

The Eclectus Parrot

Eclectus roratus

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Eclectus in the Wild

My first sighting of Eclectus parrots was 32 years ago on a documentary film expedition. The filming was done in the rainforest of the Iron Range of the Cape York Peninsula in North Queensland, Australia. The year was 1968 and our party of nine, which included two Americans, one German, and six Australians was searching for the Palm Cockatoo, *Probosciger aterrimus*. Back in those days, the Palm Cockatoo had rarely been seen or photographed. At that time, my involvement in aviculture was breeding black Cockatoos and I had all the species except the Black Palm Cockatoo. I was contacted by an American film producer who heard about my plan to go to Cape York in search of Palm Cockatoos.

It was during this trip in 1968, and again in 1969, that I saw the Australian Eclectus Parrot for the first time. This sighting left me with images and memories that have stayed with me all these years. In fact, two years later my wife, my daughter, and I packed up and moved from Sydney to Cairns, a distance of 1,800 miles with a plan to obtain a collecting permit for these birds and to create a bird park.

In 1973, after obtaining the collecting permit, developing the bird park and opening to the public, I did my first collecting trip back to Cape York. Palm Cockatoos and Eclectus parrots were collected and thus began my lifetime fascination with these beautiful birds.

There is some debate about the number of Eclectus subspecies, but it

is my opinion that the Eclectus Parrot genus is made up of nine subspecies. These are the nominate *Eclectus roratus* and eight subspecies: *E. r. vosmaeri*, *E. r. polychloros*, *E. r. solomonensis*, *E. r. macgillivrayi*, *E. r. aruensis*, *E. r. biaki*, and the two rare subspecies, *E. r. cornelia* and *E. r. riedeli*.

In the U.S., the subspecies most commonly kept are *E. r. polychloros*, *E. r. solomonensis*, *E. r. vosmaeri*, *E. r. roratus* (known as the Grand Eclectus), *E. r. aruensis*, and few pairs of *E. r. biaki*, and *E. r. cornelia*. To my knowledge, there are no *E. r. macgillivrayi* in the U.S. although there have been some unproven reports that seven birds were seen at an importer's facility during the last few years. There are no *E. r. riedeli* recorded in the United States.

Here in Australia, we keep much the same number of subspecies but in not as many individual birds. The most popular are *E. r. polychloros*, *E. r. solomonensis*, *E. r. macgillivrayi*, *E. r. vosmaeri*, and very few *E. r. roratus* and *E. r. aruensis*. There have been reports of a small number of *E. r. cornelia*.

We also have the same problem as breeders in the U.S. of cross-bred birds. It was only about 10 years ago that Eclectus were sold as just that – "Eclectus," a name which covered all subspecies. Only in the past few years have breeders started to become aware of specific subspecies and breed pure birds. I would like to encourage all breeders here in Australia and the U.S. to breed only pure birds, even for the pet bird market because in time, crossing the subspecies will come back to haunt us all.

Eclectus parrots are found in areas throughout the Asia Pacific region. The main number of subspecies are found in the Indonesian archipelago, on the islands of Buru, Ceram, Ambon, Halmahera, Aru, Biak, Sumba and Tanimbar, with the others found in Australia, New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. There is an introduced subspecies, *E. r. polychloros*, to the island of Palau, there also are reports of birds being introduced to smaller islands near Tanimbar.

Eclectus Parrots have been traded for many hundreds of years throughout Indonesia and in the latest reports I have received, this is still the case. I might add that although Eclectus are protected in Indonesia and cannot be exported (it is not illegal to own or trade them domestically) birds still do reach other countries. I know of a collector in Thailand who owns a fleet of fishing boats that do regular trips throughout these islands in Indonesia. Parrots are as much a part of his cargo as fish.

I also saw this first hand on a sailing trip to the Indonesian island of Ambon in 1974. My mates and I were offered birds from canoes that paddled out to us when we docked in Ambon Harbour. There were many Eclectus Parrots offered for sale for only a few dollars. Not far from us were two ships of the Indonesian Navy and after we cleared through immigration, customs, etc., we were invited to one of these ships. Upon boarding, we noticed quite a few bamboo cages of birds on the after deck. When I asked what they were, I was told that they were pets owned by the sailors and that they had purchased them while on duty throughout the outer islands of Indonesia. There were Eclectus, Great-bills, Cockatoos, and Racket-tailed Parrots. Some of these birds were offered to us as well. I am sure that this enterprise is still going on today.

The status of Eclectus Parrots in the wild is for the most part secure, but the main threat is deforestation which is still carried out at an alarming rate. All wildlife, not just the birds, will decline if there is no place to breed.

