



ROSELLAS;
AN AUSTRALIAN VIEWPOINT

by Chris Hunt, Morwell, Victoria, Australia

the Stanley Rosella

Platycercus icterotis (Kuhl)

Introduction

This species, the smallest of the Australian rosellas, is the only rosella found in southwestern Western Australia. In Australia it is usually known by its most popular common name — Western Rosella. It is sometimes referred to as the Yellow-cheeked Rosella or Stanley Parakeet.

Species

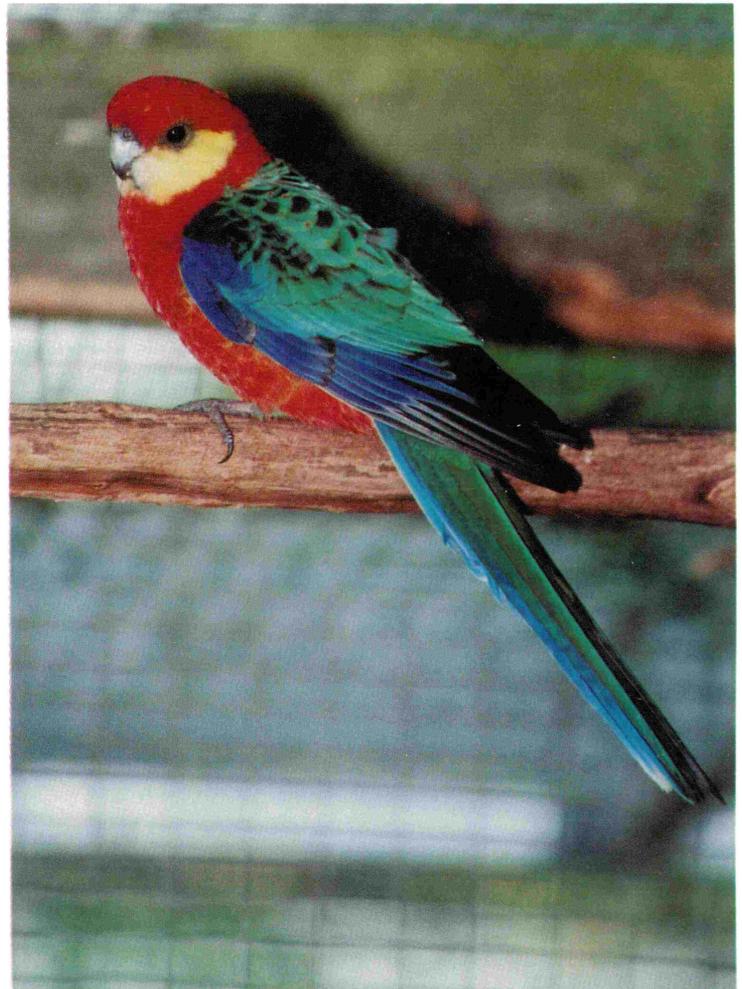
The Stanley Rosella *Platycercus icterotis icterotis* is the nominate race of the two [Stanley Rosella] species and is the one most commonly kept by aviculturists in Australia. In the wild the nominate species exists only in the extreme southwestern corner of Western Australia, well away from the

rest of the rosella family, as can be seen in distribution map - Figure 1.

The subspecies *Platycercus icterotis xanthogenys* is commonly known as the Red-backed Stanley Rosella and, occasionally as Salvadori's Rosella, so named by Count A. T. Salvadori, an Italian ornithologist, in 1891. In the wild this subspecies, which is a paler form, is found further inland (but still only in the southwestern part of the state) through the greater part of the wheatbelt, which is a much drier area than the wetter habitat inhabited by *P. i. icterotis*.



Stanley Rosella male of the Red-backed race
Platycercus icterotis xanthogenys.



Stanley Rosella male of the nominate race
Platycercus icterotis icterotis.

