

Two young female *Eclectus*, about seven weeks old.

Eclectus: a special parrot

by Rosemary Low

Derivations of scientific names of birds are usually descriptions of plumage; however, among members of the Parrot family are many names which indicate their beauty or pleasing appearance. Examples are *pulchella* for beautiful, as in the Fairy Lorikeet, and *magnificus* for the Banksian Cockatoo; several have the appellation *amabilis*, meaning lovely. The curious name *Eclectus* is derived from eclectic, meaning chosen in the sense of special. It is indeed appropriate for these birds rank high in the estimation of many psittacine enthusiasts.

They have several characteristics which make them ideal subjects for aviculture. Perhaps I should qualify that by saying for the aviculturist who is prepared to devote a

little extra time to them.

Eclectus are unusual birds in many ways. The most notable feature of their appearance is the striking sexual dimorphism. In no other species of parrot is it so marked. In practical terms to the aviculturist, this is of great benefit. There can be no mistaking the predominantly red female for the green male, a distinction which is apparent as soon as their feathers start to appear at the age of three and one half to four weeks.

Another unusual feature is the formation of its feathers which in some areas of the plumage, notably the head, produces an effect which is more like fur than feather. This, too, is unique among parrots.

One perplexing aspect of their appearance is that while the various subspecies (there is only one species) are readily identifiable in the female, they are impossible to distinguish in the male. The chance of pairing together a male and female of the same race is therefore slender, as ten or more races are recognized. Size varies from approximately 13-15" (34-38 cm); therefore, if possible, male and female should be reasonably well matched for size.

While it is true that males do vary in their plumage, in the shade of green and the extent of the yellow tip to the tail, the variation is slight compared with that found in the female. The females can be divided into two groups. The first comprises those with a narrow ring of blue feathers surrounding the eye: the Red-sided *Eclectus* *Eclectus roratus polychloros* from New Guinea and the western Papuan Islands; the larger *E.r. macgillivrayi* from the Cape York Peninsula of Australia, and the smaller Solomon Island *Eclectus E.r. solonomensis*.

The second group consists of those which lack the blue feathered ring around the eye and have yellow or partly yellow under tail coverts. I find birds of this group more beautiful for, contrasting with the yellow on the tail, their red plumage is even more startling. The race *vosmaeri* is especially pleasing with its broad band of yellow at the tip of the tail, yellow under tail coverts and mauve lower breast, abdomen and upper mantle. The upper parts are dark red with the primaries and the bend of the wing dark mauvish-blue. The head is bright red. Underside of the tail is dusky orange. The bill is jet black and the iris is yellow. This race comes from the islands of the Moluccas and is one of the best known.

Eclectus are distributed throughout a number of Indonesian islands, New Guinea and, in Australia, are found only in a small area of the tropical northern tip of Cape York.

As we cannot distinguish the male's subspecies with certainty, what happens when, in captivity, he is paired with a female of a different subspecies? Will their offspring resemble the mother? This is usually the case, although there can be slight differences in the plumage, just as in any other parrot. For example, in two females reared in the same nest by my pair, one had the area which can most easily be described as the "armpit" orange while in the other it was dull red as in her mother. I have not heard of a female being produced which quite obviously resembled a different subspecies to its mother and wonder

whether this could occur.

As to the males, all those produced by my pair (ten, to date) have exactly resembled their father.

Eclectus are among the easier of the large parrots to breed in captivity; unfortunately, imported birds are among the most difficult parrots to establish. Losses are so high that I would welcome an embargo on their importation. This would have little or no effect on aviculturists because there are many pairs in collections, a good proportion of which are rearing young. As it happens, the introduction of compulsory quarantine in many countries has greatly reduced the trade in these birds, as few importers are prepared to take the risks involved in their importation.

Until the late 1960s, Eclectus were rare in captivity. When export from Indonesia commenced in early 1968 I obtained a male from a London dealer. I was fortunate in my choice of a healthy bird which thrived. Importers of Eclectus are well aware of the fact that even a bird which is not emaciated can be apparently well one minute and dead the next. It is for this reason that aviary-bred birds (provided, of course, that they have been raised by a breeder who realizes the importance of sound nutrition) are a much sounder pro-

position than imported ones.

The avicultural potential of this species has apparently not yet been fully realized. Here we have a parrot of very great beauty for which there is always a demand. Unlike the females of many large parrots, they are very willing to lay eggs in a cage — thus in an aviary there is usually no stopping them. There can be no excuse for our generation of aviculturists failing to create aviary-bred strains of these magnificent parrots. Losses of newly imported birds are unacceptably high and this reason alone should be enough to encourage aviculturists to be self-sufficient where Eclectus are concerned.

