

# The Five Popular Australian Grass Parakeets

## Parakeets

(An Overview)

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### Bourke's Parrot *Neophema bourkii*

**Natural Range:** The inland of southern and central Australia.

**Synonyms:** *Neopsephotus bourkii pallida*, *Euphema bourkii*. (Neophema: Neos = new, pheme = voice; bourkii = after Sir Richard Bourke, a former Governor of New South Wales.)

**General:** After their discovery in 1835, and observations in New South Wales at the beginning of 1900, it became apparent that this species was gradually becoming scarcer, and after the second world war it was considered by some that the species had become extinct in the wild. Although there were fairly large numbers of the birds in the aviaries of fanciers in Europe and Australia, the wild birds had become really endangered and the relatively few remaining lived only in the dry, almost uninhabited regions of the interior. During the lengthier dry spells in various parts, the birds would disappear, only to turn up again when conditions improved. During the last few decades the status of wild Bourke's Parrots has improved greatly and they have extended their range west-wards, almost to the coast.

During the day, the birds rest in the sparsely foliated trees, foraging only in the mornings and evenings, sometimes among the acacias, sometimes on the ground, searching for the seeds, buds and leaves of grasses and broad-leaved plants. Scarcely before the sun has set, they fly to their drinking places and may not go to roost until 10 P.M. Long before the sun rises they may also go to water. On the ground they walk quickly and easily, for seemingly long distances. They are not particularly shy and can be approached fairly closely.

When they finally take to the wing, they land again after a short distance either on the ground or in a tree or shrub. During the flight they utter

trilling notes. The flight is fast with short wing beats, that are interspersed with short rest pauses, making a somewhat fluctuating flight path.

The birds nest in the hollow limbs of shortish trees. The hen lays 4-5 white, roundish eggs, one approximately every 48 hours. The eggs usually rest on a bed of wood pulp. The incubation period is 19 days and the young leave the nest four weeks after hatching. They are fed by the parent birds for a further two weeks after fledging. Breeding seasons vary, depending on favorable rainfall and the resulting flush of food plants. During the breeding period, the cock stays close to the nest and feeds the hen regularly. The hen leaves the nest only for occasional short periods to eat and drink.

The species first arrived in Europe in 1867 at the London Zoo, but specimens were soon to be seen in other parts of the continent. Newly arrived birds were somewhat tender, but they soon became acclimatized to the extent that they could be kept in outside aviaries with a night shelter.

The Bourke's Parrot is one of the most endearing and attractive aviary birds that will live quite amicably together with other species. However, if you wish to breed numbers of them, it is best to house each pair separately. They are very mobile birds that need plenty of flying space. It is good to have grass and other plants growing on the floor of out-side aviaries, so that the birds can forage naturally. It will be necessary to cultivate the earth floor at regular intervals. To provide the necessary shade, a *Polygonum* or similar climbing plant can be grown over the aviary.

The seed mixture should consist of two parts canary and millet seeds, and one part rolled oats, plus a small amount of sunflower seeds and hemp. In the breeding season, seeding grasses, germinating millet sprays, and adequate green food must be given. Soft food consisting of soaked bread and hard-boiled egg should also be given, but apples are not always accepted. Some birds show a preference for particular food items, while others will ignore them. River sand, grit, cuttlefish, and minerals must be available. The

birds like to bathe regularly.

Bourke's Parrots should be given a choice of two or three nestboxes. You should place a layer of damp sawdust or peatmoss in the base. When the young hatch, you must inspect the nest at weekly intervals and remove excess droppings as the hen is not particularly "houseproud." In general, Bourke's Parrots make good parents and can also be used to foster the young of other species. There are a few mutations, including isabel, cinnamon, yellow, red varieties, and a sex-linked lutino.

The first breeding results reported were in 1875 by the Dutchman de Comely; a year later by Kessels in Uccle in Belgium, then by Russ in Germany and Gedney in England. Today, they are bred regularly and in such color varieties that they can be regarded as almost domesticated.

