In Praise of the Yellow Plum-headed Parakeet

by Dale R. Thompson, Lemon Cove, CA

In 1980 I had the privilege of visiting several breeders of parrot mutations in Europe. Being very early in the mutation game, any new mutation of any psittacine species created quite a stir among avicultural circles on both sides of the Atlantic. The European breeders were far advanced in their techniques in aviculture in the late 1970s and early 1980s especially in the long-tailed parakeets. These especially included the Australian parakeets and all of the *Psittacula* group.

Europeans were able to acquire new birds from the wild much easier than American breeders could. This was mainly due to the quarantine restrictions in the U.S. due to the threat of Newcastle Disease (VVND). Newcastle Disease can severely threaten the populations of captive birds in both the poultry and exotic bird industries.

Most of the new mutations first occurred in European collections as they were many years ahead of the American aviculturist in procuring and reproducing the above two groups of birds. I observed many new mutations in 1980 including the blue, dark-eyed yellow and three dilute forms of the Mustached Parakeet. Dilute does not refer to a color or mutation but is a reference point of how much melanin is removed or remaining in any color. I personally felt that one of these dilutes was the cinnamon. Only through reproduction can the genetics of each new mutation be determined.

Of great interest was that I had observed the blue Mustached Parakeet in Belgium the year before and it was explained to me that it came directly from the wild. In only a year later (or maybe two), I observed this same blue Mustached Parakeet in the aviaries of John Postema in the Netherlands. It had been paired to a normal mate and this pair had three young fledglings. Time and time again new mutations would show up in Mr. Postema's aviaries and this man reproduced them. It is something when one has a lot of mutations but it is even greater if the aviculturist reproduces them. And certainly John Postema did that. A lot of credit must be given to Mr. Postema for his expertise and avicultural knowledge. Many wild-caught specimens are truly wild and they are difficult to reproduce. They are not the same bird that has been bred for generations in captivity like the ringnecks and rosellas in our aviaries.

Photo by Dale R. Thompson

A 1980 photo of a Yellow Plum-headed Parakeet male with four split offspring and a normal female. The birds were owned by Mr. Postema of Holland, one of the top mutation breeders in the world.

Other incredible mutations reproduced by Mr. Postema were the blue and lutino Alexandrine Parakeets. Neither one of these mutations had been crossed (hybridized) with the blue or lutino Ringneck as was occasionally done by some breeders. No, these mutations were the true thing. I was simply stunned by the white ring on the beautiful blue Alexandrine male.

I observed so many new mutations, let alone new species (for me), and was thrilled with them all. I thought I had seen the best there was, until coming upon a flight toward the end of the isle. There flew a mutation that I have to place in the top three mutations seen in my lifetime. This mutation was the dark-eyed yellow Plum-headed Parakeet.

I personally have some disdain for mutations that are less (in color or pattern) than the normal bird found in the wild. This is why you will never see a blue Scarlet-chested Parakeet in my aviaries. God made such a beautiful bird, so why mess with it.

The Plum-headed Parakeet is one top bird when it comes to color. In Forshaw's *Parrots of the World*, the head is described as deep red. It is really a vibrant plum color. A color not seen very often in exotic birds. In the yellow mutation the melanin is reduced only slightly, giving the head a light plum color that is vibrant. The complete bird (this was the male obviously) was full of different colors that are not normally seen in nature and the colors seemed to be balanced.

After thinking about it, both the normal colored bird and the yellow mutation *do* come from nature, so why wouldn't they be balanced. The most stunning color was a lime color that lined the side of the bird. This derivative of a green color matched the vibrant light plum of the head and

ROSELLAS;
AN AUSTRALIAN VIEWPOINT

by Graeme Hyde
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the History of Rosellas in Australian Aviculture

Introduction

As stated in the accompanying article by Dale R. Thompson, "the rosella group of parrots originates from Australia and they are one of the largest of the Australian parrot families." The fact that there are a total of 19 species and subspecies (Hutchins & Lovell), together with their striking colors, has combined to attract the attention of bird lovers, naturalists, ornithologists, scientists and aviculturists.

There is no doubt that the color, variety, and individuality of the Australian rosellas is the reason for the interest in these fascinating parrots by aviculturists in the United States, Europe, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia.

Sixty years ago Neville W. Cayley, a noted Australian ornithologist, wrote, "The second illustration of an Australian parrot was painted ... [by] the artist, William Ellis, executing a water-colour drawing of the Tasmanian Green Rosella." This painting, dated 1777, is in the British Museum (since renamed The Natural History Museum). The earliest known painting of an Australian parrot was a female Red-tailed Black Cockatoo which is also in the same museum.

I believe this reference to the Tasmanian rosella is an interesting, albeit different, way of introducing the history of the rosellas to *Watchbird* readers. One or more species or subspecies of this fascinating and colorful group of birds are to be found in each state of mainland Australia, as well as the island state of Tasmania.

In recent years, thousands of overseas visitors, including many Americans, have traveled to Australia for a holiday "Down Under" where they have marvelled at the beauty of the rosellas—one of the natural wonders of the Australian countryside. These parakeets which are, with the odd exception, gaudily colored birds are commonly known as broadtail parrots and collectively as rosellas. The scientific name for the genus, *Platycercus,* denotes this fact, i.e. *Platys* is Greek for flat and *cercos* is Greek for tail.

The Distinctive Markings of the Rosellas

Each Australian rosella has two obvious plumage characteristics: 1) well-defined cheek patches (white or yellow); and 2) the scalloped pattern on their back whereby each feather is usually edged with the general body color of the bird (i.e. red, yellow or green). The mottled effect on the back of each species or subspecies is a feature unique to the rosellas which are all medium-sized birds that feature long gradated tails.

Popularity as a Captive Bird

The rosellas have always been a popular aviary bird in Australia and, in days gone by when trapping of native birds was allowed (taking native Australian birds from the wild is now banned), it was quite common for people to take young parrots from the nest and handrear them as pets. In the case of the rosellas they would usually obtain the species that was common to their area.

All the rosellas are popular as aviary birds in Australia. I believe there are four reasons for this popularity:

1. their beautiful colors;
2. their hardy nature and longevity;
3. their suitability to captivity;
4. their basic dietary needs are easily met.

Early History—1930s

We know that the various members of the rosella family have been kept and bred in Australian aviculture for a long, long, time. It is difficult to trace the early history of captive breedings

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wing bar on the male.

This male dark-eyed yellow Plumheaded Parakeet was paired with a normal female and there were three juveniles on the perch with them. The dark-eyed yellow Plumhead is a recessive mutation so all of the three offspring on the perch were split to the mutation color.

The sex-linked lutino Plumhead is very similar in appearance to the dark-eyed yellow. I saw the bird that Mr. Fitzsimmons had brought into the country. If I were to acquire one of these beautiful mutations, I would work on getting the dark-eyed yellow form as it is very much stronger. I keep hearing over the years about the further reproduction by Mr. Postema on the dark-eyed yellow Plumhead and I keep hearing the rumor that it may be coming into the U.S.

Or maybe it is in the country. Could that be true? I'm sure Roger Bringas, of North Hollywood, California would know as he has been the person to bring in so many of the beautiful mutations from Europe.

No matter what, I will always remember the first time I observed this new mutation and stood there in awe for several minutes. I even had to go back for a second look. This was a mutations that was good on the eyes. I do hope to see this bird someday in the aviaries of an American aviculturist. If *you* see one, please let me know. I will be waiting by the telephone.