



## ROSELLAS; AN AUSTRALIAN VIEWPOINT

by Daryl Dunn, Ballarat, Australia

# the Blue Rosella

*Platycercus adscitus* (Latham)

### Introduction

The Blue-cheeked Rosella *Platycercus adscitus adscitus* is the nominate subspecies of the Blue Rosella; usually two subspecies are recognized in Australian ornithology and aviculture, they being:

- 1) the Blue-cheeked Rosella *P. a. adscitus*; and,
- 2) the Pale-headed Rosella *P. a. palliceps*.

Both races, together with the race *P. a. amathusiae*, are the usually recognized forms of the Blue Rosella. Although debate will, no doubt, continue in Australian ornithological circles about whether there are two or three subspecies of this beautiful rosella, the fact remains that each race (either two or three) will continue to excite aviculturists in my home country of Australia.

Although the Blue-cheeked Rosella is highly prized as an aviary bird in Australia the Paleheaded Rosella is the "blue species" more commonly kept in Australian aviculture. Depending which part of Australia you are visiting, or the person to whom you are speaking, this softly colored—and strikingly colored—rosella is also known as Mealy Rosella, White-headed Rosella, Moreton Bay Rosella or Blue Rosella.

### Description

As written descriptions of aviary birds can make for rather "dull" reading I am relying on the *Watchbird* staff to provide appropriate color photographs to accompany my article in this special "Rosella Series," however, the enthusiast (i.e. purist) is directed to

the excellent word-by-word descriptions in two excellent books on Australian parrots: *Australian Parrots* by Joseph Forshaw and *Australian Parrots: A Field and Aviary Study* by Barry Hutchins and (the late) Bob Lovell.

The Pale-headed Rosella is a beautifully marked bird with a rich cream to golden head that merges into a black with gold edged feathered back, while the front and underwings are a violet/mid-blue to the secondary flights where both secondary and primary flights become black/blue in the adult bird, the female having a whitish understripe in the mature bird; underwing coverts violet-blue; the feathers of the neck and mantle and upper back are black.

### Sexing

In both species females are slightly smaller in body size and paler than their respective males. The hen has a narrower head and narrower upper mandible when compared to the male's head and bill.

### Distribution in the Wild

The Blue-cheeked Rosella inhabits the northern most areas of Cape York Peninsula which covers approximately 450 miles from the northern-most tip of Australia, almost to Townsville, whereas the Pale-headed Rosella is found from that area some 500 miles to the border of Queensland and New South Wales. The two species cohabit in the northern part of their total range where there is some hybridization as they are sympatric.

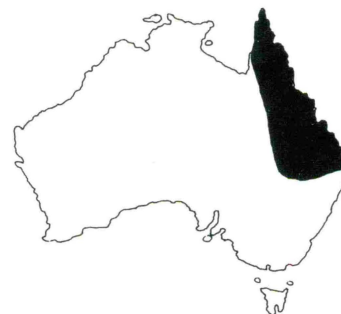
The (total) designated area of Australia where these birds reside in the wild is in Queensland, from the border between Queensland and New South Wales to Cape York that area as illustrated on the map covering the mountainous parts of that state, a strip some 2,000 miles long and covering 300-400 miles inland. Below that area is where there has been interbreeding of this species with the Eastern Rosella *Platycercus eximus eximus*, which has resulted in the evolution of the Golden-mantled Rosella *P. e. ceciliae* — but that's another story for another day.

### Of Academic Interest Only

Although the Commonwealth Government of Australia bans the export of any native Australian bird to any other country, I thought American readers of *Watchbird* may be interested in the current price per pair of the two races of the Blue Rosella kept in Australian aviculture. The Avicultural Society of Australia (of which I am an active member) publishes a annual "Guide to Bird Prices" list in October each year in its monthly journal *Australian Aviculture*. The current list recommends the following price per pair, between members:

- 1) Blue-cheeked Rosella \$150 pair (approximately \$US105).
- 2) Pale-headed Rosella \$100 pair (approximately \$US70).

This price guide (it is a guide only, and not enforceable) applies to the State of Victoria only, where the society is based, as prices can vary from state to state, depending on availability and interest.



Distribution of the blue Rosella on the Australian mainland.





Photo by George D. Dodge and Dale R. Thompson

*The Blue Rosella is often referred to as the Pale-headed or Mealy Rosella.*

### **Purchasing Stock**

When starting out with the Blue Rosella it is advisable to try to purchase a known breeding pair as it can be quite frustrating obtaining a compatible pair. You need to know the breeder and see the parent birds with the young prior to purchasing or, alternatively, select young birds privately and hold them until they mature in the second year, hoping they are a pair, and not two of the same sex.

