

# On the Wild Side

## The Rainbow Lorikeet

*Trichoglossus haematodus moluccanus*  
Colorful - Noisy – Active

Graeme Hyde, Australia

### Multi-Colored Memories

I enjoyed reading Margrethe Warden's interesting article "Rainbow Lories in American Aviculture" in the *Watchbird*, Number 2, 2002. It brought back pleasant memories of visiting the San Diego Wild Animal Park in August 1994 with my Australian avicultural colleague, Warwick Remington of Ballarat, Victoria. We were two of the three invited speakers from Australia at the American Federation of Aviculture's Twentieth Anniversary Convention in Knoxville, Tennessee. Following the convention we spent a further two weeks in America and before we left for home visited the San Diego Zoo and the San Diego Zoo's Wild Animal Park. A highlight for both of us was the large walk-through aviary that featured Rainbow Lorikeets of the Australasian Region. Along with hundreds (thousands?) of other visitors that summer's day we fed the Green-naped (Rainbow) Lorikeets nectar from a small disposable cup.

As mentioned by Warden "The term 'Rainbow Lory' is a generic one applied to over 20 separate brightly colored birds. The Rainbow group, *Trichoglossus haematodus*, is comprised of one nominate species, commonly called the Green-naped Lory, and approximately twenty-two subspecies." It was a pleasure for Warwick and I to handfeed noisy Green-naped Lorikeets because due to the 43-year ban on importation of birds into Australia this race of the Rainbow Lorikeet is almost unknown in Australian aviculture. This amazes overseas aviculturists when they realize New Guinea is only a few sea miles across the Torres

Strait from Australia. As noted by Pizzey "Cape York Peninsula and New Guinea share many similarities in climate, vegetation and wildlife. In effect they form a faunal unit divided about 8000 years ago after the last Pleistocene ice-sheets melted and raised ocean levels round the world" (1985).

### The Land of Parrots

As I sit in my small study, switching my gaze from computer to our front garden, I often reflect on how fortunate I am to live in Australia – The Land of Parrots. Neville W. Cayley, the outstanding Australian naturalist-ornithologist-author-painter, in his important work *Australian Parrots-Their Habits in the Field and Aviary* (1938) wrote: "The earliest Dutch navigators are credited with having named that part of the west coast [of Australia] visited by them in the seventeenth century 'The Land of Parrots'. ... A world map of Mercator (issued in 1569) has upon it a place called 'Terra Psittacorum, The Land of Parrots'. This is marked in 45 degrees south, away to the southward of the Cape of Good Hope."

Phipps, in *Australia's Animals Discovered* (1980), states the first capture of a live Rainbow Lorikeet by early explorers occurred in May 1770. The bird was taken aboard the Endeavour as a pet where it survived, outliving its owner who died on 26 December 1770. As a result, the Rainbow Lorikeet has a distinct place in the history of Australian ornithology as it was the first bird from eastern Australia to reach England alive where it was painted from life by Peter

Brown, artist and zoologist attached to Marmaduke Tunstall's museum which later became the Newcastle Museum. (Endeavour was the ship commanded by James Cook when he discovered the eastern Australian coast in 1770.)

### Lorikeets in Abundance

As far as bird life is concerned, Australia is not only the Land of Parrots but, also the "avian pot of gold" at the end of the rainbow! Conversely, the strikingly colored, noisy and acrobatic Rainbow Lorikeet, symbolizes all that is wonderful, colorful, and fascinating about the birds of the continent "Down Under." Of the thirty or so native Australian species that frequent our front garden or backyard, the Rainbow Lorikeet, also widely known outside of Australia as Swainson's Lorikeet, is an annual seasonal visitor. Along with the Musk Lorikeet the Rainbow Lorikeet visits the flowering eucalyptus in the front garden when it is in blossom around December to February each year.

Forshaw (2002) confirms that lorikeets are confined to the Papuo-Australasian region, being distributed from Henderson and Marquesas Islands west to Mindanao, southern Philippine Islands, and the Sunda Islands, Indonesia. He acknowledges that they are strongly represented in New Guinea whereas in Australia there are only six species in three, or possibly two genera.

Even though Musk and Rainbow Lorikeets only visit our garden when they are traveling along what I term "the eucalyptus blossom trail," and are both commonly observed species throughout their distribution range, it is always a thrill when one, or both, species arrive to feed themselves on the nectar of the flowering trees in our garden, or the neighbor's garden opposite, where there is an abundance of native trees. You don't have to see them to know they are present – the raucous noise they make while clambering through the foliage in search of food is easy to discern – even from 50 yards away!