It is strange that to date no cross breeding with a Bourke's Parrot has occurred. The crossing mentioned by Annie P. Gray in her book *Bird Hybrids* (between a cock Budgerigar and a hen Bourke's) is highly unlikely.

Bourke's Parrot is actually so different in color pattern from other members of the genus *Neophema*, that it would perhaps be better to give it its own genus – perhaps *Neopsephotus*, as it was formerly called.

### Splendid Grass Parakeet *Neophema splendida*

**Natural Range:** The interior of South Australia

**Synonyms:** *Euphema splendida*, *Neophema splendida halii*. (splendida = splendid).

**General:** Splendid Grass Parakeets inhabit areas where spinifex grass and Eucalyptus trees grow among other thick scrub. After the discovery of these birds by John Gould in 1840, no more was heard about them until their sudden rediscovery in 1941 in Western Australia, where they had previously not been seen. Later, large numbers of these beautiful birds were seen in southeastern Western Australia, and they soon colonized gardens and parks in the towns and settlements. The birds live a fairly nomadic existence which is indicated by their sudden appearances and disappearances.

The birds spend the greater part of the day on the ground, where they seek the seeds of grasses and other plants. When alarmed, they creep off through the brush before making for a tree or shrub from where they can appraise the situation. When they finally fly off, the flight is rapid, with short wing beats, and turning and gliding at regular intervals. During the flight they utter a loud, trilling call.

They use hollow limbs in which to rear their families, the hen laying 3-5 white, roundish eggs. The hen incubates for 20 days and the young stay in the nest for four weeks.

It seems that the first Splendids came to England in 1872. Successful captive breeding results, however, were first reported by Harvey in Adelaide in 1932. Year in year out, he reared 2-3 clutches per season and in 1934 the King of England received a pair. At the Keston Bird Farm, in 1934 a number of young were reared by Bourke's Parrots, Turquoisines, and even lovebirds. It was strange that the birds started to breed and then suddenly altogether quit their responsibilities.

A pair of Splendids should be housed in a separate aviary with a choice of two nest boxes. It is recommended that a part of the aviary floor is planted with grass and that a regular ration of willow

*Beautiful Australian Grass Parakeets.  
A male Turquoise above and a pair of  
Scarlet-chested Parakeets below.*

