



ROSELLAS;
AN AUSTRALIAN VIEWPOINT
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Aviculture of the Crimson Rosella

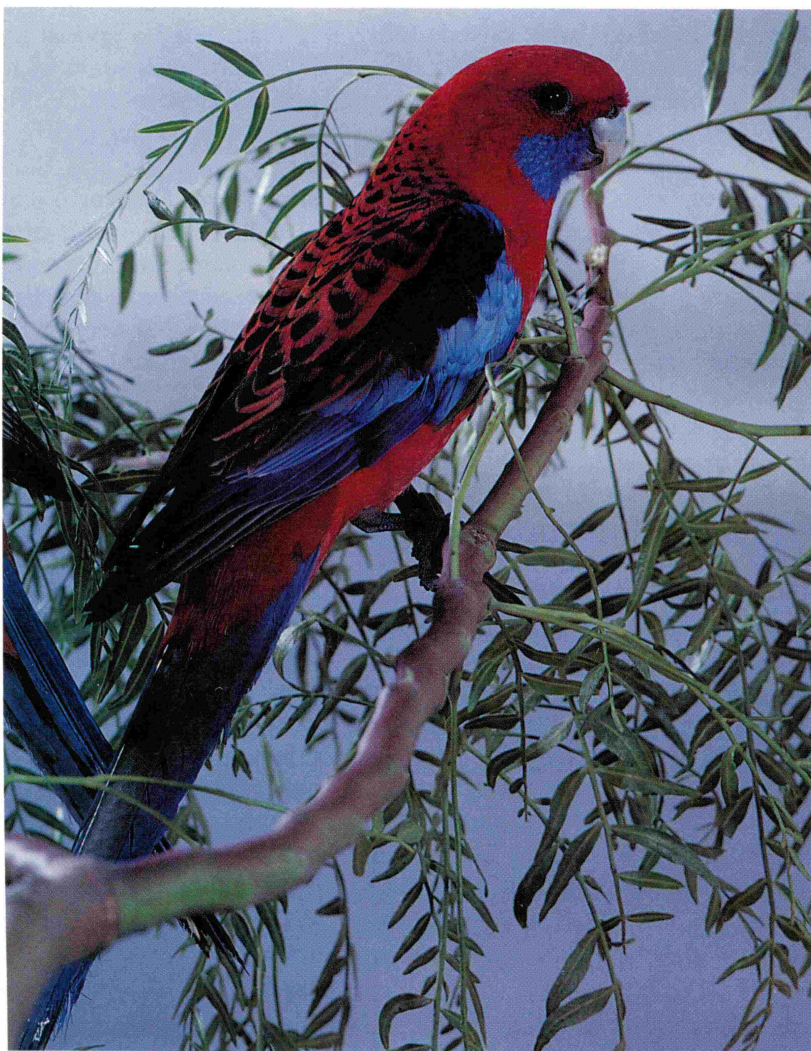


Photo by George D. Dodge and Dale R. Thompson

Preamble

This striking rosella, *Platycercus elegans elegans*, although widely known outside of Australia by the alternative common name — Pennant's Rosella — is (almost) universally known as the Crimson Rosella in Australian aviculture. As mentioned in my opening article in this "Rosella Series" ("The History of Rosellas in Australian Aviculture") "it has never been widely kept as an aviary bird in Australia due, no doubt, to it being such a common species in the wild."

Introduction

In the Avicultural Society of Australia's informative book, *Australian Parrots: A Field and Aviary Study*, the authors Barry Hutchins and Bob Lovell, discuss six species and 13 subspecies of the rosella genus *Platycercus*. Parrots belonging to the genus *Platycercus* are commonly referred to as broadtail parrots and collectively as rosellas. Hutchins and Lovell comment, "Generally all species and subspecies make good aviary birds once acclimatized, being long livers and reasonably

good breeders."

Modern avicultural literature clearly indicates that the Crimson Rosella (perhaps the most strikingly beautiful of all the rosellas) continues to be a favorite parakeet, particularly in America, Europe, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and, to a lesser degree, in its home country Australia. For example, in his excellent book *Australian Parakeets and Their Mutations*, Herman Kremer the noted Dutch aviculturist comments, "Pennant's [Crimson] parakeets are relatively easy to breed ... They are hardy birds which can withstand low temperatures."

Subspecies of the Crimson Rosella

Although some authorities claim that there are several subspecies of the Crimson Rosella I am, for the purpose of this article, concentrating on the nominate race *Platycercus elegans elegans* and its northern form, *P. e. nigrescens*, which is found only in the wild in isolated areas of Queensland. The nominate race, sometimes known as Mountain Lowry or Red Lowry, is the form kept in aviculture around the world. The northern race, *nigrescens*, although commonly known as the Crimson Rosella (in Australia), is "the smallest in stature of all races of *elegans*" (Hutchins & Lovell), being approximately 12 inches in length. This race (i.e., subspecies) seems to follow Gloger's Rule of clinal variation whereby "a bird of a single species which inhabits warm and humid parts of their range tends to become darker in color" (Hutchins & Lovell).

