries are suspended flights three and a half feet off the ground, three feet wide, four feet high, and eight feet long. They are made of $\frac{1}{2}$ x 3 inch 12 gauge wire. The heavy 12 gauge is not necessary for these birds but the combination of $\frac{1}{2}$ inch and 12 gauge makes the opening in the wire only $\frac{3}{8}$ of an inch wide which definitely prevents rats from getting into the cages. And if a mouse gets in, all he has to do is eat a few seeds and he'll be too fat to get out. These flights were built this way by design.

Experience is a good teacher. Rattray's first aviaries were wooden on earth floors. There were several nest boxes hung in various locations in each flight. To avoid disturbing the



Rattray designed a cut-down wheelchair in which he scoots around beneath the flight cages and cleans the floor wire of the cages as well as the concrete floor of the building with a high pressure water hose.



Rattray has two sets of stainless steel food trays. One set is in the aviaries while the other is sterilized and prepared for the next day's use. Note the fruit in the background.

birds, one usually checks only the nest box nearest the aviary door. In one flight where a good pair always raised babies, Rattray noticed that the birds were really going through the fruit. He heard the babies squeaking but not quite the normal squeak. He checked the nest box and where there had pre-

viously been five baby kings there were now nine baby rats. Indeed, one out of three nest boxes was a rat nest.

Down came the wooden aviaries and up went those of steel construction with the wire as described.

Originally the flights were 16 feet long but as the collection increased,



Photo by Sheldon Dingle

This view from inside the flight shows the continuous-flow seed hopper. The waste falls into the container below the feeding tray and is then winnowed and the good seed fed again.

Rattray divided the flights in half, reducing them to the current length of eight feet. There was no change in breeding performance. Eight foot cages work just as well as 16 foot cages. And even in the shorter flights, the birds get all the flying they want. They fly over and under the perches making figure eights until they tire. They maintained good conditioning this way. Some of them, the Greenwings in particular, even became pretty good at hovering.

The nest boxes used for the kings are grandfather type about four feet deep and hung in the aisle, not inside the flights. The birds aren't really touchy about nest boxes. They generally make do with what is available.

Rattray believes three things are a crucial to the operation of a successful aviary.

- Security for the birds is very necessary. *Never* enter the cage.
- cleanliness is really important.
- Easy to service. If your aviaries are hard to service, you will take shortcuts and deprive the birds. Aviaries must be keeper-friendly.

With that last thought in mind, Rattray designed his flights so that he can provide the "goody" trays with ease. He has two sets of stainless steel trays, one in the food preparation room in the garage (all scrubbed and sterilized) and the other set in the aviaries. Each morning he fills the clean trays with the available assortment of apples, oranges, figs, pomegranates, guavas, chard, comfrey, spinach, pyracantha, blossoms, berries, and, when there are babies, mealworms. He grows much of the produce on his property.

With the full trays under his arm, Rattray goes down the aisle pulling old trays out and putting new trays in. It takes less than a minute per row of nine cages. The old trays go on bottom of the stack and are returned to the food room for cleaning and sterilization.

The small "goody doors" on each flight have a lip so a bird cannot push the tray out. On the wire platform there is a lip *over* the tray so the bird can't lift tray or drag it around.

The birds also get Rattray's mix of seeds. And he makes sure they *eat* what

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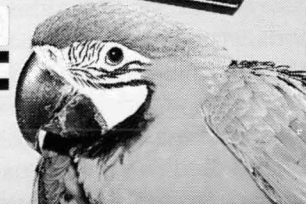
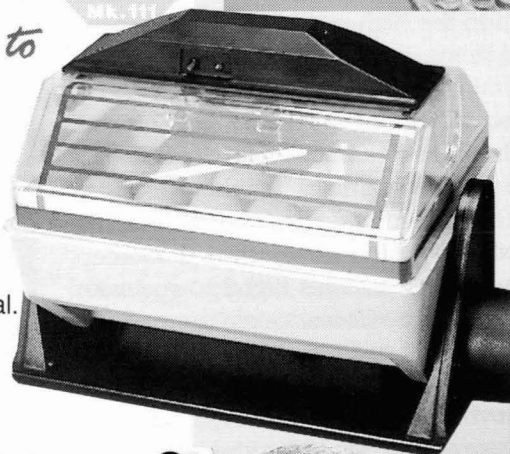
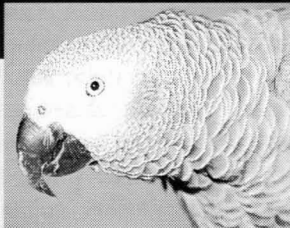
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is given them. He has self servicing feed hopper of own design. Any food spilled or thrown out drops into a bottom container. It is then put back into the top hopper. If it is not eaten yet, Rattray puts it through the winnowing machine and feeds it again. The birds have no real choice but to eat the mixture of seed provided.