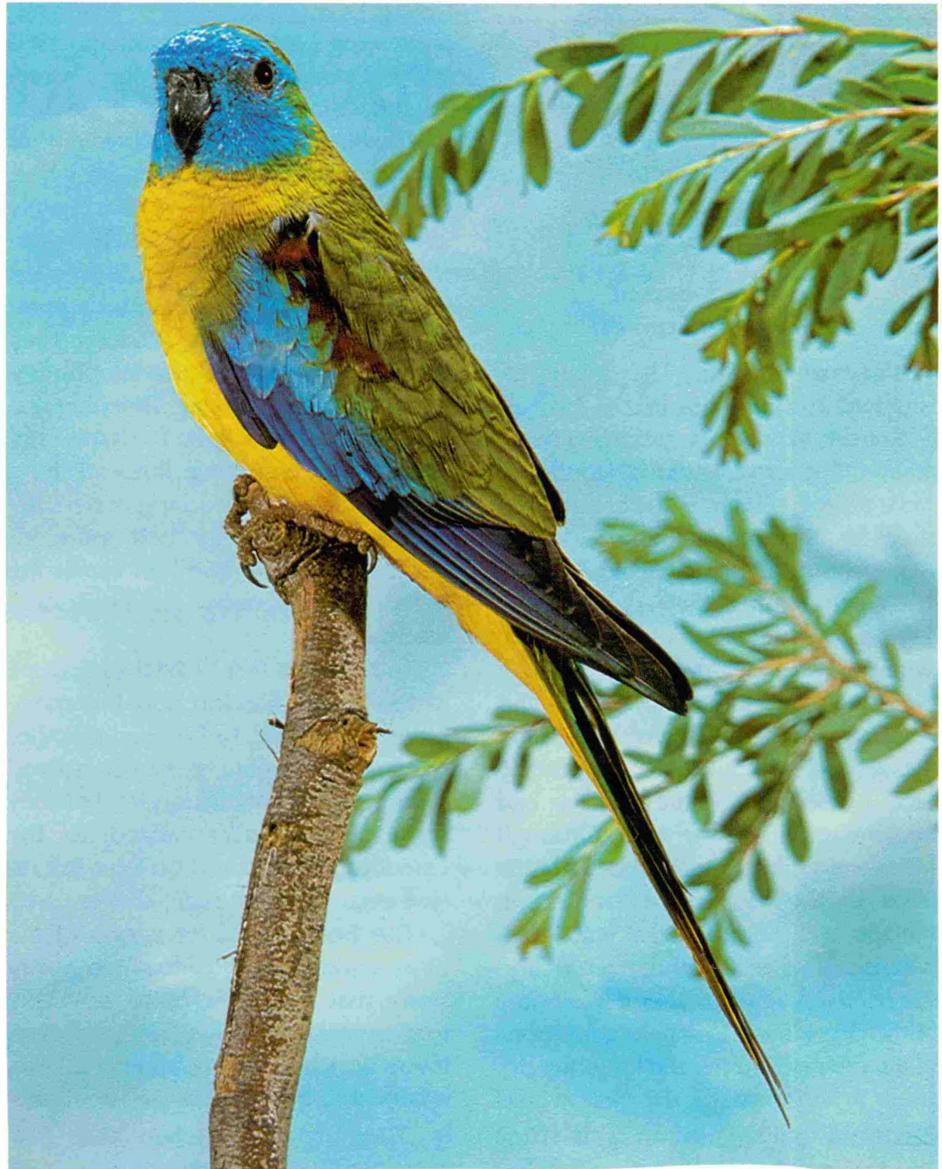


Photo courtesy of the San Diego Zoo



Photo by John Zitta

twigs is given, to keep the birds busy. It seems that the hen may use a few willow leaves to line the nest. A mixture of canary seed, millets, sunflower seeds, and rolled oats will form the staple diet, which should be supplemented with seeding grasses and green food. During the breeding period they should be given milk-soaked bread, mixed with hardboiled egg. Germinated seeds can be good but pose a danger in that they soon go moldy.

In Australia, Jean Delacour discovered a blue mutation in the Adelaide Zoo. Other fanciers also bred them and in 1960 some were sent to England. The green parts of these birds have been replaced with bluish-gray and the yellow with pale cream. The red breast patch of the cock has become more orange red. This variety is now common in aviaries throughout Europe. Although Splendid Grass Parakeets cannot tolerate damp, cold weather, they will do well in an outdoor aviary all year round as long as they have access to a dry, draft-proof shelter. It is strongly recommended that the birds are shut into the night shelter at night and that a little warmth is provided during very cold periods.

Occasionally there are puzzling reports that perfectly healthy looking birds drop dead, or that a fancier breeding his birds indoors has done all the right things and finds that the fledglings drop dead one after another.

In my opinion, it is not good to keep Australian Parakeets indoors exclusively; they have better chance of acclimatizing when, for most of the year, they have access to a grassed outdoor aviary where they can forage around in the fresh air and find all sorts of greens, grit, and minerals which they would not find indoors.

### **Turquoise Grass Parakeet** ***Neophema pulchella***

**Natural Range:** Sparsely distributed along and adjacent to the ranges throughout southeastern Australia from Maryborough (Queensland) to northern Victoria.

**Synonyms:** *Psittacus pulchellus*, *Euphema pulchella* (pulchella = pretty)

**General:** At the beginnings of the

present century the Turquoise Grass Parakeet was scarcely seen in its particular habitat and was soon added to the list of endangered or already extinct species. Today, they are observed much more often, either in single pairs or in small groups. They prefer to stay in open woodland, grassland, and among riverine trees. They forage for food only in the early morning and late afternoon, spending the rest of the day in a shady spot in a tree or shrub. They also never go to the waterholes during the day but, like the Bourke's Parrot, they drink early in the morning or late in the evening.