Description

Adult Male

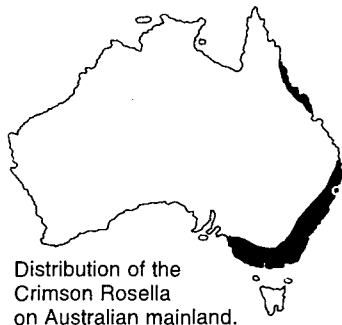
The nominate race of the Crimson Rosella *Platycercus elegans elegans* is approximately 14 inches long. The male is predominantly crimson-red in color, with violet-blue cheek patches and black-edged-with-crimson feathers on the mantle and back. It usually has a larger, flatter head than the female.

Adult Female

The adult female is similar in color to the adult male but usually has a smaller head and upper mandible.

Immatures

In the nominate race (*elegans*) juvenile Crimson Rosellas have green plumage with some patches of red and the violet-blue cheek patches whereas



Distribution of the
Crimson Rosella
on Australian mainland.

the northern race (*nigrescens*) are almost red in contrast to the overall green coloration of *elegans*.

Distribution

The distribution map clearly shows the distribution of the Crimson Rosella — from far north Queensland — down the eastern seaboard into south-eastern South Australia. In a large part of its range (as Hutchins & Lovell state) “this rosella can be found at a fairly high altitude throughout a large area of the Great Dividing Range, sometimes as high as 2,000 meters [6,560 feet] above sea level.” As readers of *Watchbird* who have visited Australia may know, the Great Dividing Range is a mountain range which extends along the whole of the eastern seaboard of Australia from Cape York Peninsula in the north to central-southern Victoria.

Habitat in the Wild

One of the reasons why the Crimson Rosella is such a hardy avicultural species, both in Australia and the US (as well as Europe and the United Kingdom), is that its natural range in the wild includes:

- tablelands with rainforests;
- fern gullies;
- heavily wooded mountains;
- dense woodlands;
- open forests;
- hilly and plains country;
- open forest country;
- seasonal snowcapped areas;
- occasional snow in other areas.

It is essentially a parrot that has adapted to a wet and/or cold climatic habitat. Where we live the annual rainfall is approximately 35 inches (900mm) and the area, noted for its quality dairy industry, is officially classified as a “wet climate” although we have our share of glorious weather — including hot summer days.

As mentioned previously (“History” article) it is a common species where I live in southwestern Victoria and is a regular visitor to our garden throughout the year, where it likes to alight and feed in the uppermost branches of one of the native gum trees. Its presence is usually evident either by the swift flight of a pair or a small flock of four to six birds.

Because it is primarily a seed-eater, the Crimson Rosella spends a lot of time foraging on the ground for food, including the seeds of grasses, both local and introduced (i.e., exotic spp.).

Avicultural History

In 1903, in his book, *Parrakeets: Being a Practical Handbook to Those Species Kept in Captivity*, David Seth-Smith of England wrote of Crimson Rosellas, “They have been bred in this country and on the Continent several times.” The doyen of modern-day avicultural authors, Rosemary Low, in her excellent book, *Parrots: Their Care and Breeding*, comments, “For long a favorite bird with aviculturists, this parakeet was bred in France as long ago as 1874...” and in “...the U.S.A., the first breeding was probably by J. C. Edwards of Los Angeles in 1927.”

Unfortunately the Australian avicultural literature hasn’t recorded when the Crimson Rosella was first bred in its home country. The oldest avicultural society in Australia, the Avicultural Society of South Australia which was founded in 1928, eventually began keeping records of first breedings for that state. The nominate race, *Platycercus elegans elegans*, was first “officially” bred in South Australia by E. B. Cox in 1936. (The same race, *P. e. elegans*, was, according to Coles, first bred [officially] in the United Kingdom by H. Jary in 1871.)

This species has always been a favorite avicultural species despite its aggression toward its own kind. As is so often the case, it is more highly prized in countries other than its native Australia. (In Australia it is not a common aviary bird which, in part, is undoubtedly due to its abundance in the wild in eastern, and southeastern, Australia.)

Diet in Captivity

As this rosella eats a wide range of

items in its wild state, ranging from seeding grasses to buds of trees, Australian aviculturists offer their Crimson Rosellas a varied diet — from a range of the usual dry seeds through to, and including, seeding grasses, milk thistles, garden weeds, silverbeet, spinach, lettuce (in its various forms), green peas, and fruit including apple, orange, peach, apricot, pear, banana — plus a range of berries including raspberries and blackberries. The basic seed diet consists of white millet, panicum, canary, sunflower and hulled oats — with the latter two being given in limited quantity except when the breeding birds have youngsters in the nest.

Mealworms are often supplied, together with a tree branch weekly, which gives the birds the opportunity to chew, as they have a natural affinity with trees in the wild — especially eucalypts. A varied and nutritious diet, preferably including soaked or sprouted seed — fed daily, is important to ensure success with this colorful parakeet.

In Australia fresh water is usually supplied on a daily basis in either terracotta or stainless steel dishes. Either way, fresh water is essential for both drinking and bathing. Shellgrit and cuttlebone are provided all-year-round.