Of the nine subspecies of *Eclectus*, the two that are the least secure are the Cornelia, *E. r. cornelia* and the Tanimbar, *E. r. riedeli*. Only small numbers of these two subspecies remain in the wild and there are very few breeding pairs in captivity. I know of only about a dozen of each of these birds held in Germany, Spain and Indonesia in captive breeding programs. These have produced young and one would hope that some will be made available to other breeders of *Eclectus* so that their numbers can be expanded.

Eclectus in Aviculture

For hundreds of years, *Eclectus* have been kept in captivity either as pets or in aviculture for breeding. As I mentioned earlier, they still are traded in Indonesia on a daily basis for basic staples such as food or other goods. This has been a way of life for many years and will continue as long as there are birds to take from the wild. We as breeders can do little to change this, but we can help to build up the numbers of the more rare subspecies when they become available to us. Another worthy goal for breeders is to maintain the purity of the *Eclectus* subspecies.

Enclosures

Breeding *Eclectus* Parrots can be achieved in either aviaries that are suitable for breeding one pair, or large flight aviaries that can be planted with small trees and shrubs. These parrots are very sociable birds and can be placed together with other pairs of *Eclectus* in a large flight. I have had nine pairs of *Eclectus* in a large flight and they all got on well with each other. The only thing I had to do was to band the chicks in the nest so I could keep track of all the young when they fledged. The smallest breeding flight was 12 feet by 4 feet square with the nest box on the outside. This is only recommended for commercial breeding and birds should be placed into larger flights after the breeding season so that they can get more exercise.

Subspecies

I know many breeders who keep or have kept *Eclectus* in the past who have trouble identifying the various subspecies. There are a few good books available at present and two or three that are presently been written including one by myself. My book will cover all the subspecies and will help in identifying these subspecies by way of photos. There will be identifying guides for each subspecies and up-to-date information from the latest field reports on their status in the wild. I have spent three years researching information for this book and I plan to have it published in 2001.

Diet

Over the past 30 years or so that I have been keeping *Eclectus* Parrots, I have changed very little in the way that I maintain and breed them. I use a common sense approach with regard to their diet and nesting requirements, having had the chance to study these birds in their natural environment and to climb nesting trees to observe an active nest to learn the size, depth, and other pertinent information. This has been enormously helpful in determining the way that I care for my birds.

I have spent days on end, from daylight to dark, watching what they eat and feed upon, how they socialize with each other, and during the breeding season from October to February, watching how they all get on together at the nesting area. The Australian *Eclectus*, *E. r. macgillivrayi*, nest in tall fig trees and large *eucalyptus* trees 80 to 120 feet high in the rainforest. I have found active nests at the edge of rainforests overlooking open forest areas. I also have found pairs nesting together in the same tree; in fact, one particular tree had three active nests in it.

Eclectus Parrots are arboreal which means that their diet comes from what they can find in the canopy of the forest – fruits, gum nuts, seeds, and blossoms of flowering native trees. There are many wild fruits for these birds to feed upon. We should try to imitate this for our birds in captivity.

Like many other breeders, I fed my

birds seeds because it was easy to obtain sunflower seed, Budgie seeds, and others. Now I feed only a handful of Budgie breeders mix per pair, per day. My *Eclectus* diet is 85 to 90 percent fruit, blossoms, native fruits, gum tips, flowering shrubs, and other natural dietary items. The fruit depends on the season but the basic diet is apple, pear, banana, kiwi fruit, grapes, guava, carrot, and green beans. These are diced and fed on a bed of crisp lettuce or silverbeet leaf. Other fruits including mango and pawpaw (papaya) are fed in season.

Breeder Communications

Many of us *Eclectus* breeders now have computers and are members of Email lists on the internet. This is a great medium for exchanging information and ideas and helping new members to get involved with these fascinating birds. We now can discuss on a daily basis the problems that each of us face, and help is only a keyboard tap away.

One question that has come up a few times is the outside temperature at which we keep our birds. One breeder was worried that leaving her birds outside in 90° F. weather would be too hot for her *Eclectus* breeders.

Heat is not a problem for *Eclectus* as long as there is humidity. While collecting *Eclectus* in Cape York during the breeding season, the daily temperature was around 100° F. and humidity was approximately 98 percent – very hot and humid! I spent eight years in Broome, Western Australia, as curator and manager of the Pearl Coast Zoo. During the summer we sometimes had daytime temperatures of 107° F. (42 degrees Celsius) and low humidity. In order to raise the humidity, we installed sprinklers on the roof of each aviary which raised the humidity quite a lot. In Broome, our *Eclectus* bred year round.

I hope that this article is of some help to all breeders of these birds and that we can continue to exchange information with each other to better care for the birds that we have, and to become better breeders of all the subspecies of *Eclectus roratus*. 