They seek their food (seeds of grass and herbaceous plants plus buds and leaves) on the ground. They keep out of the bright sun as much as they can. They are shy and difficult to approach. As they fly off they utter a soft, repeated, fluting call. The flight is rapid, and undulating due to the short glides between the spells of rapid wing-beating. During recent years, Turquoise Grass Parakeets have been seen more frequently close to settlements, where they forage for food in agricultural areas.

They breed in thick hollow limbs of Eucalyptus trees, at varying heights, sometimes just above the ground in a fallen tree. The 4-6 eggs are laid on a bed of damp wood-pulp and are incubated for 18 days. The hen alone feeds the hatchlings for the first four days, after which the cock helps to feed them. The young fledge after four weeks but are fed for a further few days by the parents before becoming fully independent.

Older cocks sometimes develop an orange red marking on the belly and thus resemble a Splendid Grass Parakeet.

Turquoise Grass Parakeets were to be found in English collections already by 1850, and they soon made their way onto the continent of Europe. Breeding successes became so common that they were no longer a novelty. In spite of these successes, however, wild birds in Australia became increasingly scarce and even aviary specimens were hard to come by in that country. In 1925 a number were collected from the wild and shared out among a number of

fanciers for a breeding project. Practically all of today's aviary populations of this species have arisen from those birds.

Newly imported birds were rather tender, but were carefully acclimatized. Later on they became quite hardy and could be kept in outdoor aviaries all year, provided they had access to a well insulated night shelter.

A layer of moist peat, covered with some wood pulp should be placed in the floor of the nestboxes. As the cock bird is very aggressive, single pairs of this species should be kept alone. The hen begins to incubate after the third egg and sits very tightly, sometimes staying put even during a nest inspection.

Toward fledging time, it is wise to place some nylon mesh or some leafy twigs in front of the aviary wire, as the young tend to fly around wildly and could possibly injure themselves. Once they are used to the aviary, after a few days, the mesh and/or twigs can be removed.

As the hen often likes to start a new brood as soon as the last young have fledged, the nestbox should be promptly cleaned. The aggressive cock parent will worry his sons and they must be removed before he injures or even kills them. He does not worry the hens, so this is one good way of distinguishing the sexes. The young males can be placed in a wire cage in the night shelter so that the parent cock can continue to feed them.

You should ensure that the young are getting plenty to eat and as soon as you are sure they can feed themselves independently, they can be removed to another aviary. Sometimes a third clutch will be attempted but as this is usually late in the year there is a chance that the young will find it difficult to survive the winter and will, in any case, need to be coddled indoors until at least the following April.

Like the Splendids, Turquoisines become quite tame and will hang on the aviary wire begging for a piece of apple or similar treat. In the wild they eat the seeds of chickweed (*Stellaria media*), stinging nettles (*Urtica urens*), and saffron thistles (*Carthamus* species). Such plants can thus be cultivated in a corner of the aviary.

## Elegant Grass Parakeet *Neophema elegans*

**Natural Range:** Southeastern and southern Australia.

**Synonyms:** *Nanodes elegans*, *Euphema elegans*. (elegans = elegant).

**General:** On the grassy plains, in open woodland, along wooded water courses, and in the high heathland, these parakeets occur in pairs or in small groups. They spend much of their time foraging on the ground, searching for seeds among the grass and broad-leaved plants. They are shy and cautious, and fly off at the slightest disturbance, only to settle in a tree, or on a fence post or telegraph pole some distance away. The flight is rapid and undulating with much swerving and turning. During the flight the birds utter a soft, somewhat lamenting, fluting tone. The birds are nomadic in habit and follow the supplies of food.

Thanks to the wholesale deforestation of many areas, the habitat of this species has been enlarged (they do not occur in thickly wooded areas) and its status seems to have improved (it is only a shame that the status of other species has declined for similar reasons). Today the birds are quite abundant among the agricultural lands within their range, especially where clover crops are grown. In addition to native grass seeds, the seeds of many introduced and cultivated plants are eaten. While foraging for food among the tall grass and weeds, they keep in touch with a frequent, soft contact call.

