

The Land of Cockatoos

by Eric Nolan
Brownsburg, Indiana

Photo by Catherine Bourne



Wild Galabs in tree in city park.

As a breeder specializing in cockatoos, I was greatly excited by the announcement in the Jun/Jul issue of *Watchbird* regarding Terra Psittacorum, The Land of Parrots. This was a tour conducted by Monarch Tours, of Australia. It was to visit many birding areas, bird attractions and Australian breeders.

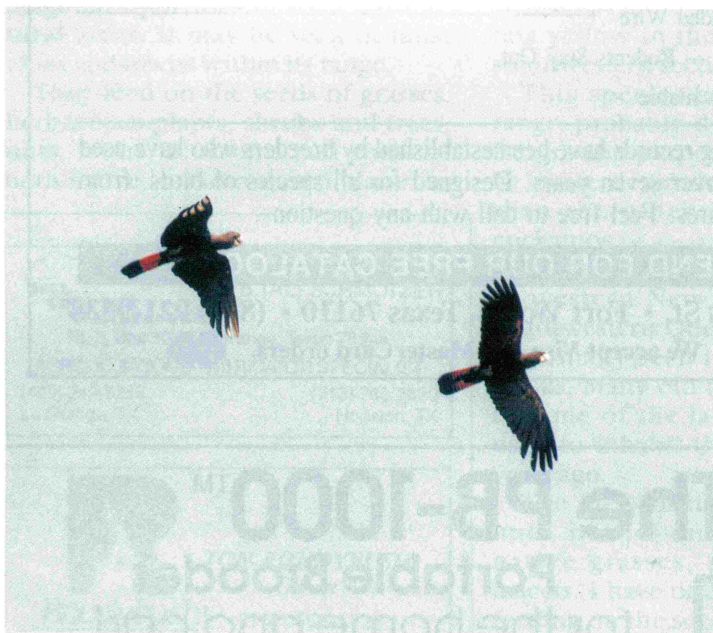
I contacted Monarch immediately, not being able to wait for the "further information" promised for the following issue. I signed up, but to my disappointment, the tour was cancelled due to several factors beyond the control of Monarch. They were, however, able to offer me an alternate selection. I signed on for their birding and wildlife trip scheduled for early October. I also started dropping none too subtle hints in my contacts with Monarch, that the spotting of cockatoos in the wild was my idea of an Australian wildlife outing.

The original itinerary for the tour actually changed just before it began. An extended airline strike in Australia made it impossible to fly to Darwin and Alice Springs as originally planned. This forced a modification to the tour that coincidentally made the new itinerary very close to the cancelled tour.

The tour group consisted of ten people including the Monarch guide, Bill Martin, a long-time Australian park ranger. His contacts and knowledge of the parks we visited were to add greatly to the success of the trip. The people on the tour were all Americans, ranging from parrot fanciers to bird watchers of the Audubon persuasion. One couple raised show chickens and wallabies. Most were from California, but Seattle, Pennsylvania, and Indiana (myself) were also represented.

The trip was oriented primarily to the national parks along the east coast of Australia. We began with Lamington National Park in the hills above the Gold Coast, just south of Brisbane. After a flight north to Townsville, the tour spent several days in the Atherton Tablelands before visiting Cairns and spending a day at the Great Barrier Reef. Next we flew south to Sydney, where we travelled down the coast and, eventually, inland through Kangaroo Valley to Canberra, the nation's capital. Accommodations varied from rustic cabins at Binna Burra Lodge in Lamington National Park, to upscale hotels in Brisbane and Sydney. Most nights were spent at family style

Photo by Eric Nolan



Red-tailed Black Cockatoos in flight by a public road, Atherton Tablelands, Queensland.



Author feeding Rosellas and Galabs in a park.

Photo by Catherine Bourne

motels in small communities.

For the first few days, our cockatoo sightings were minimal and at long distance. We did, however, observe a multitude of interesting birds and wildlife. The first full day at Lamington, we observed Pale-headed and Crimson Rosellas, Rainbow and Scaly-breasted Lorikeets, the striking King Parrot, and many non-parrot species including several bowerbirds and the Eastern Whipbird. The bowerbirds are builders of amazing courtship structures. We observed our first bower at Lamington, but were to see an incredible structure later near Atherton, where we also saw the beautiful Golden Bowerbird.

In Townsville, we were welcomed by flocks of lorikeets. In the center of this small resort town was a pedestrian mall. In this were several large trees. As dusk approached, small groups of rainbow lorikeets started gathering. By dark, hundreds of birds had taken residence. The cacophony was reminiscent of our Greycheek room at home, though multiplied many times.

By the fourth day, I was starting to despair I would ever see a cockatoo up close in Australia. Bill promised that "down South" cockatoos were "common as dirt" — I had only to

wait. For the short term, he indicated that he knew of a spot near Atherton where Red-tailed Black Cockatoos had been spotted in the past. We drove north out of Atherton with all eyes looking to the treetops. After passing through several miles of apparently identical woods, Bill pulled to the side of the road and turned off the bus. As he opened the window, we heard the cries of the cockatoos all around us. We piled out of the bus, cameras and camcorders at the ready. The trees were filled with black cockatoos. That day we estimated their number at 50 birds. Returning the next day, the number appeared closer to 100. To commemorate my real introduction to the cockatoos of Australia, Bill combed the bush and came up with a black tail feather with a bright splash of crimson. This is my most treasured souvenir of the trip. The Red-tailed Blacks were extremely shy birds. They remained high in the treetops and flew away as we approached. The area in which we found them, however, was not at all remote. They were scattered in trees on either side of what passes in Australia for a busy road. There were even several homes scattered through the area.