### Specific Differences

Although they lived in Adelaide, the small but beautiful capital city of South Australia, Barry Hutchins and (the late) Bob Lovell traveled widely in their desire to study native Australian birds in the wild – especially the parrots, lorikeets, and cockatoos. Both were practicing aviculturists and amateur ornithologists that also enjoyed the bush country and the vast outback countryside of Australia. Their combined experiences eventually resulted in the excellent paperback book – *Australian Parrots: A Field and Aviary Study* published by the Avicultural Society of Australia in 1985. From their experiences, in both aviary and the wild, Hutchins and Lovell believe the Rainbow Lorikeet *T. h. moluccanus*, which is distributed from Cape York Peninsula in Northern Australia right down the east coast through to Eyre Peninsula in South Australia is, despite the similarity to the well-known Red-collared Lorikeet *T. h. rubritorquis*, from the Kimberley division of Western

Australia across Northern Australia to the Gulf of Carpentaria, that they are two distinct subspecies. Rosemary Low, the well-known avicultural author and lory specialist, treats *moluccanus* and *rubritorquis* as separate subspecies whereas Joseph Forshaw argues quite firmly that they should not be treated as separate “mono-typic species.”

Although the discussion about the Rainbow Lorikeet and the Red-collared Lorikeet in the above paragraph may seem pedantic, or overly academic, it is a brief introduction into the way ornithologists and taxonomists can, and do, disagree. (Ah, for the simple life of an aviculturist!) Stan Sindel, a widely experienced Australian aviculturist who spends a lot of time studying parrots in the wild writes: “The Red-collared Lorikeet is another subspecies of the numerous and highly successful species *Trichoglossus haematodus*. Although closely allied to the Rainbow Lorikeet, its isolation from this subspecies and other members of the genus has allowed it to evolve with distinct color patterns” (1987).

### Localized Observations

1. My observation of the Rainbow Lorikeet where I live (Colac) on the eastern fringe of the Western District of Victoria consists mainly on sightings made over a quarter of a century living in the same house in the same city. (Colac is the center of a prosperous dairy farming area 92 miles west of Melbourne, the capital city of Victoria.) We have much larger numbers of Rainbow Lorikeets, a highly mobile species, when the flowering eucalypts are in full bloom compared with the numbers that arrived annually when we first came here to live. In January of this year (2003) when checking the bird life on the local tree-lined golf course at the end of the street where we live I heard the Rainbows long before I saw them. They were feeding in various native trees including a Coast Banksia *Banksia integrifolia*, the accompanying photographs show the Banksia flower in different stages, from “untouched by lorikeets” to “well utilized by lorikeets.”

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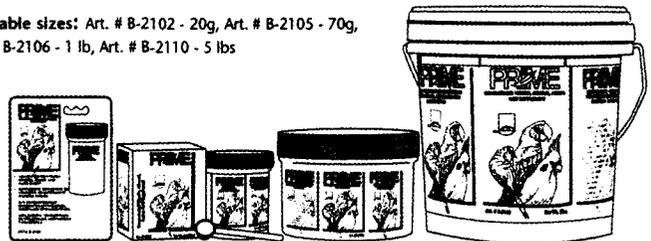
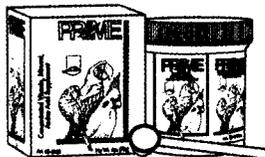
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2. In her excellent book *Encyclopedia of the Lories* (which features a superb painting of a pair of Red-collared Lorikeets on the front cover) Rosemary Low writes: "Most residents of areas where this species is common (in Australia) take it very much for granted. Yet it must be one of the world's most common birds which is colorful and easily seen; a feeding flock, or on coming in to roost, is a spectacle which would be difficult to surpass. ... My own first view of these lorikeets in the wild, along with musks, took place in an Adelaide park on a fine April day. I was totally spellbound. It amazed me that local people were walking by without giving the feeding birds as much as a glance! I was speaking at a convention being held in the nearby university, and it was with great reluctance that I tore myself away from this wonderful scene! I still find flocks of this subspecies (*moluccanus*) mesmerizing from the point of view of color, noise and activity" (1998).

I was at that same convention and, by pure coincidence, went into the same adjoining parkland (which surrounds the River Torrens) during the same break in proceedings. I noticed Rosemary, who *was* mesmerized. She didn't notice me, as she was too busy photographing Rainbow Lorikeets to be aware of my presence! The area frequented by the lorikeets and other species including Rose-breasted Cockatoos is alongside the River Torrens only a few minutes walk from the center of Adelaide.

The Adelaide Zoo, in Frome Road, Adelaide, is also adjacent to the River Torrens. This is a superb zoo with an excellent collection of Australian native birds housed in well-designed, attractively landscaped aviaries. Free-flying Rainbow Lorikeets are another highlight of this small well-planned zoo, which is about a ten-minute walk from the center of the city.

3. When discussing the Rainbow Lorikeet with Barry Hutchins of Adelaide last year he mentioned that this

species has increased its distribution in South Australia during the past fifty years. He has confirmed that the Rainbow Lorikeet, which was common in the Southern Fleurieu Peninsula northwards to about Strathalbyn in the 1950s, has now extended its range across the Adelaide Plains due to urban development. This movement has increased through the Barossa Valley with continuing observations further north, making a distribution extension of some 100 miles over the past five decades.

Hutchins, through his involvement as one of the South Australian coordinators for the *New Atlas of Australian Birds*, a major project of Birds Australia (i.e. Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union), has followed this movement with interest.