The Elegant Grass Parakeet nests in a hollow limb or trunk. The hen lays 4-5 white, roundish eggs which hatch after about 18 days. In 1862, the first specimens arrived at the London Zoo, and breeding results were recorded shortly afterwards. Soon they were to be seen in aviaries all over Europe and today they are bred in large numbers. One characteristic of this species is that only three, rarely four young are usually raised from the four or five eggs laid. Infertile eggs are also not uncommon. With good weather conditions, two broods per season are not unusual.

It is important that the bottom of the nest box remains moist and this can be done with a layer of damp peat, cov-

ered with a layer of wood pulp. The hen may accept this but in some cases will throw it all out before beginning to lay! The birds are very hardy and can be kept in an outdoor aviary summer and winter, but are best locked into the shelter during excessively frosty periods.

Canary seed mixed with millet, sunflower seeds, and a little hemp forms the main part of the diet. This should be supplemented with seeding grasses and greenfood (which may or may not be accepted).

## Blue-winged Grass Parakeet *Neophema chrysostomus*

**Natural Range:** Southeastern Australia, King Island, and Tasmania.

**Synonyms:** *Psittacus chrysostomus*, *Neonanodes chrysostomus tasmanica*, *Euphema venusta*. (chrysostomus: chrysos = golden, stoma = mouth.)

**General:** As with the Elegant Grass Parakeet, this species has benefited from the deforestation of vast areas of Australia and the installation of agriculture, which has resulted in a population explosion that makes this one of the most abundant parakeets, especially in Tasmania. They have quickly acclimated to the environment and only avoid thickly wooded areas. At one time, these birds spent only the summer months in Tasmania and southern Australia, but today many birds overwinter in these parts. However, many of the birds still migrate into the interior of the continent for the winter. Like the other *Neophema* species, these birds forage for food mainly on the ground and they eat a wide range of grass and herbaceous plant seeds both native and introduced. They are more fond of fruit than is the Elegant Grass Parakeet and are thus frequently seen in orchards and plantations when the fruit is ripe. They also feed on cultivated grains and can cause serious damage to crops in some areas.

The flight is rapid, undulating and erratic. Nesting takes place in a hollow trunk or limb at varying heights, sometimes near the ground in a fallen log. The 4-6 eggs are laid on a layer of wood pulp. While the hen is incubat-

ing the cock stays nearby; she leaves the nest at regular intervals to be fed by him. The incubation time is 19-20 days. The cock helps to feed the young when they are a few days old. They leave the nest about four weeks after hatching and soon become independent.

The fact that the cocks sometimes have an orange patch on the lower breast led Forshaw to think that this occurs only in older birds, but Immelmann believes it to be a form of "breeding dress" that disappears again after the breeding season. The birds migrate into the interior after breeding and may sometimes be found in the company of Orange-bellied Parakeets, *Neophema chrysogaster*. It is difficult to make accurate observations when the birds are in flight, and further research will be required before we can reach a concrete conclusion.

Unlike many other parakeet species, these docile birds, remarkably, rarely squabble among themselves, even when in large groups. The migratory movements occur at night. Neunzig reported that Blue-winged Grass Parakeets were to be seen in the Berlin Zoo in 1874 and, in 1879, they were bred in France. For a time thereafter they were rarely imported but breeding has become quite commonplace during the last 60 years.

One remarkable breeding result occurred when, in 1922, a fancier in Tasmania sent 32 eggs to his friend, a Russian professor, in the city of Tomsk (Siberia). The eggs took seven weeks to reach their destination, when they were placed in an incubator. Twenty one of the eggs hatched and the young were hand reared. These youngsters were bred in the following years and there were reports of four broods per annum with eight eggs per clutch. Moreover, eight different color mutations were developed over a period of 10 years. One may tend to take this report (from the Avicultural Magazine in 1938) with a pinch of salt when one considers the much poorer results normally attained with these birds. But such results may not be entirely out of the question as aviculture becomes more scientifically oriented. 