You should try to obtain as much information regarding their age, rela-

tionship (if any), how they have been housed, what they were fed and, if they are an "older pair," have they bred previously. Don't buy birds that are not in good feather or condition, feel their body to ascertain their body weight; a well rounded chest is necessary for a healthy bird

I have had disastrous results after losing the hen of a pair and trying to introduce a replacement to an older cock bird, he killed the first replacement even though I moved them into a different aviary and placed her in the aviary first. Once compatibility is

reached they are much more interesting as they go about their daily habits. As the breeding season approaches you should hear the female starting to beg to be fed by the male, but I have never been around early enough to see copulation take place.

### **Housing**

The housing of the Blue Rosella can be as important as the direction the aviary faces. If they are facing north in Australia (south in the US) and nothing is happening as far as breeding is concerned it could be beneficial to change



them to an aviary with an easterly aspect (west in the US), or visa versa. My parrot breeding aviaries are constructed from steel and the sheltered area is clad with hardboard sheeting for both warmth and draught elimination.

The minimum size of the aviary should be 3 feet wide and 10 feet long and the height should take into account the height of the keeper thus allowing the birds to fly overhead whenever the aviary is entered (by the keeper). I'd suggest six feet as the minimum height for a rosella aviary. Although Blue Rosellas will chew their perches if the timber is to their liking (usually eucalypt or acacia) the perches should be at least an inch in diameter to give their feet adequate exercise in gripping. Smaller fresh eucalypt branches can be placed in the flight to encourage them to chew and keep their beaks in good order and shape—they certainly seem to get something from the fresh branches and leaves.

The floor of the aviary housing my breeding pair of Blue Rosellas has a layer of crushed sand or washed river sand, to a depth of three inches, to allow for ease of cleaning and to allow the birds to fossick for themselves.

### Management

As with any new purchases, Blue Rosellas should be quarantined for 40-45 days to enable you to ascertain that they are free of worms or other diseases—or have overcome any stress related to moving them from one location to another. Likewise, it is also important to ensure they have settled in with each other as a pair and, consequently, they need to be kept under observation on a daily basis during this time.

Having prepared their aviary with all the necessities, it is important to release them early morning (about 8-9 A.M.) and keep them under observation during the day to make sure they have found both seed and water. Observation is a most essential part of aviculture as one needs to observe immediately when a bird is off colour and in need of attention.

Climatic conditions could play a major part in the successful breeding of this bird. I live in Ballarat, a large

inland country city in the Central Highlands of Victoria. The city is 1500 feet above sea level and the weather can be quite cold and bitter. My aviaries are fully covered in except for the front and the side six feet on the south end which has a see-through blind that drops and can be fastened to reduce any flapping so that when rough weather is predicted I can drop the weather shield to stop the southwest winds from howling through the aviaries.

Our annual rainfall is approximately 30 inches so one has to be careful that the aviaries stay dry. This can also have an effect on when my birds commence breeding, be it an early or late season. This past season has not been a good year for me as my Pale-headed Rosellas have not raised a chick despite three attempts, the second and third round of eggs being infertile.

### Nestboxes or Natural Logs

Nestboxes can also play an important part in a successful breeding program. I have had them bred in both types mentioned here. The boxes should be a minimum of two feet overall with the inside of the log/nestbox being at least 12 inches - either circular or square. The opening should be about 2 ½ inches in diameter and be placed about 4 inches from the top of the nest with a substantial perch for the birds to hold onto when feeding the female or their young. Natural hardwood logs are very good for rosellas but those built from man-made materials can be just as effective. I have found solid pine, 1 inch thick, or chipboard to both be suitable so long as the birds accept the nestbox and are not chewers. Nests should be securely anchored to the wall at a height where inspection can be made through an inspection hole or removable lid so you can observe how the breeding pair are progressing.

Once the hen has selected her nest she will spend probably 10 to 12 days working the nest material to her needs. My preference is to supply a mixture of wood dirt being the rotting material from the middle of an old hollow tree stump, mixed with some sawdust, plus a small portion of fine tan bark which is then mixed with a small amount of

water to create a damp mixture. This is then put into the nestbox or logs to allow the hen to select the nest of her own choice (i.e. nestbox or log). Generally the pair will continue to use the same nestbox or nesting log that they originally bred in and rarely change from this specific nest when I hang the nests in their aviary in late July - early August prior to the breeding season in southern Australia where I live. (Spring in Australia coincides with fall [autumn] in America, i.e. September, October, November.)