Photos by Chris Hunt

Identification

Nominate Race: *P. i. icterotis*

MALE: Head and underparts scarlet red; mantle, upperparts and feathers black, edged with green although some birds have a mixture of dark green and red; cheek patches bright yellow the same as the chin; rump green; central tail feathers green washed with blue.

FEMALE: The female is markedly different from the male. Head feathers, face and breast light green with faint red and yellow markings; lower breast, abdomen and vent duller red, suffused with green; cheek patches duller yellow compared with male.

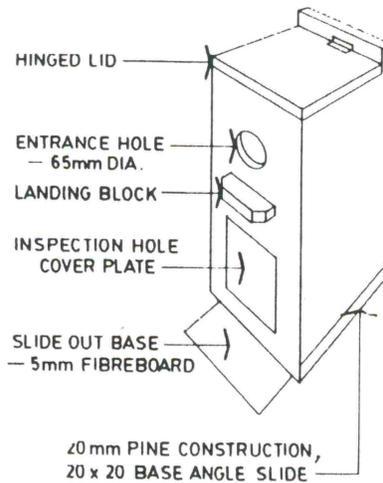
Red-backed Race: *P. i. xanthogenys*

MALE: Head and underparts scarlet red; mantle, upperparts and feathers black edged with crimson red; cheek patches paler yellow with white chin, blending into the yellow cheek patches; rump greyish-olive, central tail blue with no green.

FEMALE: Much paler in color than the male Red-backed form but is considerably paler again than the female of the nominate race.

IMMATURES: Young birds resemble the adult female in both species, but they lack the yellow cheek patches. Although immature young Red-backed Stanley Rosellas resemble the female of the subspecies, young males do seem to be brighter in color than young females.

As nestlings both sexes carry two underwing stripes, however cocks lose their wing stripes at maturity, whereas hens retain both stripes.



Chris Hunt's special Stanley Rosella nestbox.

Adelaide Rosella is found around the city of Adelaide and, in particular, the nearby Adelaide Hills (i.e. Mount Lofty Ranges); The Yellow Rosella inhabits a small area - along the Murray-Darling and Murrumbidgee River systems - that is many hundreds of miles long, resulting in it occurring in three states: South Australia, Victoria, and New South Wales. The Green Rosella, which is distributed throughout Tasmania and some of the islands of Bass Strait, is not found on mainland Australia.

I hope the above information conveys to *Watchbird* readers by how far the two Stanley Rosella species are separated from *all* the other members of the *Platycercus* genus.

Purchasing Stock

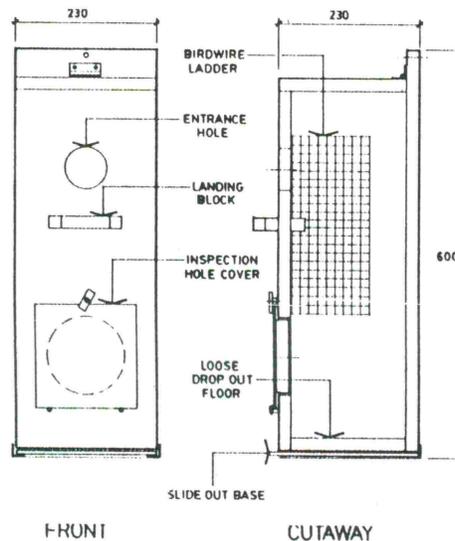
You should never be in a hurry to buy the first pair of birds you see. This applies to the Stanley Rosella as well as the other parrots. There are birds and birds.

Look at them and make sure they are good sized specimens. Make sure they are healthy and in good feather condition. Obtain as much information as you can about the birds. Ask the following questions:

- How old are they?
- Have they ever bred?
- Are they related?
- What do they eat?
- Under what conditions have they been kept?