There are several reasons for these losses. One is the need of Eclectus for a high level of Vitamin A in the diet. While some parrots can remain healthy on a diet which consists mainly of seed, few Eclectus will survive long on an inadequate diet. They need large quantities of fresh vegetables, especially carrot and corn to supply Vitamin A. Celery, tomato, cheese, meat and fruit should also be offered.

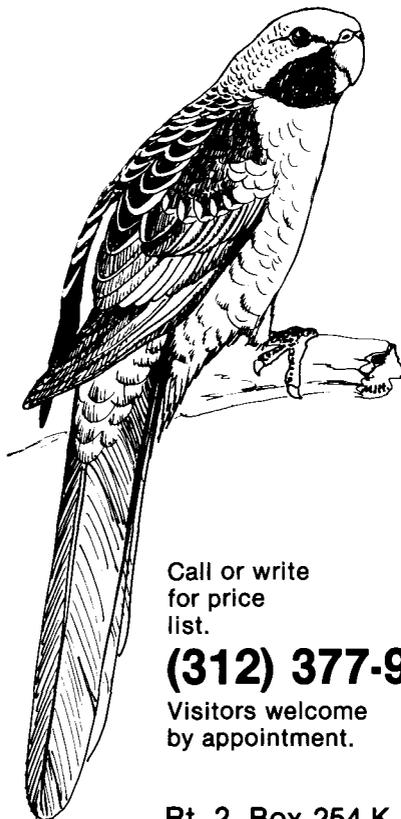
On autopsying Eclectus, the author and veterinarian George Smith was surprised by the extreme length of the bowel, suggestive of the fact that the natural diet of these birds included vegetable matter which needs extra digestion. I would em-

phasis the fact that these birds require a diet whose proportion of fresh vegetables and fruits to seed is a least 50:50. Unlike most parrots, most of my Eclectus prefer white millet, spray millet and canary seed to sunflower. They will also eat pine nuts and peanuts.

A deficiency of Vitamin A sometimes results in a swelling in the mouth which is painful, thus the bird ceases to eat. If this occurs, it should be taken immediately to a veterinarian. An injection of chloromphenicol directly into the swelling will usually clear up the problem, provided that it has been noticed in time.

A major reason of death among newly imported birds is stress, especially of males when they are closely confined with a female. To understand the reason for this, one needs to know something about the two types of pair bond which exist in parrots. In most species, including lorries, cockatoos, Amazons, macaws, and conures, the pair bond is maintained permanently. Birds in this group indulge in much mutual preening and are usually extremely affectionate, even when "pairs" actually consist of two birds of the same sex.

In some species outside this group which exhibits such affectionate behavior, the female is dominant over the male, who



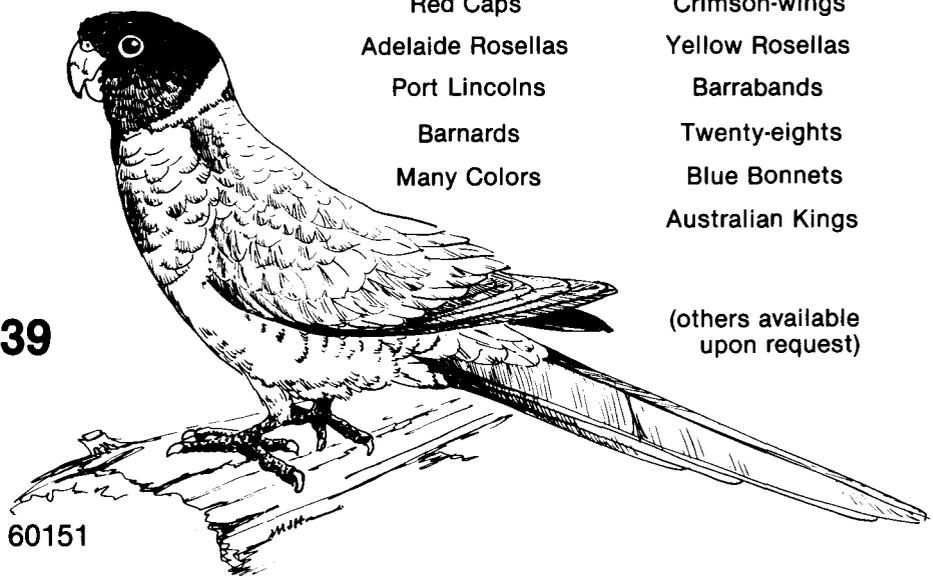
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courts the female during the breeding season and has little or no physical contact with her, such as mutual preening, at other times of the year. The Ringneck Parrakeet and other members of the genus *Psittacula* fall into this category, as does the Eclectus.

Except when in breeding condition the male may be very much afraid of the female. Therefore, to closely confine him with one causes an unacceptable level of stress which can result in his death.

