



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

wing bar on the male.

This male dark-eyed yellow Plum-headed 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. ➔

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

however, partly because the first avicultural society in Australia was not formed until 1928—150 years after the European settlement of Australia.

The oldest society, the Avicultural Society of South Australia (ASSA) was founded in Adelaide, South Australia, in 1928. This progressive society is still as active as ever. Although the ASSA had a "South Australian Section" in *Australian Aviculture*, the monthly journal of the Avicultural Society of Australia, for almost nine years (April 1949 - December 1957) it was not until February 1958, 30 years later after its formation, that the Avicultural Society of South Australia began publishing its own magazine—*Bird Keeping in Australia*.

I've included this "club" information to assist readers of *Watchbird* to more easily understand why, prior to 1928, there was no publication available for the recording the avicultural pursuits of the day, let alone the breeding records of the Australian rosellas.

Australia suffered from the same problem experienced in other countries—bird keeping magazines were occasionally launched, but eventually ceased publication. For example, a short-lived but informative weekly magazine, *Australian Cage Birds Weekly*, was published for several months (maybe longer?) in 1936-1937. In format this publication was based on the English weekly *Cage & Aviary Birds* newspaper. Perhaps the impact of World War II caused its early demise.

Likewise, the Victorian Avicultural Society existed in 1932. This was Melbourne-based but, for some unknown reason disappeared without leaving any record of its aims and achievements. A similar thing occurred in Western Australia in the 1930s when the "original" (?) Perth-based Avicultural Society of Western Australia came and went without leaving any information behind about its existence or achievements. The present day Avicultural Society of Western Australia, which was founded in Perth in 1956, is still extremely active.

Although of necessity this commentary about societies and publications is brief it should make it clear to the American reader just how difficult it is

for anyone to contribute an article on the history of the rosellas in Australian aviculture. Even though I have been a member of the Melbourne-based Avicultural Society of Australia (founded in October 1940) for 44 years, a member of the committee (board of management) for 28 years, and editor of its monthly journal for the past 22 years (as at December 1997), it is still difficult—despite my ongoing interest in the Australian rosellas, both in the wild and in captivity—to write a historically definitive article on the subject.

Because of the difficulty in historical accuracy I have decided to discuss the first breeding of each species in the following way:

- Give the "first official breeding for South Australia" as the earliest known date of the particular species being "officially" bred in Australia.
- Placing in brackets the date of the first known captive breeding in the United Kingdom.

This will give a particular type of historical perspective to the subject and, at the same time, will acknowledge that following colonization of Australia by England in 1788 many species of Australian birds were trapped and sent to England by boat for the cage bird trade in the U.K. The early records for breeding Australian birds in Britain, despite the long three months sea voyage, is an historical acknowledgement that such birds were adaptable to captive breeding—especially in aviaries. It also recognizes that despite being 12,000 miles apart, Australia and England are intrinsically

linked with each other, culturally and aviculturally.

Fauna Regulations

Australia is similar to the United States of America in that the country is divided into states (two are known as territories) which are governed by a State/Territory Government, as well as having a federal government e.g. Commonwealth Government of Australia. All native fauna and flora "belongs" to the nation and is fully protected. For example, it is illegal to remove any native Australian bird from the wild. This heritage is fully policed. Each state or territory has its own fauna regulations under which citizens can keep native Australian animals, birds, and reptiles in captivity. Common birds such as the Budgerigar, Cockatiel, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo and Rose-breasted Cockatoo (Galah) can be kept without the requirement of a wildlife license.

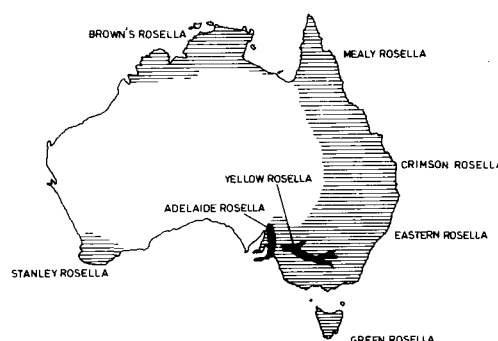
Note: There are plentiful stocks of aviary-bred native Australian birds always available from private aviculturists and bird dealers to meet the demands of the hobby. Sometimes it is hard to sell surplus parrots. One aviculturist I know has 30 Golden-shouldered Parrots that he is unable to sell, because there is no demand for them, even at \$120 Australian a pair.

Records of the species which are kept by an individual and held under license (e.g. in my state, the State of Victoria, all the rosellas and other popular species such as the Splendid Parakeet and the Princess of Wales Parakeet) must be kept in a Protected Wildlife Record Book.