Such information will be extremely important once you have your first pair(s) of Stanley Rosellas at home and settled into their aviary. I prefer to buy young birds and pair them up, waiting two or three years for them to breed. My reason for this is that once the birds have acquired their adult plumage it is impossible to tell whether the birds are two years old or 20 years old, and you could be buying somebody else's problems, e.g. non-breeders past their breeding age, mutilators, or several other reasons why the owner wants to part with them.

It is always wise to purchase unrelated pairs for breeding. If you visit an aviculturist to buy birds and are told the ones you are interested in are unrelated, and there appears to be only one breeding pair in his/her



Chris Hunt's special Stanley Rosella nestbox.

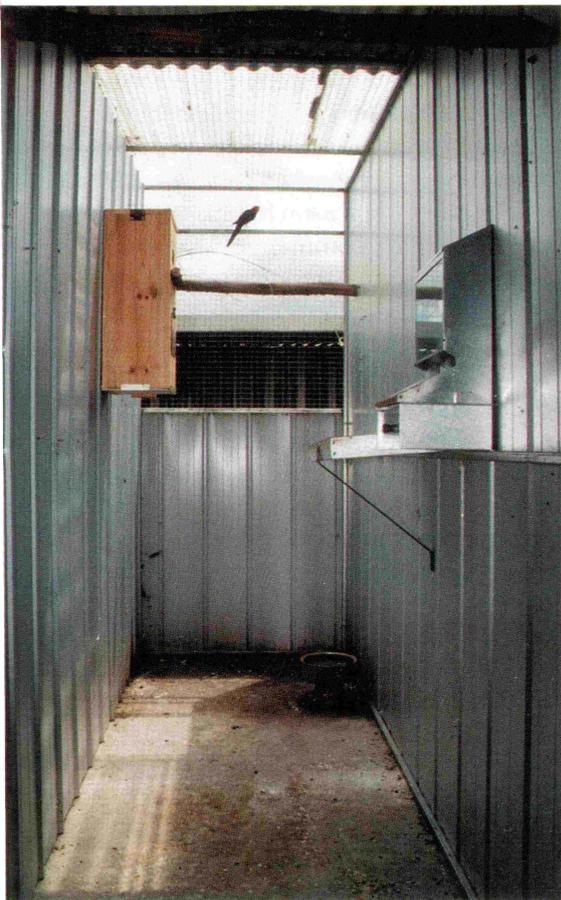
Rosella Distribution

Figure 1



Distribution of the Rosellas

If you study the accompanying map of Australia (Figure 1) it is clear that the Northern Rosella occurs in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, from Victoria River eastwards to the Gulf of Carpentaria; the Blue Rosellas (i.e. the Blue-cheeked and Pale-headed Rosellas) are distributed from Cape York Peninsula down to northeastern New South Wales; the Crimson and Eastern Rosellas range throughout southeastern South Australia, through southeastern Queensland, eastern New South Wales and Victoria. The



Interior of Stanley Rosella aviary facing the front.

aviaries, think twice before purchasing them as being “unrelated” birds.

Housing

Of the eight races in the rosella family, the Western Rosella is the smallest and definitely the least aggressive. It can be housed with other birds in a mixed collection, however, I don't recommend this, preferring to house my pairs separately as individual pairs in aviaries measuring 10 feet long x 4 feet wide x 6 feet 7 inches high.

My aviaries are constructed of steel and because I live in southern Victoria, where our weather is often unpredictable, they are fully roofed except for two feet of open wire at the front, which allows the birds some access to sunshine and rain. I believe this access to the elements is essential for both the feather condition and health of my parrots.

Solid partitions between aviaries offer more privacy and less distractions for my breeding pairs of rosellas. I believe walkways are a must for aviaries housing the Western Rosella as they are very rapid flyers and would

have no problem escaping between you and an open aviary door.

Another reason why the aviaries housing my Westerns are only 10 feet long is that this species is a fast flyer and has less chance of injuring or killing itself if it takes fright than it would in a longer aviary. In my opinion the smallest enclosure for housing a pair of Western Rosellas would be 6 feet 7 inches long x 2 feet 7 inches wide x 6 feet 7 inches high.