Later, as we headed south, we spent a day in Sydney. Several minutes after we checked in, one member of the group shouted that she had cockatoos in sight. Several Sulphur-crested were flying around a balcony on the top floor of a ten-story building nearby. They landed and appeared to be expecting food from the occupants. Later, other Sulphurs and several Galahs (Rose-breasted) were observed flying by, this in the heart of Australia's largest city. Several of the latter were also seen later in the Royal Botanical Gardens located beside the Sydney Opera House.

Driving south toward Jervis Bay, we stopped at Royal National Park, where we encountered our first flock of White Cockatoos, as Australians refer to the Sulphur-crested. When we arrived, the cockatoos were congregated about the snack area looking for handouts, a situation not that different from home. We fed them bread and French fries and one even landed on my knee. Later, in Bundeeena, we saw a great many more Sulphur-crested and several Little Corellas. One of the corellas was spotted peering out of a nest hole. This was unusual in that we were very close to the shore and their normal

habitat is further in toward the hills. Galahs and Rosellas were also seen here. While we watched, examples of all of the above were seen to fly to the deck of a nearby private residence to eat wild bird seed provided by the residents.

In Jervis Bay, at Green Patch picnic area, Crimson Rosellas ate seed from our outstretched hands, landing on arms and even heads. One plucky Galah even got up the nerve to snatch a seed from my hand before scampering off. All this changed, however, when a bossy Sulphur-crested showed up and chased everyone away. We also had kangaroos eating bread from our hands, including one complete with a joey peering from her pouch.

Our arrival in Canberra was full of expectation. Bill had indicated that Gang-gang Cockatoos were present within the city and Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos could probably be spotted at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve not far away. At a small city park, primarily used for horseback riding, a pair of Gang-gangs was spotted. Like the Red-tailed Blacks before them, they were extremely shy, but we still got an excellent view. The male, with his brilliant red head, was especially impressive. In this same park, a Galah was spotted standing guard at the entrance to its nest hole. The mate was sitting a little higher in the tree. It is interesting to note that, to my recollection, a solitary Galah was never seen. They always were in pairs, even when part of a larger group.

Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve was probably the single most exciting day of the trip. Before we even entered the park, we were mesmerized by a field full of cockatoos and kangaroos. Paying each other no attention, they happily co-mingled. Also present was an Emu and its baby. Most of us assumed this was "Mom" and baby, but we were corrected, as the male Emu apparently raises the young.

Inside the park, we saw many different kinds of kangaroos and also several koalas. We had been hoping to see the Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos in Jervis Bay but were disappointed. This was not to be repeated. While most of the group settled in for a barbecue put on by Bill and his family, two of us hiked to the top of a nearby hill to watch for cockatoos. Shouts from the group called our attention to a group of a half dozen Yellow-tails flying over them, directly toward us. They passed nearby and disappeared

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over the woods. Soon more appeared. These we followed into the woods. Again, like the Red-tails, they stayed high and flew as we approached. But even so, we were able to get a good look at these magnificent birds. One interesting note about Tidbinbilla — the trail we walked to observe the koalas had been planned and built by Bill when he was a ranger at the facility.

Our trip officially ended in Sydney with a harbor cruise and a farewell banquet. However, about half the group spent the next day at the Taronga Zoo in Sydney. Bill arranged for a tour of the bird facilities, given by Ken de la Motte, the zoo bird-keeper. Afterwards, we enjoyed the zoo itself, especially the cockatoo exhibits. The main aviary contained several pairs each of Leadbeater's, Galahs, Red-tailed, Yellow-tailed, Banksian, Corellas, and Sulphur-crested Cockatoos. Individual exhibits housed Palm Cockatoos as well as the White-tailed Cockatoo.

At each city, I looked for a pet store with birds for sale. In Cairns, we found such a shop. As I had imagined, the prices were rather startling. Galahs were \$35 Australian, or about \$29 in U.S. funds. The proprietor indicated that a tame baby would be more — \$50 Australian. Sulphur-crested were listed at \$65. The most expensive bird listed in this store was the Superb Parrot at \$165. Several caged birds were observed in shops throughout Australia. The most exotic was a Gang-gang in an Aboriginal artifacts store in Sydney. The most interesting was seen by two tour members on a trip to the Blue Mountains above Sydney. They observed what could only have been two Galah X Sulphur-crested hybrids in Featherdale Park, a commercial aviary and animal park. They had yellow stomachs, grey back and wings, and a short, yellow crest. A Galah and Sulphur-crested were later seen caged together so it was assumed the birds were raised at the park.

This article has concentrated on the cockatoos that we saw on the trip. I must say that many beautiful and interesting birds of all types were observed — from the comical Kookaburra, who has inspired almost as many Australian stuffed animals as the koala — to waterfowl, owls, doves, eagles, and the gorgeous, little Superb Fairy Wren. For any bird lover, Australia has to be the ultimate vacation destination. ●

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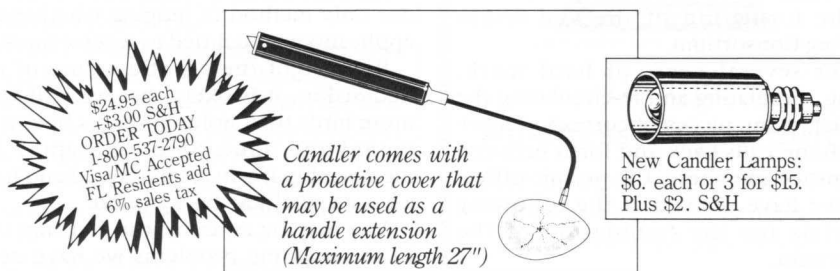
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