



Scarlet-Chested Parakeet, *Neophema splendida*

photo by John Zitta

# The Scarlet-Chested Parakeet

by Mark Runnals

The Scarlet-Chested Parakeet (*Neophema splendida*) has been sought after for years and during the period just after its discovery the Scarlet was very rare to aviculture and ornithology.

In 1871 the Scarlet was almost unknown, but in that same year a pair was received by the Zoological Society of London. That pair was said to have bred and hatched one young in 1872. After that date there was little written on the Scarlets until 1903 when Cambell in his **Nest and Eggs of Australian Birds Vol. 2** wrote a little about them. There seems to have been few or no further documented observations until some 30 years later.

Nearing the end of these 30 years, reports started coming in. Records show that Scarlets were first bred in captivity by Mr. S. Harvey of Adelaide, Australia in 1932. Then in Holland by Mr. Polak Amersfoort in 1934; and finally in England by Mr. Boosey in 1935, for which he received the Avicultural Society's Golden Medal. The Scarlets were first brought into the U.S.A. in the mid forties. They were then successfully bred by Mr. Dave West in Montebello, Calif. in 1947.

Greater numbers of these beautiful birds reached Europe in the 1930s. One pair, owned by Lord Gowrie (then Sir Alexander Hore-Ruthven), was housed by the Adelaide Zoo before being sent as a gift to King George V of England. Another pair was brought over by the late Duke of Bedford and given to Mr. Boosey in the autumn of 1933, (the pair mentioned above which bred in 1935).

Several years later in 1939 an irruption of Scarlets took place near Wynbridge, Australia and several hundred birds were caught for the avicultural trade. It is said that these were the nuclei for the birds we are now breeding.

Today there is no fear that the Scarlet will vanish from aviculture as they are breeding freely in America as well as in Europe.

Since good descriptions of the Scarlets can be found in any book on Australian Parakeets, I have decided to delete it from this article. Young hens are a lighter version of the adult females as are males at an early age. The young also have horn colored bills when they first leave the nest.

## Sexing

Adult Scarlets are easy to sex at a glance, and it is only when one is dealing with young, not yet in color that problems in sexing occur.

It is said that one can sex young Scarlets by the wing stripe which is found on the underside of the wing, and by the young males showing a brighter blue in the foreheads. This way of sexing is very unreliable and does not always hold true. Two hens in my collection showed no wing stripe since they were babies so I thought them to be males. Since they never colored out and have produced young, I am now sure they are hens.

A. Lendon in his article **Sex in Australian Parakeets** said of the wing stripe in Scarlets: "the immatures are very variable; some, which appear to be invariably females, exhibiting a marked stripe while in others of both sexes it is absent. Correspondingly it is invariably absent in the adult male and quite inconstant in the adult female, being well marked or entirely absent".

I have found it best to use the wing stripe in correlation with other means of sexing



in order to get a better idea as to the sex of a particular young Scarlet.

Buying Scarlets out of color is not a bad idea, as generally the price is cheaper per bird and one can buy several birds in order to assure a pair. If one is buying Scarlets in color or just starting to color up, one can be sure of the sex, but the price is also a little higher. The breeder has had to hold onto the young until the males start to show some scattered red feathering in the chest, which starts to appear at three and a half to five months of age. The male will continue to get red feathers in the chest until at about a year of age he is completely colored in his adult plumage.

Another means of sexing is "Hoganising" which is commonly known as the pelvic bone test. One takes the bird in question and measures with a finger the distance between the two pelvic bones by the base of the tail. Usually the bird with the closest spacing is the male, and the widest would be the female. Another method of sexing is to observe the young Scarlets — young males are often more active and vocal than the young females. Young males usually fly from perch to perch making several different twittering notes, this being another indication of the sex. This same twittering can be heard in adult males during courtship, or before the male feeds the female.

None of these methods are completely reliable alone, but when used in combination with the ones mentioned earlier, you can get a fairly good idea as to the sex of the young birds you have.

I have even gone so far as to pull a couple of breast feathers in the babies at about two months of age and wait till they grow in. The young male's feathers will grow in with red on them, the young female's will grow back in green.

Obviously the best method is to wait. The young will color up in approximately three and a half to five months, and one can go from there.

#### Feeding

This may be one of the most important aspects of keeping Scarlets or *Neophemas* in general.

Though Scarlets are not fussy eaters, they do require a varied diet and seem to need large amounts of greens and sprouted seed. Fruits of all sorts are eaten as well as corn on or off the cob. At times it seems the Scarlets will eat anything which is put in front of them and it does not hurt to try new foods.

One starts out with the basic Budgie mix and adds to this a mixture which we buy from Scarlet Seed Company called "Keet Treat". This mixture contains many of the small seeds which the Scarlets love. It contains such seeds as hemp, thistle, flax,



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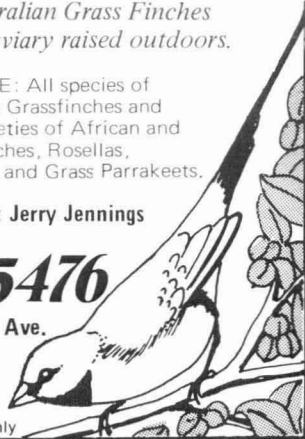
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anise, poppy, sesame, rape, and lettuce seed, plus others.