Let me illustrate: Twice a year in Victoria the license holder must send in a return on a form provided by the fauna department (Department of Natural Resources & Environment) which shows numbers held of each species, plus the acquisitions, breedings, sales and deaths that have taken place over the previous six months. This form is sent to the department within 14 days of the end of March and September each year.

The Private Wildlife License, which is issued under the Wildlife Act 1975, must be renewed each year on the due date and by payment of the set fee.

Distribution of Rosellas in Australia



There are three license schedules: Category 1 covers most of the "common" aviary birds kept in Australian aviaries; Category 2 includes species such as the Golden-shouldered Parrot; and Category 3 which embraces the rarer species, e.g. Gang Gang Cockatoo and Swift Parrot. The annual license fee in Victoria in Australian currency is (approximately):

- Category 1 - \$30
- Category 2 - \$75
- Category 3 - \$120

In the State of Victoria the licensee's birds can be inspected by departmental officers at any time—even at the weekend.

Although the foregoing may seem foreboding, the system of having a license for the "privilege" of being allowed to keep native birds in private aviaries is really quite straightforward, especially if you obey the law. At least the Aussie aviculturist is allowed to keep native birds.

Suitable Type of Aviary

As in other countries, the aviary design and size varies but to generalize the average sized aviary used in Australia for housing a breeding pair of rosellas would vary from 12-18 feet in length, 3-4 in width and 6-8 feet in height. This size aviary is considered ideal for the Eastern, Pennant's, Adelaide, Yellow, Mealy, Brown's and Green Rosellas.

As the Stanley Rosella is a much smaller bird smaller aviaries are considered adequate, viz., 6-8 long, 2-3 feet wide and 6-7 feet high.

The Australian contributors to this rosella series in The A.F.A. *Watchbird* Journal will each mention the type of aviary and style of nestbox they consider suitable for the species they are writing about. In the case of aviaries this will also include walkways, safety doors, shelter sections and open, covered, or partly covered roofs.

Historically, Australian aviculturists who live in the temperate areas of the continent housed and bred the rosellas (and other medium sized parrots) in aviaries that were relatively open to the elements, i.e., shallow shelter with long flight that featured a wire mesh roof. In more recent times many such parrot breeders have switched to cov-

ering or partly covering the roof for two or three reasons. Again, I'll leave this aspect of management for the contributors on the various species to comment upon.

The Eight Rosella Species

There are eight recognized species of rosellas. This differs slightly according to different authors but for the purpose of this article we will discuss the following eight species: Eastern, Pennant's, Adelaide, Yellow, Mealy, Brown's, Green and Stanley. In addition, each of these species will be the subject of an article, one at a time, by an Australian aviculturist in future issues of *Watchbird*.

Eastern Rosella

Without doubt the Eastern Rosella, *Platycercus eximius*, is a gaudily colored parrot probably the gaudiest of the *Platycercus* genus. The nominate species and the race *P. e. ceciliae* have between them a large distribution on the mainland ranging from southeastern Queensland through central-eastern New South Wales, most (but not all) of Victoria, through to southeastern South Australia. The race *P. e. ceciliae*, the "true" Golden-mantled Rosella, which is found in the northern part of the Eastern Rosella's range is a highly prized rosella in Australian aviculture because of its opaline markings whereby the "... mantle, scapulars, back and wings are margined with rich yellow and the rump and upper tail-coverts are greenish-blue" (Hutchins & Lovell). This color variation gives the Golden-mantled race an attractive appearance. The race found in the island state of Tasmania is the subspecies *P. e. diemenensis*. It is the "most brilliant of the Eastern Rosellas" (Hutchins & Lovell) and its cheek patches, which are larger than those of the mainland birds, are snow white in color.

It is sad to record that the Eastern Rosella is seldom kept by Australian aviculturists because it is such a common and easily observed species in the wild. The suggested price for an adult pair of aviary-bred Eastern Rosellas is only \$US 50 (Avicultural Society of Australia "Guide to Bird Prices - 1997-1998").

It could be postulated that the nominate race of the Eastern Rosella, *P. e. eximius*, was first bred in captivity in Australia a few years after European settlement, maybe as early as 1800, as the species was (and still is) abundant in the wild. Because of the ease with which this beautiful bird could be trapped legally in days gone by there is no way of knowing when it was first captive bred in Australia.

The Golden-mantled Eastern Rosella, *Platycercus eximius ceciliae*, was first officially bred in South Australia by Alan H. Lendon in 1948. [In the United Kingdom the nominate race, *P. eximius eximius*, was first bred by C. P. Arthur in 1889. The Golden-mantled Eastern Rosella, *Platycercus eximius ceciliae* was first bred by the Duke of Bedford in 1934].