This can also occur when a male and a female are introduced in an aviary. The female, being dominant, keeps the male away from the food, thus it is imperative to place food at both ends of the aviary. It may also be necessary to resort to this procedure when young leave the nest and the female again becomes dominant over and aggressive towards the male. Her aggression may extend to the young; if this is the case she must be removed until the young are self-supporting.

Some pairs of Eclectus are excellent breeders and prove very prolific. Others never produce young and the reason may be that the male cannot overcome his fear of the female, thus mating never occurs. Another possible reason is that the female is so keen to lay she will spend very long periods in the nest, seldom being seen for months at a time and not seeking contact with the male.

How can this problem be overcome? Compatible pairs are more likely to be formed if a male and female (from different parents) are placed together in the year in which they were hatched. It is most unlikely that the male will be afraid of a young female with whom he grows up.

All the young hatched by my pair have been reared by them with the exception of two females hatched during mid-winter which were not fed during bitterly cold weather. They were thus removed for hand-rearing when aged six weeks. When the eldest female was nine weeks old she was introduced to an adult male for a few minutes. This bird had proved useless for breeding as it would not mate with the female. However, on being introduced to the very young female he fed her at once — then had to be removed because it was courtship which he had in mind! The reason was clear: at that age the female was not aggressive enough to arouse his fear, thus he was quite willing to mate with her.

While most parrots are single- or double-brooded and stop laying in order to moult, this is not true of Eclectus. Hens are multi-brooded and simply moult while incubating. It may even be necessary to remove the nest-box so that the female can have a well-earned rest from domestic duties.



Head of adult male.



Adult female.



*Female
vosmaeri
at nest
entrance.*



Two immature males.

Photos by R.H. Grantham

Lady Gouldian Finches

WHITE-BREASTED
BLUE-BREASTED
NORMAL COLORS

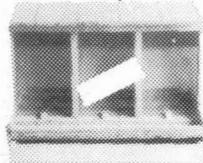


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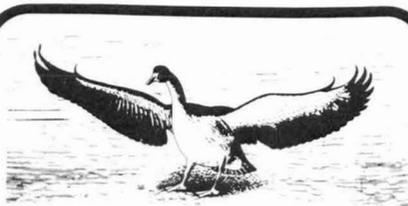


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Eclectus will use a nest-box or a small barrel. Pieces of wood should be nailed to the inside of the nest as females need to be able to gnaw before and during incubation — and gnawing the framework of the nest could have disastrous results. The box used by my breeding pair measures twelve inches square and four feet deep. Nesting material can consist of peat or wood chips or a combination of both.

In Eclectus the normal clutch consists of two eggs which are incubated for 28 days by the female. Young spend about 11 weeks in the nest; so far the minimum period in the young raised by my pair is 66 days. None has returned to the nest to roost.

On leaving the nest males have the beak dark brown with the tip of both mandibles yellow. As they mature the brown decreases until, by about ten months old, the beak is almost entirely yellow. With age, it deepens to orange, but the tip remains yellow.

Rearing foods consist of corn on the cob (one or two cobs daily for the first eight weeks or so — consumption of this food decreasing gradually), cheese, bread and milk, tomato, carrot, celery and spinach. Little or no seed is eaten until the young are three weeks old.

Newly hatched chicks look very much like those of Ringneck Parrakeets, being almost devoid of down except for a few tiny wisps. The second down is dark grey and very dense by the time the chicks are two weeks old.

Where possible, as in the case of a pair of birds which are not at all nervous, it is advisable to inspect the nest often as this will usually result in the young being much steadier when they leave the nest. The first Eclectus my pair reared nearly broke its neck flying about the aviary in panic because the nest had seldom been inspected while it was being reared. Subsequently, daily inspection has occurred and the young have benefitted. However, the temperament of the adult birds and whether or not they resent nest inspection must be the criteria for this decision. Young birds usually spend a couple of weeks looking out of the entrance before leaving the nest — and this too has a steadying effect on them.

It would seem that there is wide variation in breeding behavior among individual pairs. In my pair the male normally feeds the young from soon after the time they hatch; however, in the case of two nests, one containing two males and another a single female, the female did most of the feeding until the young were old enough to climb to the nest entrance, where they were fed by the male. In the

second, instance, this behavior was almost certainly due to the fact that the male had an overgrown beak.

I know of a pair of Eclectus in which the female never allows the male to enter the nest and of yet another in which the female will brood the young but loses interest in feeding them at a very early age, leaving this task to the male. My female invariably stays in the nest with the young for most of the day, long after they need to be brooded, and comes out for long periods of one to two weeks before they are due to leave the nest and have started to become very active inside and to exercise their wings.

An excess of enthusiasm usually shown by my male for his young: indeed, this sometimes results in him nibbling the down from their backs or napes. While adults will occasionally preen their young, I have never known them to preen each other although I am told that this does occur in some pairs. In contrast to the male, I had never seen the female of my pair behave with any kind of affection towards her young until a single female fledged recently when I was surprised to see her preening its head. The only other females the pair have hatched were removed for hand-rearing so I shall watch with interest her behavior towards any females raised in the future. Perhaps it is only young males which she treats with contempt!