The wire mesh I use in the construction of these aviaries is 1/2 x 1 inch.

The floors are concrete which I consider healthier for the birds and, as this rosella likes to spend a lot of time foraging on the floor, it assists in controlling the problem of intestinal worms. Also vermin find it difficult to dig through a concrete floor and it is much easier to sweep or hose down. A two-inch layer of clean washed river sand may be laid out on the top of the concrete to allow the birds to scratch and forage on the aviary floor.

Because Stanley Rosellas spend a lot of time on the ground, I don't recommend suspended aviaries, however, this doesn't mean they cannot be kept or bred in this type of aviary.

Management

Once you have purchased your Western Rosellas they should not be released straight into their (permanent) aviary as all new arrivals should be quarantined. Most aviculturists quarantine their birds for 45 days before

releasing them into their new aviary. A close watch on your birds during this time is vital as signs of stress, worms, and other diseases can be detected and treated quickly.

On the day the new birds are to be released into their breeding aviary it is advisable to do it early in the morning as this allows the birds all day to explore their new home, finding seed and water, and roosting places etc. Try not to spend time near the aviary on the first day, allowing them time to settle in. If you must watch, do so from a distance.

Most importantly, make sure the day you release them is a warm sunny day, because they may have been quarantined inside, away from the elements, for quite some time.

I believe observation is one of the most important rules of aviculture. Today most aviaries are set up to supply enough food and water to last a week or more, however, it is a wise practice to observe your birds at least twice a day, early in the morning and once again before dark. This will alert you before it is too late to any bird that may have a problem.

Cleanliness plays a big part in managing aviary birds and keeping them disease-free. I clean my aviaries on a regular basis, disinfecting seed and water containers, and removing old seed regularly. Soaked seed and water are changed daily. During the breeding season these practices are continued on an even more regular basis.



Photos by Chris Hunt

Young Stanley Rosellas in the nest.

Feeding

I provide a dry seed mix consisting of 50% Budgie mix and 50% grey sunflower in metal seed hoppers with catching trays to eliminate spillage and waste. In Australia we generally buy our Budgerigar seed pre-mixed. This comprises 33.5% Japanese Millet, 10% Canary, 10% Panicum, 32.5% White Millet, 15% Hulled Oats. Once all these seeds are mixed thoroughly together, we usually coat the mixture with a rich vitamin A and E oil (not cod liver oil).

A soaked seed mix consisting of equal parts of mung bean, wheat, barley and grey sunflower is given daily throughout the year — this mixture being allowed to sprout during the breeding season.

These soaked or sprouted seeds are fed to my birds in stainless steel bowls which are easily cleaned and disinfected daily to eliminate bacteria-related disease.

A frozen vegetable mix containing peas, carrots, corn and beans is also mixed with the soaked or sprouted seed, however, it should be stressed that any fruit, sprouted or soaked seed given to your birds should not be left for long periods in the aviary as bacteria from contamination may occur. I have a "green feeding tray" in my aviaries in which I place apple, corn, grain bread, carrots, endive, silverbeet (or spinach), milk thistle, seeding grasses, or any other such tidbits I can offer the birds. Nuts and flowers from native trees or bushes are also given.

I fix PVC pipes to the aviary wall to

enable tree branches or bushes to be hung as I believe these plants provide many natural vitamins and minerals essential to the health and feathering of my Western Rosellas.

The rosellas also receive cooked chop or chicken bones, dog biscuits, and egg and biscuit mix, which provide extra protein to their diet. Grit is also essential to their diet and well being. I make this up for all my birds by using a medium medicated grit mix, adding charcoal, cuttlefish bone, and fine washed river sand. All these ingredients are re-ground and mixed thoroughly together using an old meat mincer which can usually be purchased at a very reasonable price from a Sunday market or garage sale.