This Keet Treat is mixed with the basic Budgie mix at about three parts Budgie mix to two parts Keet Treat. Sunflower is fed on the side and that is about all the seed that is offered. One part safflower is also added to the basic mix. As a treat, spray millet is given a couple of times a week.

Scarlets love apple, pear, grapes and other fruits which are given four times a week and the other three days greens are given. Sprouted seed is given about three times a week either with the greens or the fruit. All this is increased when the pairs have young in the nest, then apple or other fruits plus greens and sprouted seed are given *daily*.

Corn is given twice a week when the pairs are not breeding, and this is covered with a little wheat germ oil and powdered vitamins. When the pairs have young to feed, corn is increased and given almost every day in small quantities.

Fresh water is kept in front of them at all times and once a week avitron or some form of liquid vitamins are added to the water.

If you experiment with the foods you feed your birds you will find the ones they like best and they will be more likely to raise their young successfully.

### Housing

There seems to be little problem in keeping and raising Scarlets no matter where you live and what space you have.

Scarlets do not require a lot of space to live and breed in, although I would suggest a flight no smaller than three feet long by two feet wide by three feet high. This will give the pair plenty of room and one could easily keep a cage this size in an apartment or house. Since in the North-eastern states it is difficult keeping the birds outside, finding space indoors is the main problem in housing all the birds we would like. As for those lucky people with outdoor flights, size is only limited by your imagination and your pocket-book. Too large a flight could cause problems though and this is dealt with later on.

Almost any type of wire up to one-inch by one-inch welded wire can be used. The Scarlet has a very weak bite and one could use a small gauge wire for them. You would want a large enough spacing in the wire to allow you to see these beautiful birds, so you do not want to use 1/4 by 1/4 inch fabric unless you really have to. If you can get it, the four sizes which seem to work the best are one by one inch, one by one-half inch, two by one-half inch, and one by two-inch. This type of wire will last much longer than the fabric or light mesh wire and it looks a lot better when one has flights indoors.

There are several different ways of

making cages. One of the easiest and quickest ways (which I learned when visiting with Phyll Ryan) is to buy some metal shelving (called storage shelves) of the proper dimensions and anchor the wire to all four sides. One of the shelves can be turned over and made into a tray. Presto changedo you have a cage. Cut a few doors in it and you are all set. Well, it is just about that easy.

Perches are best made out of natural branches and not dowel, as the birds will exercise their feet on the varying sizes of the branches. Also claws are less likely to become over-grown. The birds also get the added benefit of chewing off the bark, and getting some of the many vitamins stored within.

Some of the branches one could use are apple, pear, peach, privet, and mountain ash. For people in the warmer climes such things as calabash, mimosa, eucalyptus, etc. can be used.

### Breeding

I will not say that Scarlets are all that easy to breed. As in any involvement in the propagation of a certain species, some aviculturists are able to raise scarlets with no trouble, while others have every problem in the book and never do get them to raise young.

I have found them free breeders and only too willing to raise a family anywhere at anytime. I have noticed Scarlets inspecting a Rosella nest box measuring some three feet deep by ten inches square, and there the hen sat on the bottom of the box with high hopes of producing a family in this roomy home. I have also heard of them going to nest on the floors of aviaries when no box was supplied and they were ready to nest.

The nest box we use measures six by seven inches square and fifteen inches deep. A wire ladder is fastened to the inside of the box which runs from the base of the entrance hole to the bottom of the box. The entrance is two inches in diameter.

The Scarlets seem to like the deep box. Not only do they seem to go to nest quicker when it is offered but it keeps the young in the box longer and they tend to come out a little calmer.

The pair will show their sign of readiness to nest when they are a year of age or more and the male feeds and courts the hen frequently. The box is then set in place and a small handful of wood chips are put on the bottom of the box.

It is said hen Scarlets will at times take pieces of leaves to the nest in their rump feathers, in much the same way love birds do. Though I have never noticed the hen do this, I have often found large pieces of greens and tree bark in the nest of some pairs. I really do not know if these pieces of greens were carried into the box inten-

tionally or if just by accident. I hope other breeders noticing this will write me.

The box and pair of Scarlets should be left alone until the hen really settles down on the eggs. This may take several weeks, and you can tell when the hen had eggs as she will not be seen outside the box for several days and the male will at times be seen feeding the hen at the entrance to the box. If there is any question whether or not she has any eggs, you can inspect the box. Scarlets do not seem to mind a few inspections and I have never known or heard of a pair that deserted their eggs or young because of this.

The usual clutch consists of from four to five eggs. The eggs are incubated by the hen for some 18 to 21 days and should hatch if they are fertile. For the first ten days after hatching the female is fed by the male at the entrance to the nest, she then returns to feed the young. After these ten days the male will enter the box and both parents will feed the young.

