



ROSELLAS; AN AUSTRALIAN VIEWPOINT

by Barry R. Hutchins
Northfield, South Australia, Australia

Aviculture of the Yellow Rosella

Platycercus elegans flaveolus Gould 1837

Introduction

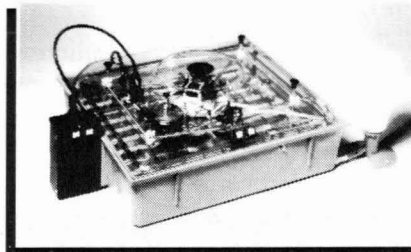
This beautiful rosella is also known as the Yellow-rumped Parrot, Murray Rosella, and River Rosella. I believe the Yellow Rosella is a clinal sequence of the

Adelaide Rosella *Platycercus elegans adalaidae* race and, therefore, a subspecies of the Crimson Rosella *P. e. elegans* which was featured in *Watchbird* (May/June 1998, pp.46-48).

Description

Adult Male

The adult male is approximately 14 inches in length. The head is bright pale yellow, frontal band orange-red, this being more defined than with *P. e. adalaidae*. Hindneck, mantle, scapulars and back are black, each feather edged with yellowish-buff; cheek patches violet blue; breast bright yellow with occasionally the upper breast being tinged with orange; rump and upper tail-coverts are a darker shade of yellow than the underparts; median wing-coverts are black; bend of wing and outer secondaries pale blue; primaries black washed with blue on outer webs. Central tail feathers are blue heavily tinged with green, remainder being blackish-brown with blue on the outer webs. The bill is grayish-horn and the iris dark brown.



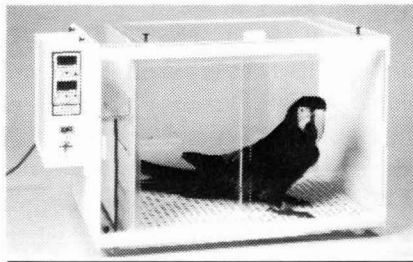
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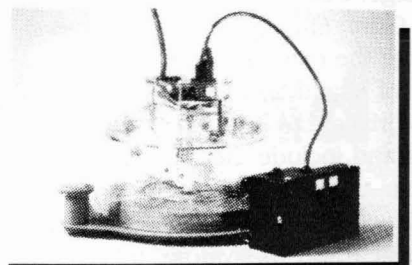


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Adult Female

Compared with the adult male the coloration of the adult female, both above and below, is somewhat duller; the head is smaller and the upper mandible is narrower.

Immatures

The general color of immatures, both above and below, is dull olive green, the dark markings of the adult usually being almost absent. The frontal band is a duller shade of orange-red; cheek patches blue; breast and abdomen yellowish-green. An interesting (naturally occurring) characteristic of this subspecies is, that in common with the North Queensland race of the Crimson Rosella *P. e. nigrescens*, some of the young birds when they fledge are a duller version of their parents. This contrasts to the predominantly green birds (i.e. fledglings) of the other races.

Distribution

Although Australians know this subspecies as the Yellow Rosella it could well be termed the River Rosella because it shows a distinct preference for larger trees (in particular the River Red Gum *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) skirting the extensive river systems in parts of inland Southeastern Australia. These rivers cover many hundreds of miles and include the Murray Darling System, the Lachlan as far as Booligal, the Murrumbidgee to the Gundagai-Yass area and the Murray to at least Albury and thence to tributaries to the south and northwards to about Tumut. In the eastern extremities of its range the Yellow Rosella does, to some degree, come in contact with the nominate race — the Crimson Rosella *P. e. elegans* — and interbreeding occurs. The Yellow Rosella travels southwards along the Murray River to around Mannum in South Australia where it "mingles" with the Adelaide Rosella *P. e. adalaidae* and a transitional form occurs. Evidence of this color variation "shows up" in many individuals up to, but diminishing, all the way to the South Australian, New South Wales, and Victorian border junction, and from there upstream along the Murray and its tributaries. Very little red on the



Distribution of the Yellow Rosella on the Australian mainland.

body can be noted but most, if not all, birds do retain the red frontal band on the forehead.

Habitat

As Yellow Rosellas prefer rivers, their tributaries and lake-side vegetation, the River Red Gums *E. camaldulensis* play an important part in their lifestyle. The flowers and seeds supply a great deal of their dietary needs and the River Red Gums are a perfect host for roosting during the day and night. In addition, they are one eucalypt that supplies a variety of hollows for nesting purposes. Other vegetation of note that provides shade, shelter, and food are the box trees: Black Box *E. largiflorens*, Yellow Box *E. melliodora*, Grey Box *E. microcarpa* and Red Box *E. polyanthemus*. The Gum-barked Coolibah *E. intertexta* is another source of food and shelter and, although its fruit is small, it is readily taken. The latter tree is plentiful along the Darling River and the Menindee Lake system of New South Wales.