Sometimes, as I presume also happens in the US, my pair of Blue Rosellas differ in the timing of when they commence nesting. In Australia this seems to depend on the climatic variations of the particular season.

I have, on at least one occasion, even gone to the trouble with one hen that wanted to use an old log that had started to split open to wire it together. I then mixed up some clay-based dirt to a putty consistency and worked it into the cracks to seal off the chamber and eliminate any light as it is important for the nesting chamber of all rosellas to be dark. I then placed the usual nesting mixture in the log.

There is always debate on whether the nests of breeding parrots should be inspected. I have adopted two methods that are easy to replicate: firstly if the hen continues to sit when you open the nestbox and just squawks or growls, then it is obvious she has accepted the intrusion and, as long as you inspect the nest on a regular basis, everything should be alright. If, however, the hen takes up to a day to return to the nest then I would limit inspection to times when I catch her off the nest—this usually is early in the morning when she has emerged for her daily morning feed.

Checking the eggs for fertility may also fit into the same category as nest inspection. If the hen accepts you handling the eggs then that's fine but some birds will leave them after handling. In this case I just note the date when the hen starts to work the nest allow eight days, and then work out the hatching dates from then. I must admit that although many widely experienced parrot breeders recommend noting the day the first egg is laid, and all subse-

quent eggs of the clutch, and then the date each chick hatches and fledges, that this is for me far too risky. However, I accept that many aviculturists who keep and breed rosellas—both in Australia and America—may check details. My answer to this is simple: to each his own.

As is the situation with all the rosellas, the Pale-headed and Blue-cheeked Rosellas both have a "good bite" if allowed to get a hold of you. As previously stated, they can be quite vicious to each other, especially if the young are left in with the parents when the hen goes down the second time and the new youngsters are in the nest, or if a new bird is introduced to an adjacent aviary.

### Feeding

My method of feeding their dry seed is to supply it in a 12 inch x 12 inch square container that is 2 inches deep so that the husks and uneaten seeds can be emptied and winnowed at a later date. The dry seed mix I use consists of 1 part canary, white millet, Japanese millet, safflower and hulled oats plus 2 parts grey sunflower and a small amount of wheat and triticale (a locally produced hybrid between barley and wheat). A soaked seed mix of wheat, oats, safflower, triticale (basically the larger seeds) is fed during the winter months and into the breeding season with a break during autumn. The soaked seed, which I usually feed in the morning, is fed in bowls—either ceramic or stainless steel, for ease of cleaning.

The usual green-leafed vegetables including lettuce, broccoli, silverbeet and spinach, plus milk thistle and seeding grasses—and any such plants that I know they enjoy and that I can find are supplied. A quantity of frozen sweet corn is kept in a freezer and cobs are cut into quarters and fed about every second day to vary their diet. I am a firm believer in varying the diet of my Blue Rosellas because the birds are never sure what's on the menu for the day and, in my experience, this helps to relieve boredom. I also have a variety of freshly cooked vegetables on hand which are fed on alternate days; quite often these are only partially boiled to retain the fresh-

ness and goodness.

This rosella species is partial to a piece of orange. They also enjoy a quarter of an apple, a piece of dog biscuit, cooked chicken, chop bones, whole grain bread soaked in milk, and egg and biscuit mix, all of which provide extra protein in their diet. A tray containing shellgrit, some cuttlefish bone, and pieces of charcoal gives them the necessary additives to assist their digestive system.

### Attentive Yet Animated

The Blue Rosella can become a quite interesting species if the time is taken to learn their whistles and calls. I am fortunate enough to have Eastern Rosellas *P. e. eximius* flying wild where I live and I have learnt the calls of both species which enables me to call in the Easterns—this makes the male Pale-headed Rosella become quite animated, displaying his tail, flying to the wire-netting in an attempt to drive away the intruder, or if the wild bird will not come too close then he tries to call it to him. In this way I have listened carefully and can now talk to

my birds as I walk out the back door of our home.

### Summary

I can recommend the Blue Rosella as being a most interesting bird to keep and breed in captivity as it will, in its own way, endear itself to its keeper. Even though it is easy to surgically sex them it is still their decision as to whether they are a compatible pair but, when they do breed, they are usually attentive parents.


### References

- Forshaw, J. M. Australian Parrots. (second [rev.] ed.). Lansdowne Editions, Melbourne, Australia: 1981.  
Hutchins, B. R. & Lovell, R. H. Australian Parrots: A Field and Aviary Study. Avicultural Society of Australia, Melbourne, Australia: 1985.

### 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.

### Legend

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

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