

Cockatoos, Creation, and Devastation

by Harold Armitage
Mamhilad, Pontypool, Wales, UK

We've all heard reports from Australia about the mass shooting and poisoning of cockatoos by the agricultural industry. The export of these birds as pets is strictly prohibited yet licenses are handed out *ad lib*, it seems, for every farmer to treat parrots in the same way as rats. Thousands are killed every year. Whilst I was in Australia this year I thought I would do a little private research into this matter. The complete story has yet to be told....

My wife and I had been invited to a ranch where Carnaby's Cockatoo *Calyptorhynchus latirostris* (also called the Short-billed Black Cockatoo) was to be seen together with its nest holes. I have been asked not to reveal the location of this farm as it has been the target of egg thieves, but it lies about a hundred miles to the north of Perth, in the wheat belt of Western Australia. We duly saw the Cockatoos. I also elicited the following information from the farmer there who had a mixed farm rather than monoculture.

The ground about here is slightly undulating, light and porous. Rainfall is normally 13 inches per year. There is an underlying water reservoir. However, as there is no natural outlet, over the millennia this water has become salty due to evaporation, in the same way as have the Dead and Caspian Seas. The natural vegetation was a scrubby grassland but this has been almost entirely removed for the purpose of wheat cultivation.

This has led to an irreversible desertification and salination because this scrubland efficiently absorbed the sparse rainfall. This no longer happens; the rain is able to penetrate the substrata, raising the water table and bringing the salt to the surface. This results in the ultimate death of

all vegetation as the salt makes contact with the roots, particularly in the lower lying ground where salt-water springs may issue. Salt-water pools and natural evaporation pans can be seen in these areas. The process seems to be an irreversible and worsening one; at least no one has found an answer to date.

Where then do the parrots come in? On the first morning of our visit we were awakened by the most incredible row – Galahs! We had to see this! On a mile walk around the farm, I was able to see not hundreds but thousands of Galahs and Corellas roosting in the trees about the farm. This population is artificially sustained by feeding on the spilled grain, animal food concentrates, and cultivated grains and grass seeds. In the dawn twilight I could see the trees surrounding the property were weighed down with hordes of these birds that rose in vast flocks and set off on their foraging expeditions as I drew near.

There is no shortage of nest holes here; virtually every tree is hollow due to termite activity. However the down side to this parrot presence is in their destructive habit of stripping the bark from trees. It was hard to find a tree without severe damage, many indeed were completely dead due to a combination of parrot nibbling from above, with salt water and termites from below.

One of the reasons for the scarcity of the Carnaby's Cockatoos – quite a large bird – that we had come to see, was constant harassment by the Galahs and the Corellas, particularly at their nest sites.

These vast numbers of cockatoos then are devastating the landscape, the environment they depend on, ultimately bringing on their own doom. That is, unless nature or a higher being intervenes..... ➤