



PARROTS IN PROFILE

Stella's Lory

Charmosyna papou

Photographs by Cyril Laubscher
Text by Joseph M. Forshaw

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There is an interesting story associated with my first sighting of Stella's Lory, which occurred in May 1970 at Mount Tomba, on the southern slopes of the Hagen Range, in the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea. At 2800m, in disturbed *Nothofagus-Podocarpus* forest, some 10 to 12 birds were seen in the company of Musschenbroek's Lorikeets *Neopsittacus musschenbroekii* feeding on *Schefflera* fruits. At the time, William Cooper and I were collecting plant specimens for backgrounds in paintings to be reproduced in *Parrots of the World*, so a fruiting branch of this food plant was taken back to our base at the Wildlife Sanctuary in the Baiyer

Photo by Cyril Laubscher



Stella's Lories

River valley.

After detailed sketches had been made, the branch was placed in a rubbish receptacle for disposal. Within a brief time it had been retrieved by local villagers working at the Sanctuary, and obviously it was a source of much consternation to them. Eventually, they came and asked where we had obtained the branch. When told that ".....him belong Tomba," they were quite relieved, for they did not know the plant and were most concerned that we would have found in the valley any plant that was not known to them. We were astounded at this remarkable familiarity with local plants.

Following publication of *Parrots of the World* in 1973, William Cooper was contacted by the then Director of the Lae Botanic Gardens, again seeking information about the food plant and its location. He pointed out that, as depicted in the colored plate, the plant appeared to be a new, undescribed *Schefflera* species, so specimens were required for verification. These specimens were collected on Mount Tomba, and the plant was described as a new species!

Two Color Phases

In avicultural literature, the name Stella's Lory applies to two very similar subspecies from the mountains of central to south-eastern New Guinea. *C. p. stellae* from the south-east is predominantly red in plumage coloration, while the mantle and wings are dark green, and a broad black band extends across the lower abdomen to the thighs and flanks. A black patch extending from the occiput to hind-neck is anteriorly streaked with violet-blue, and there is a blue patch on the lower rump to upper tail-coverts. The tail is green, with the spectacularly elongated central feathers becoming rich yellow-orange toward the tips. The bill and feet are orange-red, and the iris is yellow-orange. Females differ by having the rump and sides of the lower back yellow. Juveniles are generally duller, with fine dusky margins to feathers of the neck and breast, a dull greenish suffusion to the black

abdominal band, a variable yellow band across undersides of the secondaries, and markedly shorter central tail-feathers, while the bill is brownish, the feet are grey-pink, and the iris is yellow-brown.

Farther west, in the mountains of central New Guinea, occurs *C. p. goliathina*, which differs from *stellae* only in having the elongated central tail-feathers broadly tipped with paler yellow. All captive birds that I have seen have been of this subspecies, but differences from *stellae* are so slight that referring to both forms as Stella's Lory seems appropriate.

Another two well-differentiated subspecies are found in isolated mountain ranges – *C. p. papou* in the Vogelkop Peninsula and *C. p. wabnesi* in the Huon Peninsula, but both are virtually unknown in aviculture.

Added interest in this spectacularly beautiful lory is provided by the existence of a melanistic phase, in which red is almost entirely replaced by greenish-black. Observers have reported a preponderance of either normal or melanistic birds at certain localities, but I am skeptical of claims that local ratios are determined by altitude. Only melanistic birds were seen by us at Mount Tomba in May 1970.

Conspicuous in Flight

These lorries frequent montane forests between 1500m and 3500m, and are fairly common in most areas, though numbers may vary locally in accordance with changes in food availability. Unlike other *Charmosyna* species, they rarely associate in flocks and usually are seen in pairs or small parties. Also, their direct flight is not particularly swift, and they prefer to fly through or just above the treetops rather than high above the canopy. It is during flight that they are especially conspicuous, their brilliant colors flashing and the long tail-feathers streaming behind, but when feeding among blossoms or flowering epiphytes attached to moss-covered branches they can be overlooked. Hopping from branch to branch or running along stout limbs, they move in a peculiarly jerky manner, often

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flicking the long tail-feathers.

Though not particularly noisy, Stella's Lories emit distinctive call-notes which can aid identification. The contact call given in flight is a soft, mellow screech, as would be expected from a much smaller bird, and while hopping about in the treetops they utter a soft *cheep...cheep*. When at rest or while preening, birds may give a prolonged, nasal *taa - aan*.

A lack of information on nesting reflects the often rugged terrain in which this species occurs rather than any scarcity of the birds. Females in breeding condition have been recorded in October-November, and a male seen crawling over and under a large clump of epiphytes on the upper branch of a tall forest tree was thought to be searching for a nesting site.

Well Established in Aviculture

Commercial importations of Stella's Lory occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, so the species now is well established in aviculture. Always in strong demand because of its striking beauty, it has adapted well to captivity and has proved to be an ideal aviary bird. A tolerance of cool temperatures renders it particularly well suited to European and North American conditions. Always on the move, its characteristically exaggerated actions seem to give added prominence to the brilliant plumage coloration. It has a friendly, almost endearing disposition, and pairs soon become trusting of their keeper, readily coming to the wire to take favored food from the hand. It breeds freely in captivity, some pairs being quite prolific, and the clutch normally comprises two eggs. ➤

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