Eclectus are the only exception to the rule that my favorite parrots are those in which the pair bond is permanently maintained. In actual fact, they are the only birds in my collection not in this category. The very affectionate behavior of pairs of Lories, Amazons and cockatoos, for example, is to me an endearing aspect of their personalities.

In Eclectus females will usually advertise the fact that they want to go to nest by becoming noisy and active. A sure sign is a certain double call note, difficult to describe, which is made at no other time. It occurs during copulation or when the female is ready to mate. A most attractive sound, it is unlike any other in the female's vocabulary. Voices of male and female are totally different. The male has an equivalent mating call, this being a deep "Konk, konk, konk" uttered several times in succession. Eclectus also have a harsh, very loud scream, normally used only as a warning signal, such as when there is a cat in the vicinity, or as a contact call. Males of pairs in my aviaries housed out of sight quite often use this call. One male, hatched in 1975, is a particularly noisy bird. In general, however, Eclectus do not have regular periods of screaming, as do Amazon parrots, for example.

The female of my breeding pair is con-

sistently noisy only when the male is removed or, during one period, in his presence. This occurred after his bill had been trimmed, an operation which required anaesthesia. He reacted badly and took several weeks to recover fully. During this time, when the male was obviously not in breeding condition, the female behaved as though he was not present in the aviary. She flew up and down repeatedly, calling — advertising the fact that she required a mate.

Eclectus will learn to talk. The two hand-reared females already referred to, were housed with an adult male which could say "Hello" and "Come on." Within a few months they had mastered these phrases, as well as "What are you doing?" which they learnt from a Black Lory (raised in 1977) housed in the same room.

While some Eclectus make good pets, especially if hand-reared, I never feel happy about seeing these birds caged. They definitely do not accept very close confinement as easily as would a young Amazon, for example. And as is usual in species in which the pair bond is not maintained permanently, they normally lack

the affectionate nature of a tame Amazon which makes it such an endearing pet. Male Eclectus are more likely to make good pets than females; indeed, I kept the male of my breeding pair as a pet for several years. While a tame macaw, cockatoo, Amazon or Grey Parrot will sit for hours while its indulgent owner scratches its head, Eclectus will not tolerate this kind of attention, as mutual preening between adults is rare, or unknown in most pairs. Thus there can never be quite the same bond between bird and owner as in the aforementioned parrots.

While females are extremely beautiful, it is only the exceptional bird which makes a good pet; most are too independent and assertive. This is, in a way, fortunate, for the number of males hatched always exceeds females, thus in the USA the price of females is far higher. There would be a shortage of females for breeding purposes if their temperament matched their beauty.

The myth one sometimes hears that chicks hatched from a clutch of two eggs are always male and female is well and truly exploded by the experiences of most

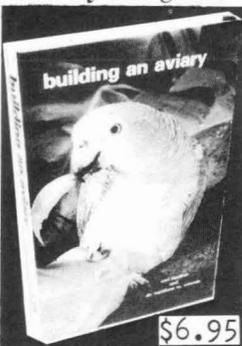
breeders of Eclectus. Indeed, my pair reared ten males before the first females appeared. They have produced, in one nest, two males or two females or one male or one female — but never a male and a female. Of course, many pairs have reared one of each.

The predominance of males in Eclectus was never better exemplified than by a pair at Chester Zoo in England which reared about 30 young before a female was raised! I believe that in many species of parrots males do predominate; however, this is most conspicuous in Eclectus because they can be sexed as soon as their feathers appear.

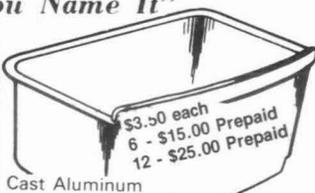
Eclectus are, without a doubt, among the most beautiful of all parrots and, from the avicultural viewpoint, they have two important advantages: extreme sexual dimorphism and willingness to nest. Aviary-bred specimens are perfect subjects for the aviculturist prepared to give a little extra attention to their nutrition. Well cared for pairs will — if the necessary element of luck is present — be a source of joy to their owners for many years and will produce numerous young.

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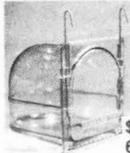
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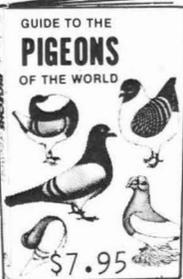
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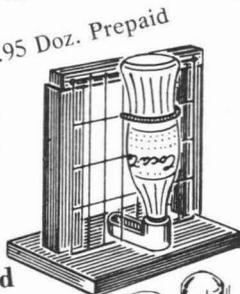


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