



# Turquoise Parakeet

*Neophema pulchella*

by Sheldon Dingle, Alhambra, California

**A**lmost all of you are quite familiar with our beautiful cover bird, the Turquoise Parakeet. It is one of seven species belonging to the genus *Neophema*. A resident of southeastern Australia, it frequents open forests and grasslands often along water courses. It is a cavity nester using holes in trees, stumps, or even logs on the ground. All *Neophemas* are ground-feeding seed-eaters favoring seeding grasses. After all, these tiny parrots are only about the size of a big Budgerigar and can't be expected to crack large seeds and nuts. (For more information, on this genus see Dr. Vriends article on the common *Neophemas*.)

The Turquoise's status in the wild has had its ups and downs. It declined almost to extinction during the years from 1880 to 1920 probably from several causes including habitat degradation (for farming and grazing), a 1902 drought, trapping, and possibly an epidemic of some sort. From about 1970 its numbers have increased markedly and, at present, it seems to be doing well. It is on CITES Appendix II. and not thought to be in great jeopardy unless there is an unexpected and very radical alteration of its habitat.

Likewise, in captivity the Turquoise seems to do fairly well. It seems strange to me that there are some aviculturists (the late Ralph Smith being an example) who have tremendous success with the *Neophemas* while others, alas, can barely raise enough babies to replace their losses. But the overall success rate with captive Turquoisines is quite good enough to supply the demands of newcomers to aviculture who want to try a beautiful

little parrot which is more challenging than the Zebra Finches and Budgies with which they started.

Turquoisines have long been one of my favorite species. Off and on over the years I've kept and bred them with excellent success.

Years ago, when almost all aviaries had dirt floors and piperazine was the commonly used worm medicine, internal parasites were the bane of the Turquoisines (and numerous other ground-foraging species as well). They seemed fore-ordained to die of ascarid infestations.

With the advent of suspended cages and a whole spectrum of excellent wormers available, the Turquoise has a much better chance today. I used to spend hours with the old microscope monitoring the droppings of the whole flock and keeping a sharp eye out for the *ova* of various species of ascarids. And I always had trouble mixing the right dose of piperazine for the various species of birds in the flock. Some of you old timers can recall, I'm sure, birds weaving drunkenly and occasionally falling off their perch – overdosed on piperazine.

I once tried breeding Turquoisines colony style and determined that it was disastrous unless the little buggers were in a huge, well planted aviary. A normal 8 foot by 4 foot aviary is just right for *one* pair of Turks. Two pairs equals total death and destruction and three or more pairs per aviary creates mass chaos but not much blood. Not much breeding either. At least that has been *my* experience with the species.


When I was young and foolish, I tried things no prudent person would

do and I once put one pair of Turquoisines in an 8 by 8 foot aviary containing four pairs of then quite rare lutino Cockatiels. Believe me, gentle people, Turquoisines can be downright savage. The pair of Turks trounced and terrified all eight of the Cockatiels. It was the female Turk who was the roughest. She commandeered *all* of the nest boxes – actually entering the boxes to drive the nesting Cockatiels out. Needless to say, that experiment didn't last long.

Turquoisines do well on a diet of Budgie mix with a few sunflower seeds included and lots of greens. Some fruit, mostly apple, was eaten by my Turks but they really relish leaves of chard, lettuce, spinach and several species of weeds I commonly fed.

For aviculturists in high density areas where noise could be a problem, the *Neophemas* are ideal aviary birds. They are very quiet but do have a pleasant little chirp that I always enjoyed. A normal sized backyard (50 x 100 feet or so) could contain many beautiful flights for the various *Neophema* species without the neighbors even knowing they were there.

And believe me, dear friend, if you want to splurge and lay in a supply of expensive birds, the Turquoisines can help you do just that. There are several color mutations that are rather costly. In fact, one of the most beautiful birds in the world is the lutino version of the Turquoise (again, my considered opinion). There is also a red-bellied variety where, through selective breeding, a German breeder has extended the red, normally on the thighs only, to the point where the entire belly and breast are brilliant red. I don't know the current market, but these extremely dazzling mutations used to sell for pretty hefty prices – enough to pay the seed bill with a little left over to save for a Hyacinth Macaw.

All things considered, I believe the Turquoise to be one of the most desirable and beautiful of all aviary birds. Your collection can be greatly enhanced by adding a few pairs of *Neophema pulchella* whose very name means beautiful. 

*Updated version of the 1988 Watchbird article.*