When the young first hatch they are covered with a grey or ash colored down and will quickly begin to show signs of quills, these starting to appear at about 14 days of age. The young will grow very fast and in 30 days they are ready to venture from the nest. This is a very critical time as young Scarlets are very flighty and easily spooked. This is when the long flight cages can be cause for worry. The young, when

spooked, will pick up speed in flight and smash into the wire at the end of a long flight. This will either severely damage or kill the young as they often break their necks when crashing into the wire. The only way to prevent this is to put lots of branches at the end of the flight so they will slow down to land on them. I find it much easier on the birds and my mind to house them in smaller flights to begin with. The young Scarlets will settle down in a couple of days after leaving the nest.

The male will continue to feed the young for several weeks and by this time the hen may have started a second clutch. As soon as the young are on their own they can be moved to a new cage and kept there till they start to color up. It takes the Scarlets about three weeks after leaving the nest before they are on their own. Young Scarlets' beaks will start to turn black at 9 to ten weeks after leaving the nest and will be shoe polish black at about a year of age.

Several times I have heard of Scarlets being polygamous and also breeding in colonies. I have tried two hens with one male and have had good luck this way but have never tried a colony. I am still sure, though, that the best results are gotten from single pairs, each pair in its own flight.

If one has problems with humidity in the breeding room, you can take a couple of handfuls (palm fulls) of common table salt

and mix it in with the wood shavings at the bottom of the box. Then soak this material down well and you are ready to set the box up. The salt helps hold in the moisture and keeps the eggs from drying out. I also mist the box several times during the incubation period to make sure the chips and salt stay damp but *never wet*.

Since the Scarlet is now breeding freely, several mutations have appeared in Europe and are being established there and, with luck, maybe some will make it to the U.S. There are now Blue, Cinnamon, Pied, and Lutino Scarlets in Europe. The only mutation in the States is the Blue.

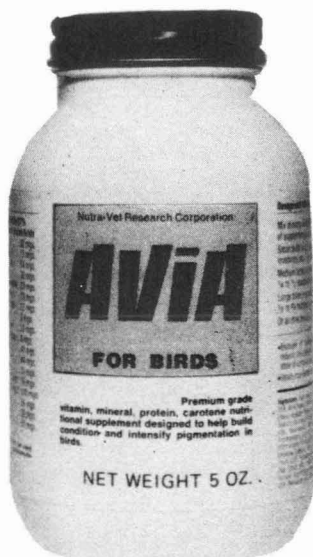
There is a law the A.F.A. is fighting which prohibits shipping Scarlets across state lines because they are endangered animals. They may be shipped across state lines if you own a permit to ship or receive them, if they are being sent on a breeding loan, or if they are a gift. It is hoped that soon with the A.F.A.'s help we will once again be able to ship these birds interstate so that all can enjoy keeping and breeding them.

#### References

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- Australian Parrots in Captivity by Alex Lendon,
- Australian Parakeets by Dr. Groen, 5th edition.
- Australian Parakeets by Dr. Klaus Immelmann,
- Aviculture Volume 2 by The Avicultural Society of England, 1931.
- Parakeets, A Handbook of Imported Species by Seth-Smith, 1903.
- Foreign Birds by A.G. Butler.

#### Analysis per 3.5 grams (approximately one teaspoon)

A	600 IU
Carotene	0.365 mg.
Canthaxanthin	1.8 mgs.
D <sub>3</sub>	60 IU
Arginine	32 mgs.
Histidine	13 mgs.
Isoleucine	24 mgs.
Leucine	33 mgs.
Phenylalanine	30 mgs.
Tyrosine	33 mgs.
Methionine	12 mgs.
Cystine	8 mgs.
Threonine	33 mgs.
Tryptophane	9 mgs.
Valine	40 mgs.
Lysine	44 mgs.
Alanine	30 mgs.
Aspartic Acid	50 mgs.
Glutamic Acid	140 mgs.
Glycine	36 mgs.



E	10 IU
K	0.001 mg.
C	6 mgs.
Bioflavonoid Complex	0.85 mg.
Hesperidine Complex	0.735 mg.
Rutin	0.365 mg.
B <sub>1</sub>	0.5 mgs.
B <sub>2</sub>	0.5 mgs.
B <sub>6</sub>	0.5 mgs.
B <sub>12</sub>	0.001 mg.
Choline	7.8 mgs.
Inositol	7.8 mgs.

Niacinamide	3.7 mgs.
P.A.B.A.	2 mgs.
Biotin	0.003 mg.
Calcium	170 mgs.
Phosphorus	170 mgs.
Magnesium	7.3 mgs.
Potassium Chloride	39 mgs.
Sodium Chloride	25 mgs.
Manganese	0.069 mg.
Cobalt	Trace
Silicon	Trace
Iron	0.7 mgs.
Copper	0.037 mg.
Iodine	0.008 mg.
Zinc	0.245 mg.
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Serine	50 mgs.
Pantothenic Acid	2.5 mgs.
Folic Acid	0.122 mg.

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