



Turquoise Grass Parakeet, *Neophema pulchella*

photo courtesy of San Diego Zoo

Tales of the Turquoise by Jerry Jennings

Grassparakeets, or *Neophemas*, are a group of small, semi-terrestrial birds native to Australia. Of the seven species in the genus, three (Turquoise, Scarlet-chested, and Orange-bellied) are listed as endangered under U.S. law.

The endangered status of the Turquoise grassparakeet is both unfortunate and disputed. Joseph Forshaw, leading authority on Australian Parrots, states the Turquoise "... is rare, but not endangered unless interference with

habitat increases drastically".¹

Turquoisines inhabit the southeastern portion of Australia near the coast in the open forested mountains and timbered grasslands. They feed on or near the ground on a variety of grass seeds and plant material including barley grass and chickweed (both available in the U.S.). Nesting occurs in hollow logs, stumps, and fenceposts from August to December.

Whatever their status in the wild, Turquoisines are certainly plentiful in captivity. They are prolific breeders, quiet, colorful, and easily managed. It is not surprising that they are so popular with U.S. and European aviculturists.

The Turquoise is dimorphic. Sexes can be distinguished before fledging. Males are more brightly colored than hens. The face and forehead are brilliant blue; crown, nape, back, rump, central tail, secondary flight feathers are green. A red bar extends one or two inches longitudinally over the inner wing coverts. Lesser and median wing coverts are turquoise, outer primary flight feathers marine blue. Throat, chest, abdomen, vent, and outer tail feathers are yellow. Feet and bill are charcoal gray, iris is brown.

Females are similar, however the throat and chest are green and the red wing bar is absent. Both sexes show a wing stripe when immature, but it disappears in the male after the first moult.

The mild disposition exhibited by the Turquoise permits it to be housed with other parrots and even finches. Since grassparakeets will hybridize, it is best to keep the various *Neophema* species separate from each other.

The best breeding success will be achieved if Turquoisines are housed one pair to a flight by themselves. Although some aviculturists breed them in cages 4' x 2' x 2', they will probably do better in a larger flight eight to twelve feet long, as they are strong, fast fliers. The added space affords them more opportunity to exercise — important in maintaining breeding condition. Height and width of their enclosure are relatively less important than length.

Turquoisines nest in the Spring their breeding season beginning as early as late February in California and lasting until early July. They average two nests during this period, though a third nest is possible. Clutch size varies from four to seven eggs, which are elliptical in shape and white in color. Incubation takes approximately three weeks. Newly hatched young are nearly identical to similarly aged young of the other *Neophemas*.

Nestlings fledge approximately four weeks after hatching and require approximately two weeks more before becoming fully independent. Nestboxes may be left hanging year around, as Turquoisines will not use them outside the breeding season thus eliminating any concern that they will overbreed.

Turquoisines are extremely hardy birds withstanding temperature extremes of 115°F in the summer and 20°F on winter nights. They rarely take ill. However, due to their semi-terrestrial habits roundworms could become a problem (as with all parrots) if the birds are housed on soil previously exposed to infested birds. A good worming of the birds and thorough change of the floor substrate prior to introducing the new birds will eliminate any such hazard.

Previous reference was made to the Turquoise's prolific nature. There are several pair at Walnut Acres that consistently produce six young per clutch, two clutches per season, year after year. On one occasion a clutch of nine was successfully reared to independence. On another, a lone male successfully reared six young from the age of one week to independence in response to the loss of his mate to injury. Their productivity and determination are remarkable.

As with most Psittacine birds at Walnut Acres, Turquoisines are fed a diet of finch/parakeet mix consisting of canary, white proso, red proso, water grass, small red millet, small white millet, finch millet, and steel cut oats; safflower, spray millet, and mixed corn, peas, and carrots. The vegetables are purchased frozen and allowed to thaw before serving. They are offered daily during breeding season and every other day during the balance of the year. Water containing Headstart Vitamins is served fresh daily and the birds have a steady supply of cuttlebone and grit.

Turquoisines are inexpensive to acquire and quick to reward the eager aviculturist. They are fun to propagate, offering the ambitious aviculturist an opportunity to make a positive contribution to the preservation of the species as a treasured wildlife resource whose population status is questionable.

¹Forshaw, Joseph M., *Parrots of the World*, Doubleday & Co., c. 1973, p. 262.

Note: Forshaw also states the Scarlet-chested exists in large numbers (p. 262), but their nomadic habits contributed to the theory they are scarce. He further suggested at the "International Birds in Captivity Symposium" held in Seattle, Washington March 8-12, 1978 that the Scarlet-chested was so common in the wild, it was no longer threatened if indeed it ever was.

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