

Cross Bred Eclectus: the Problem

by Laurella Desborough, Middleburg, Florida

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The Problem

Ever since Eclectus Parrots have been imported into the U.S., there has been a problem with correct identification of the various subspecies. Although the color patterns and size of the females of each subspecies are clearly different, aviculturists have often been unable to clearly distinguish one from the other. With regard to the males, the problem has been even more severe. The males do have distinguishing differences, but they are more subtle to those who are untrained or inexperienced with Eclectus parrots.

At the present time there are many cross bred Eclectus Parrots in the U.S. both as pets and in breeding situations. I am reminded of the gentleman who called me, almost 10 years ago, to discuss subspecies identification. Apparently he had purchased 10 or 12 pairs of Eclectus and was concerned about subspecies identification. After prolonged discussion, he was convinced that all the pairs he had purchased were cross bred. This left him with a serious problem. He had spent a lot of money to purchase these pairs for breeders. What was he going to do now?

As more and more Eclectus Parrots were bred in the US, many bird breeders who purchased young pairs have been faced with this problem. Years ago, I must have purchased a half dozen Grand Eclectus pairs, only to discover with time and breeding offspring, that these birds were not true Grands but were crosses. Fortunately, we were able to turn most of these birds into pets and others into foster parents. Not all bird breeders are able to make these choices and still others do not care whether or not they are

breeding crosses.

How it Happened

How did this problem occur? Well, the problem of cross breeding is not limited to the Eclectus Parrots, but is found in collections of conures, Amazons and other species. However, for those of us who are interested in preserving Eclectus Parrot subspecies in their purity, this problem is one that is widespread in the U.S. Early shipments of imported wild-caught Eclectus Parrots from Indonesia were not necessarily composed of a single subspecies, but often two or more subspecies were included in the group by the exporter who simply sought to fill a required number in the shipment. Quarantine station owners and brokers who received the imports did not particularly know one subspecies from another. Uneducated purchasers simply bought red ones and green ones for breeding.

Meanwhile, Eclectus Parrots were also being imported from other countries outside of Indonesia. Eclectus Parrots were bred in the Philippines and in Africa. Young birds from those sources were imported in numbers into the U.S. and sold onto the U.S. market. Many of these imported young birds were cross-bred. However, they were assumed to be pure subspecies because they were imported.

With the mixing of wild-caught pure subspecies birds by U.S. breeders, and the importation of cross bred youngsters from other countries, the situation was clearly one where the maintaining of pure subspecies would be difficult in future years. Although there have been several published articles on subspecies identification, and more people are seeking to accurately identify the birds in their breeding col-



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lections, the problem still exists and is actually becoming worse with time.

Why Care?

Why should we care? We should care because if we do not take action, we will lose our pure subspecies of Eclectus and just have a variety of mongrelized birds. However, it is not just a matter of color patterns that we are losing. We are losing subspecies specific vocalizations and behaviors and different developmental timelines. Members of the various Eclectus subspecies can interbreed, but the genetics that each subspecies brings to the pairing is not identical.

What Now?

What would be best? It would be best if we are able to continue to breed lines of pure birds of each subspecies. This means that breeders will need to make an effort to obtain the correct birds for each pairing of Eclectus Parrots. It would also be advisable to identify these birds by band or microchip number and to note the correct subspecies on the records and on any sale documents. It also means that cross bred birds need to be identified as such, so that a breeder does not mistakenly purchase a cross bred bird when he or she is seeking a pure bred bird.

Solutions?

What are we going to do with all those cross bred pairs and their offspring? Obviously we are not going to simply dispose of them. What is the solution? In consideration of this problem over a number of years, it seems to me that there is a limited range of solutions:

1) Identify all cross bred Eclectus parrots as cross bred by using a band that includes an X along with the numbers.

2) Check or verify all Eclectus pairs and resulting offspring to determine that pairs contain two adult birds of the same subspecies.

When a series of female offspring vary in color patterns, that indicates a problem. Seek to determine whether the parent pair are cross bred

birds or consist of two birds of different subspecies. Sometimes one of the birds will be a pure subspecies and the other a cross. If the parent pair consists of crosses, simply band all youngsters as crosses and identify them as such in the records and on the sale documents, and sell the majority onto the pet market. If the parent pair consists of two different subspecies, break them up and repair them with mates from their own subspecies. In my experience, incorrectly paired birds, once repaired correctly, exhibit a closer relationship with the new and correct subspecies partner, display better parenting skills, and are generally more productive in rearing young.

One of the problems with a cross bred bird is that you do not know which of the developmental timelines this bird has inherited. For example, Solomon Island Eclectus mature much earlier than the Red-sided Eclectus. Cross breeding these two subspecies could result in a variety of developmental problems with regard to maturity, pairing, mating, egg laying, and parenting skills, not to mention the behavioral differences that would result from such a cross.

Conclusion

We cannot realistically expect the many bird breeders with cross bred Eclectus Parrots to simply stop breeding them. But we ought to be able to expect that they will at the least band these birds with an X so that other bird breeders do not assume these are pure Eclectus subspecies and thus continue the problem.

If a sufficient number of Eclectus breeders work to maintain pure subspecies and identify them as such, we should be able to maintain Grand Eclectus *Eclectus roratus roratus*, Red-sided Eclectus *Eclectus roratus polychloros*, Aru Red-sided Eclectus *Eclectus roratus aruensis*, Vosmaeri Eclectus *Eclectus roratus vosmaeri*, and Solomon Island Eclectus *Eclectus roratus solomoniensis* in the United States for many years to come. The Biaki *Eclectus roratus biaki* are probably present in numbers too small for this subspecies to continue in U.S. aviculture. 