When travelling through these areas by vehicle it is not unusual to flush the Yellow Rosella from roadside vegetation during early morning or mid to late afternoon.

Behavior

Along the vast rivers there are many irrigation areas within the Yellow Rosella's distribution where groves of almonds and a variety of fruit trees and grapes are grown. It is fascinating to watch the behavior pattern of these rosellas when they are flying to orchards and vineyards during early morning and mid-afternoon. Close to these areas are tracts of trees bordering the rivers and waterways which are

their natural habitat. From my experience it is difficult to estimate the number of Yellow Rosellas in such an area unless one is prepared to spend several days with binoculars — and several helpers stationed at various points — to observe their movement from the tree-line to the orchards and vineyards.

I was commissioned to carry out a special study on an orchard and vineyard in the Riverland District of South Australia because there was a serious bird problem with apples, pears, apricots, peaches, plums, and grapes. The property owner blamed about 15-20 Regent Parrots *Polytelis anthopeplus anthopeplus* that he had observed in the area. Regent Parrots have a very high profile, especially in flight when they are extremely visible over a considerable distance, and their call carries further than most other parrot species. The question asked was: "How many Yellow Rosellas had been observed in the orchard and vineyard?" The reply was: "Five or six pairs." Observations commenced just after sunrise the next morning and continued over four full days. Yellow Rosellas could be heard chattering in the riverside trees and the first pair flew to the orchard an hour after sunrise. We then followed their flight pattern — they moved very quickly in odd pairs — without emitting any sound. There were gaps of several minutes up to 30 minutes between their movements to the orchard and vineyard. They flew very quickly and low above the ground. Once they were in the feeding area they continued to fly along the rows and disperse in all directions to feed on the fruit and grapes, again very quietly. This type of movement continued for upwards of three hours and most returned to their roosting trees by 11.30 A.M., and then returned again about 2.30 P.M. onwards for their afternoon feed.

To sum up the movements of the Yellow Rosellas I would say they are quite secretive, their movements to a feeding area are unobtrusive and, where possible, they fly close to the ground in odd pairs — not in flocks. Once frightened they emit, in rapid succession, high pitched calls as they fly fast to their roosting trees. A total of 140 individual Yellow Rosellas were

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recorded during the project. This *problem solving* exercise proved two points:

- the fruit grower was not very observant
- the Regent Parrots played only a small part in the destruction of the fruit and grape crops.

Housing

As with the other members of the Rosella genus I prefer the Yellow Rosella to be housed in an aviary of reasonable size, this being good for their well-being and it is a delight to watch them fly. They seem to be quite comfortable in an aviary measuring 12 feet long, 4 feet wide and 8 feet high, with a shelter section 4 feet deep x 4 feet wide x 8 feet high. A strong gauge wire mesh is essential and I suggest 16 or 20 gauge for this species. Likewise, the frame section should, for preference, be made from square or round galvanized tubing, with the shelter sides and roof being constructed from either corrugated galvanized iron or the pre-painted metal sheeting sold in Australia as Colorbond. Heavy fibro-sheeting is also suitable. If housing pairs of rosellas in adjacent aviaries it is advisable to have double wire netting or mesh between each aviary. This also applies if another parrot species of a spiteful nature is housed in adjoining aviaries. Without these precautions a loss of toes or a beak are quite probable.

If, however, the owner wishes to house male rosellas on their own, this is achievable if the aviary is large enough and it is possible introduce all the male birds into the aviary at the same time because, even after they set-

tle down, a "pecking" order will still occur.

In other articles I have prepared for this "Rosella Series" (in press) I have mentioned the benefit of having a closed-in corridor (i.e., walkway) at the rear of the aviaries if this is possible. I base this suggestion on experience which suggests that birds so housed tend to be less stressed when their keeper enters from the rear of the shelter for feeding purposes. A closed-in walkway also acts as an escape flight.

Captive Breeding

I don't class the Yellow Rosella as a free breeder in captivity, and they were even more difficult during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Since that time there has been a gradual buildup of captive-bred stock in Australia (legal trapping of Australian native birds ceased several years ago) and, as is the situation with most species, the more birds that are aviary bred the easier the captive breeding of those species becomes. Furthermore, the husbandry of today (in Australia) is far superior to those earlier years when aviculture in Australia was being reestablished following the end of World War Two.

Perhaps two reasons why Yellow Rosellas are not free breeders in captivity are:

- Because they are, naturally, a secretive species;
- The majority of nests I have found in the wild have been located in dead eucalypt trees standing in either water, or in lakes and backwaters, away from the main rivers. This is not typical of the other Rosellas.