(Note: Some American readers of *AFA Watchbird* may have visited the Barossa Valley when visiting Australia. It is well known for its delightful vineyards and wineries in one of the world's great wine producing countries.)

4. The official launch of the *Third [Revised] Edition of Australian Parrots* for Southern Australia, which I organised for the publisher, was held in Melbourne last year at the October monthly meeting of the Avicultural Society of Australia. Prior to the meeting I spent several hours in the company of the author, Joseph Forshaw. Upon hearing a flock of Rainbow Lorikeets flying overhead he commented on how they had increased in Melbourne. [This edition of *Australian Parrots* is a must for all parrot aficionados – especially if your interest is the Australian species. S. L. D.]

One enjoyable place for seeing free-flying Rainbow Lorikeets is in the grounds of the Melbourne Zoo and the surrounding parklands known as Royal Park. The abundance of native gum trees, especially in the extensive parkland area, has obviously attracted greater numbers over the years. The zoo is ten minutes by car from the Central Business District, is a delightful oasis on the fringe of the city, and although the bird display is not overly large is well worth a visit.

5. The November 2002 issue of *Australian Aviculture*, monthly journal of the Avicultural Society of Australia (ASA), featured an item extracted from a Gold Coast, Queensland, newspaper which claimed that the Rainbow Lorikeet was "rapidly disappearing from Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary, Currumbin, where they had been a special attraction for 55 years." The feeding by visitors (more than 500,000 a year) of bread soaked in a honey mixture in hand-held dishes to wild Rainbow Lorikeets (and Scaly-breasted Lorikeets) was a popular activity that had – over the years – become synonymous with both the Sanctuary and the Gold Coast holiday resort. Suffice to say that Currumbin Sanctuary has become an icon of Australian Fauna – a "must-see" for visitors – especially overseas parrot enthusiasts!

6. Following publication of the item above (No. 5) a member of the ASA wrote from his home in Tamworth, New South Wales (famous for its annual Country & Western Festival) as follows: "I read the item about the decline of Rainbow Lorikeets at Currumbin Sanctuary on the Queensland Gold Coast with much interest. I'd think readers of *Australian Aviculture* might be interested to know that they have moved from Currumbin and are doing very well in Tamworth where I live. They first arrived in the early to mid-1980s when there was a severe drought on the coast. Initially they were seen in isolated pairs (at first thought to be aviary escapees) and they have increased over the years to the extent that it is not uncommon now to see a flock of 100 plus birds at one time. Initially they would arrive in September and be gone by the end of January (maybe they didn't like country music!). However, from about 1990, they have made Tamworth a permanent home and every day they can be seen outside our kitchen window in a jacaranda tree no more than 5 meters away. Over fifty have been observed in the tree at different times. (In the early days the Rainbow Lorikeets were accompanied in similar

numbers by Scaly-breasted Lorikeets, however the latter have not been seen for several years.)”

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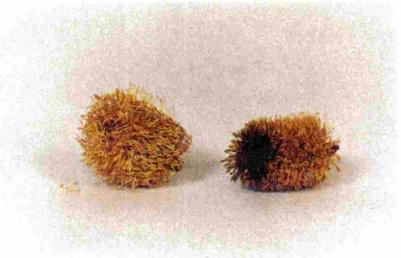
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Photo by Graeme Hyde



Photo by Graeme Hyde



Left; the flower of the Coast Banksia Tree before the lories arrived. Above; the same flower after the lories. Below; a feeder is swarmed for by the wild lories.

Photo courtesy of Pet & Aviary Birds magazine



Below left; a wild parent feeds a youngster on the grass. The baby is fully feathered and flying but still under the care of its parents. Below right; A colorful Rainbow Lory of the T. h. moluccanus subspecies.

Photo courtesy of Pet & Aviary Birds magazine

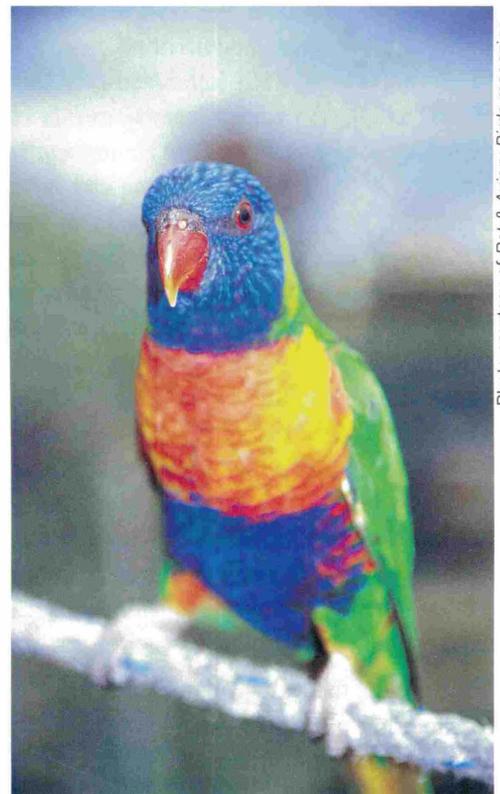


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