Captive Breeding

The first official breeding in captivity of the Stanley Rosella in Australia was in South Australia during 1936. There may have, however, been earlier unrecorded captive breedings of the Stanley Rosella in Australia. As Graeme Hyde mentioned in his introductory article to this rosella series "The History of Rosellas in Australian Aviculture" (*Watchbird*, Jan./Feb. 1998, pp. 45-49) earlier records unfortunately do not exist in the Australian avicultural literature.

Identification between the sexes of both races of the Western Rosella show sexual dimorphism (di = two, morphic = form or type) so there should be no confusion about your birds being a true pair. Immature

Stanleys take about 14 months to attain their adult plumage and, although I have known of Western Rosellas to breed at 12 months of age, older birds generally are more successful the first time they have youngsters.

The breeding season for this species in Australia commences around September, going through to January (spring to mid-summer). I am sure this varies from state to state in Australia and breeding this parrot in America could also have an impact on the month they begin to breed.

They will also double brood in most cases, however, a check should be kept on previous young fledglings and if any aggressiveness is shown by the parents towards the youngsters the young birds should be removed from the aviary immediately.

A clutch normally consists of 3-7 eggs. Incubation lasts approximately 21 days with the female only brooding the eggs.

The male will feed the female in the log or nest box and will usually stay in close proximity to the brooding hen. He will also feed her outside in the aviary on the odd occasions she leaves the nest. The young usually stay in the nest for approximately 27-30 days after hatching, becoming independent of the parents and ready for removal from the aviary about 21-28 days later. Both parents will feed the young after they have fledged.

Nest Boxes or Natural Logs

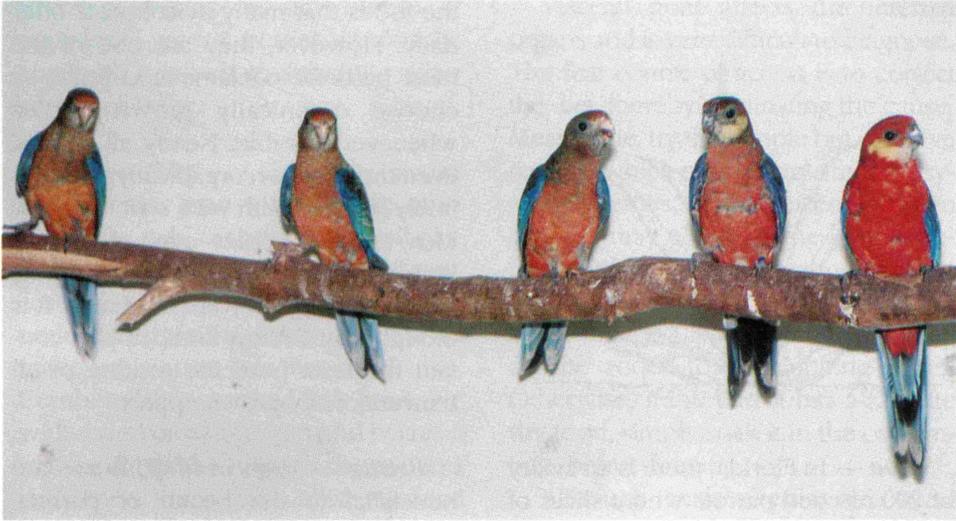
This rosella will breed in either a nest box or a natural log. However, I prefer to use a specially designed nest box because they are not as heavy as logs, easier to manage, and much easier to clean after the breeding season. My nest boxes are made from pine and measure 2 feet deep x 9 inches x 9 inches with a 2.5 inch diameter entrance hole, plus a 4 inch inspection hole. These nests also have a false bottom and a slide to allow cleaning during the non-breeding season.

At the end of each breeding season I remove the slide and false bottom allowing the old nesting material to empty onto the ground. A gas blowtorch is then lit and placed under the open bottom of the nest box, burning out and killing any bugs, mites, lice, or



Soaked seed and vegetables (left) and dry seed mixture.