The courtship display is typical of the other rosellas, viz, the male "chatters," drops his wings, squares his shoulders and, with chest puffed out, fans his tail from side to side. Several weeks prior to nesting it is not unusual to observe the male chasing the female around the aviary — she in turn spends quite some time studying the hollow before nesting takes place.

A suitable hollow log is one which measures approximately two feet in length, with an inside diameter of eight inches. If no natural entrance hole exists then one should be made slightly down from the top of the log, with a diameter of 3.5 inches, with a platform or perch placed below. It is important to have a moveable inspection lid on the top or to make one on the side just up from the nesting chamber. I believe the nest should be hung slightly off-vertical, high up in the middle side, or front side, section of the shelter.

In the wild, the Yellow Rosella breeds from August to December (i.e., late winter to early summer in Australia). In captivity in South Australia, where I live, the breeding season usually commences in September or October, being the first two months of spring. It is wise to place two or three large handfuls of natural wood shavings in the bottom of the log or nestbox — this medium should be well pressed down. Eggs can vary from four to five, with incubation taking 21 days. The young remain in the nest for up to five weeks before they fledge and are usually independent three weeks later. Following a gradual molt full adult plumage is attained at 14-15 months.

Feeding

As mentioned, the Yellow Rosella consumes an amount of fruit and seed from eucalypts in its natural habitat. These beautiful gum trees usually border watercourses and the adjacent country is savannah woodland with plenty of seeding grasses. In captivity the variety of food is limited but all the rosellas, including the Yellow Rosella, exist very well on a mixed seed diet of canary, Japanese millet, white millet, linseed and panicum — plus a small amount of hulled oats and sunflower. I mix all the ingredients together rather

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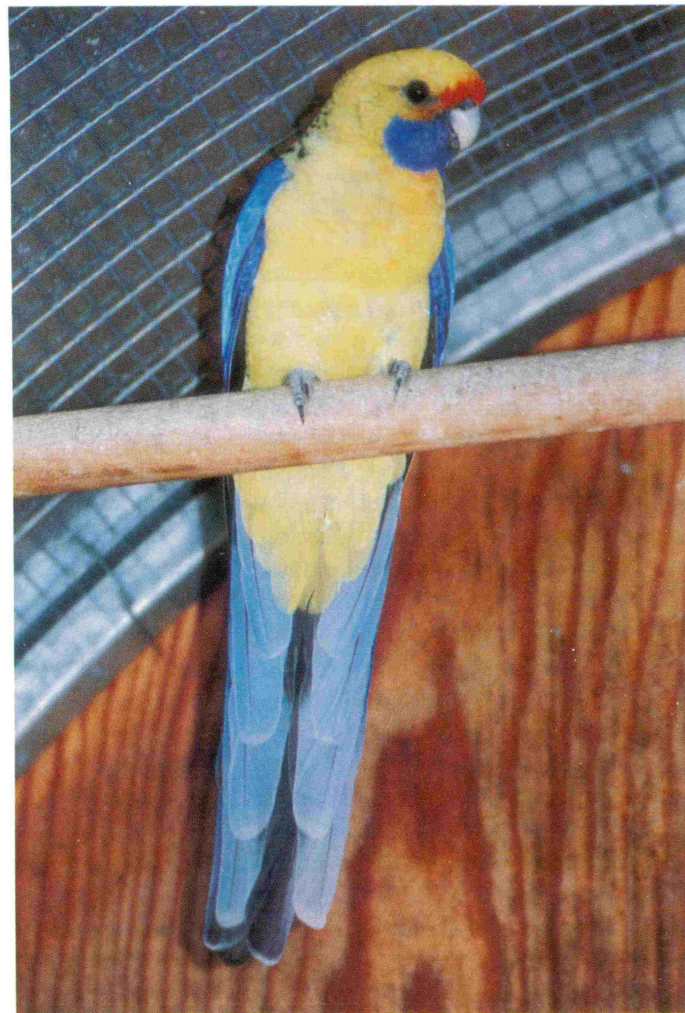
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The beautiful Yellow Rosella back and front. This rosella is a naturally shy and secretive bird and is not a really free breeder in captivity.



Photos by Susie Christian

than feed the different seeds in separate receptacles.

Fruit and vegetables are relished, including apple, pears, grapes, plums, figs, and sweetcorn. If possible give a different variety of fruit and vegetables on alternate days, along with seeding grasses and silverbeet (i.e., spinach). Variety of feeding is an important factor prior, during, and after the breeding season. If you wish to make the diet even more varied, then unsalted peanuts and mealworms can be included.

Although fresh clean water should be available at all times I know this can be difficult as rosellas would bathe all day if fresh water were available! During the breeding season, when preparing their nesting chamber, and even when brooding, most female rosellas like to "freshen up" with fresh water.

Cuttlefish bone should be available all-year round as it is a valuable, natural, source of calcium.

Bibliography

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Acknowledgements

Map

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



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