Suitable Aviary

A suitable aviary for this species measures 14 feet long, 4 feet wide and 7 feet high. It is important that a shelter (house) section be included to a depth according to the severity of the local climatic. In warmer areas of Australia [e.g., Adelaide, South Australia] an adequate shelter is 4-5 feet deep by 7-9 feet high, with the roof sloping to the rear. As the Crimson Rosella is aggressive to its own kind — as well as the other rosella species — it is only ever housed one pair to an aviary.

The use of heavy gauge wire mesh is an accepted practice in Australia for aviaries housing rosellas except the smaller, non-aggressive, Stanley Rosella *P. icterotis*. A mesh such as 1 inch x 1/2 inch solves the problem of wire-chewing. If Crimson or other rosellas are housed in adjoining aviaries the aviculturist concerned usu-

ally has additional wire mesh between each flight with such partitions being approximately two inches apart.

In Australia aviary floors for parrot species range from natural earth (which I prefer) to fine gravel, small pebbles, concrete or concrete covered with river sand. Although opinions differ among Australian aviculturists about which type of floor is the most suitable for rosellas there are two things most would agree upon:

1) concrete facilitates easier cleaning and better hygiene control;

2) an earthen floor is more natural for the birds which, in the case of the Crimson Rosella, spends a lot of time feeding on the ground in the wild.

Regardless of the type of floor used, a regular worming program is the norm, the birds usually being wormed just before and just after the breeding season.

Captive Breeding

As this beautiful rosella nests in the wild in hollows ranging from three feet to 50 feet above ground level, and maybe even higher, it goes without saying that in a controlled environment (i.e., when housed in an aviary) different pairs will select different nests — either natural logs or wooden nestboxes — at different heights. Although Australian breeders offer their rosellas different types of nests, the actual measurement for the nest would always be about 24 inches deep, with an inside measurement of approximately 7 inches.

Experience has proven that it is wise to offer the breeding pair the choice of two nests, hung under shelter, and not too close to the roof because of the extreme heat the roof can generate on very hot days. Some aviculturists hang the nests at a 45 degree angle, others hang them vertically and, sometimes, when two nests are provided one is hung at a 45 degree angle and the other vertically.

One successful method is for “the log to have the top open and hung in a position with the entrance facing the back of the shelter and the other log to have both ends closed with the top end hinged so that it can be used as an inspection door. An entrance hole to be provided about 10cm (4 inches)

from the top which should be large enough for the birds to enter. Place a suitable perch just below the opening to permit easy access to the entrance hole when the birds are entering or leaving the log” (Hutchins & Lovell).

The usual material placed in the nest is wood dirt, sawdust mixed with soil, potting mix or sawdust mixed with peatmoss — to a depth of 2-4 inches.

The breeding season in captivity in Australia equates approximately with the breeding season in the wild, commencing in September and ranging through to January. Spring “Down Under” is from September to November, with December to February being the summer months.

Although clutch size can/does vary, the usual clutch is between 5-8 white eggs which take approximately 21 days to hatch. Only the female broods. The sitting bird only leaves the nest to feed with, and/or be fed by the male. The young fledge about five weeks after hatching. A successful breeder of the northern race of the Crimson Rosella (*nigrescens*), Frank Johnston of Victoria, states, “I find that one young will fledge by itself with the other nestlings fledging one to two days later. The last young to hatch is obvious because it isn't fully feathered at the time of fledging.”

They are poor flyers and, as Johnston has observed, “The most critical time for the young is 72 hours after they fledge. Placing tree branches, hessian bags or shade cloth at each end of the aviary does save a few bumps and bruises. Such protection can be removed after five to six days as, by that time, they are more balanced in their movements.”

Three to four weeks after fledging the young will be fully independent and eating without any assistance from their parents. This is the best time to transfer them to a holding aviary. A close watch on the male's behavior at this time is important as he will often drive the young away — especially young males. This species can be double-brooded.

In captivity the Crimson Rosella is known for its longevity — living up to 20-25 years. It will commence breeding at two years of age and continue

until 15-20 years old. It is usual for this species to be single brooded in the wild and there are records of Crimson Rosellas breeding when still in subadult plumage (Forshaw).

Mutations

The best known mutation of the Crimson Rosella in Australia is the blue which is now well established throughout the avicultural world. The cinnamon mutation of this species is still in the early stages of being established. Although the “blue” Crimson Rosella is a beautiful bird, it is, in my opinion, not as attractive as a fully-colored mature normal Crimson Rosella, which quite simply, is a stunning parrot — color-wise or personality-wise.

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Acknowledgments

Map

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

Photographs

“Crimson Rosella Habitat” Chris Hunt, Morwell, Australia.

“Crimson Rosella in the Wild” Author, Elliminyt, Australia.

Legend

Australian Aviculture. Monthly journal of the Avicultural Society of Australia, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

Australian Birdkeeper. Commercial publisher which produces a bi-monthly magazine, *Australian Birdkeeper*, and “A Guide to” series of avicultural books, Tweed Heads South, Australia. ➤