Photo by Chris Hunt



Three young (on the left) with the breeding pair, male on the extreme right.

other diseases that may be lurking or breeding in the nest box. A mixture of 50% sawdust and 50% peatmoss is used for nesting material and is laid 2-3 inches deep in the bottom of the box. I hang the nest boxes in a vertical position under cover but in the bright sunny part of the aviary.

From experience I believe inspection openings in nest boxes are most important, as breeding hens and young should be inspected daily. Chicks may also need to have leg rings placed on them and such openings make access much easier.

Hand-reared versus Parent-reared

Australian aviculturists who keep the Stanley Rosella in their collections normally house them as breeding pairs, selling the young for the same purpose. The only time that I would handrear a Stanley Rosella is in an emergency such as young abandoned in the nest. My reasons for not hand-rearing this parrot are:

- In most states of Australia there is a licensing system which in the State of Victoria, for example, meant for the past 20 years we had to pay a license fee to keep most of our native birds. Although the annual fee of approximately \$US20 has now been removed for 15 of the more commonly available Australian species (e.g. Splendid Parakeet and Stanley Rosella) it was in the past too expensive for the average person, other than bird breeders, to keep the Stanley Rosella as a single pet. Therefore, there had been no

valid reason for hand-raising this species in Australia for the pet market which in any case is minuscule when compared with the American pet bird market.

- Hand-reared Stanley Rosellas tend to become too humanized after hand-raising and don't settle with any species (including their own) afterwards. They become pugnacious towards their owner and other pet birds, sometimes injuring or killing the other bird.

Being an extremely active bird they do need the freedom of a large cage or flight and unless they are allowed such freedom they could be prone to injuring or killing themselves.

Unsuitable as a Pet

If hand-rearing is necessary it is not as difficult as it used to be, although it does demand a great deal of time and commitment. The commercially made hand-rearing mixes now available are, without doubt, the best we can obtain for our parrots because veterinarians, chemists, and nutritionists have combined their respective knowledge and skills to produce these important products for the avicultural market — thus providing hand-reared young birds with the best possible start in life.

Mutations

I have seen a blue mutation of the Stanley Rosella, and have heard of a yellow or lutino, these being the only mutations I know of in this species.

Hybrids

The Stanley Rosella will hybridize with other rosellas, also with the Red-capped Parrot *Purpureicephalus spurius* and the Mulga Parrot *Psephotus varius*. Such breedings should be discouraged at all times.

Summary

Both races of the Stanley Rosella are attractively colored and are definitely the less aggressive members of the Australian rosellas. They can be kept in a mixed collection, however, for best breeding results they should be housed on their own. If there is no other option but to house Stanley Rosellas with other species, I suggest keeping them with birds such as doves or finches and, even then, would recommend that they be strictly observed — especially during the breeding season.

They are easily housed and managed and breed readily, making them an ideal small parrot for the beginner. I think this is probably why the Stanley Rosella has been very popular, certainly within Australian aviculture, over the years.

Of all the Rosella species the two forms of the Stanley Rosella are the only ones that are sexually dimorphic. Size-wise they are also the smallest of the Rosella family. It should be stressed that the nominate form and the Red-backed subspecies should never be housed or bred together because they would inter-breed.

As they enjoy bathing it is advisable to supply a large water bowl in their aviary, making sure it is cleaned and refilled daily.

In Australia the nominate form, *icterotis*, is inexpensive at approximately \$US80 a pair, whereas, the Red-backed race, *xanthogenys*, commands a much higher price of approximately \$US350 a pair.

Both races of the Stanley Rosella are beautiful birds and are not difficult keep or breed. I thoroughly recommend them to any aviculturist, either novice or experienced, as a delightful aviary bird.

Acknowledgement

Drawing of map and nest boxes: John Buchan, Glen Waverley, Victoria, Australia. Copyright Remains with Author.