The waterers are tube/ball type where the birds push beak or tongue against ball and get all the water they need. The water is hooked up to low pressure system so birds cannot push the ball and empty a container. Rattray used to spend half of his time changing and cleaning water dishes. Birds learn to use ball waterers with no problem but observe them to be sure. While Rattray was installing the system, a male king came right down and watched what he was doing — landed on his hand and took a drink. Rattray left the new waterers dripping for a few days so the birds could not fail to know where the water was.

To protect against too much heat, there is a misting system using $\frac{1}{4}$ gallon per hour orchid misters. The mist is so fine it usually evaporates before hitting the ground. Lawn sprinklers provide too much water. The misters are set to activate at 90°.

To facilitate cleaning the aviaries, Rattray has installed a continuous sub-concrete, walk-on gutter in the service end of the aviary so that the water from the high-pressure water cleaning system does not accumulate at the drain. No scraping up floor debris, and no unclogging the drain filter. This cuts the floor cleaning from three hours to a mere 30 minutes. All things considered, Rattray's operation is a model of efficiency. Indeed, he hopes to keep birds well into his eighties, and with this low maintenance aviary, perhaps he can.

When asked, "Do you have to do anything different for the kings than one would do for other Australian birds, rosellas, etc." the answer was no. Rattray thinks Crimson-winged parakeets are the hardest to breed because they are so skittish and wild. A hen killed five babies just because a stranger visited the aviaries—and he didn't even go into the flights. Kings become very tame and calm. Rattray



Photos by Sheldon Dingle

Rattray inspects a nestbox from the safety aisle. He never enters a cage.



No bird has ever escaped from this aviary. It would have to get out through the door on the cage, then pass through the plastic door strips Rattray is holding aside, and finally slip out the main door that Rattray is holding open.



Photos by Sheldon Dingle

This rear view of seed hopper shows the spilled and wasted seed retrieval bin on the bottom of the hopper.



Rattray grows fresh fruits for the birds. These giant guavas are a real treat.

used to have one that rode on his shoulder during the feeding routine.

A good aviculturist has to get smarter than the birds, says Rattray. When a hen lays off the perch, make a safety net. When a hen is not sitting tight, put the fertile eggs in an incubator and fill old blown eggs with plaster. Let the careless hen sit on them. It won't hurt the plaster eggs to cool down. Rattray makes such good plaster-filled eggs, he once found one in his incubator. Put cold eggs to the incubator -- within five days a chick will start developing then put the eggs under a more stable pair.

There is some advantage to fostering both eggs and babies. Rattray takes eggs from unstable pairs, incubates them until signs of life are seen, then give the eggs to good pairs who lay small clutches. Clutches under stable hens thus go from three to six eggs. This ups production.

If there is no matching pair to foster under, leave the eggs in the incubator. When hatched, put bigger babies with pairs who have smaller babies or babies near the same size. They will raise them.

One advantage of specializing is that all babies look alike and can better be cross fostered.

All Rattray's babies are parent reared. When babies are fed by their parents they learn to properly feed their own babies. All young are put into a large socializing cage so they can learn how to be birds and to get along with their own kind.

Experience has suggested that the best breeders are between 5 - 15 years old although Rattray has some still producing at 15.

Rattray is now retired from the corporate world and, with his wife, has been doing a lot of traveling. He is cutting down on the number of birds in his collection and you may well see some of his fine king parrots advertised for sale. In fact, he reconverted his flights back to 16 feet long as there are fewer birds now on hand.

But Bill Rattray, the King of the King Parrots, really loves his birds. He says kings are exotic, beautiful, calm, quiet, and, in fact, make the perfect aviary birds. He will always keep a few of them in his aviaries. ➤