Pennant's Rosella

This strikingly beautiful rosella, *Platycercus elegans*, whose correct common name is Crimson Rosella, has long been a favorite both in settled areas (e.g. suburbia) as well as the forests of the countryside. Named in 1792 after T. Pennant, a British zoologist and author, this popular rosella is widely known in New Zealand, America, England and Europe by the alternate name of Pennant's Rosella. In 1789, only a year after Australia was settled, Arthur Phillip, the Governor of Port Jackson (now the city of Sydney), wrote that the Pennant's Rosella was "not unfrequent about Port Jackson."

In my opinion it is the most striking and beautiful of the rosellas, yet it has never been widely kept as an aviary bird in Australia due, no doubt, to it being such a common species in the wild. A measure of the abundance of Pennant's Rosella in the wild in certain country areas can, to some degree, be summarized by the experience of our eldest son who lives in a small isolated township in the Otway Range (28 miles from the country city we live in). He has noticed that during the spring-time breeding season these birds are so abundant and so unafraid when feeding on the edge of the road that unless he is extremely careful, he could run over them as he drives his car along the roadway.

It is a common species where I live

in southwestern Victoria and is a regular visitor to our garden throughout the year where it likes to alight and feed in the uppermost branches of one of the native eucalyptus trees. One of the joys of my life is to call to Pennant's Rosellas when they are perched in a tree and have them "return" their musical call - kwik-kweek-kwik.

The nominate race of the several subspecies of Pennant's Rosella, *Platycercus elegans elegans*, was first officially bred in South Australia by E. B. Cox in 1936. [The same race, *P. e. elegans*, was first bred (officially) in the United Kingdom by H. Jary in 1871.]

Adelaide Rosella

Although Joseph Forshaw, the noted Australian ornithologist, believes the Adelaide Rosella, *Platycercus elegans adalaidae*, is a separate species, other experienced field observers (e.g. Hutchins & Lovell) consider it to be a subspecies of the Crimson Rosella. Either way, it is a most attractive rosella despite being duller than the well-known and ever-popular Pennant's Rosella. Its feeding in the wild and breeding in its natural habitat are similar to Pennant's.

It has been recorded (Forshaw) that in the areas of South Australia where it is found naturally that "... there is some local demand for Adelaide Rosellas, especially hand-reared birds, which are kept as pets ..." From my observations of parrot collections around Australia this species is not popular as an aviary bird compared to other rosellas (e.g. Mealy Rosella).

The Adelaide Rosella inhabits areas around the city of Adelaide, the capital city of South Australia. One of life's pleasures (for me) is to visit Adelaide, a delightful compact garden city, with an abundance of parklands adjacent to the city center. An even greater pleasure is to watch pairs of Adelaide Rosellas fly through suburban parklands!

There is no record for the first official captive breeding of the Adelaide Rosella in South Australia but the noted Adelaide ornithologist and aviculturist, Alan H. Lendon, bred this species for the first time in 1951 after five unsuccessful years of trying to breed this locally common rosella.

Yellow Rosella

This beautiful rosella, *Platycercus elegans flaveolus*, is a true "bird of the river," its natural distribution being centered on the Murray-Murrumbidgee Rivers system of inland Australia. The first time I saw the Yellow Rosella in the wild was when I was traveling adjacent to the Murray River. To see a pair or small flock of this striking yellow parrot fly through the trees alongside or above the waterway is a sight not to be forgotten.

In Australia the Yellow Rosella is not as popular in captivity as the closely related Pennant's Rosella. Some authorities, including Hutchins and Lovell, consider the Yellow Rosella to be a subspecies of Pennant's Rosella.

My most memorable sight of this species in the wild was in the Hattah-Kulkyne National Park, in the far northwest of Victoria where I observed 15 Yellow Rosellas bathing at the edge of Lake Mournpall. It was "a sight not to be forgotten." This species is closely associated with the River Red Gum, *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, a majestic and beautiful tree that lines the edge of such waterways.

The Yellow Rosella was first officially bred in captivity in South Australia by H. J. Packer in 1946. [The Yellow Rosella was first bred in the United Kingdom by W. Fasey in 1904.]

Mealy Rosella

As is the case with most blue-colored parrots, the Mealy Rosella, *Platycercus elegans flaveolus*, is a striking bird which features yellow, white, violet-blue, red and black. Its coloring is unique among the Australian parrots. The nominate subspecies, the Blue-cheeked Rosella, *P. a. adscitus*, is restricted to northeastern Queensland whereas the Mealy Rosella (Paleheaded Rosella) is distributed from northern Queensland south to northern New South Wales, where it avoids the highlands and frequents more open areas including woodlands, grasslands, and trees bordering rivers.

I will never forget my first sighting in the wild of this magnificent rosella which occurred in 1983 on the lawn outside the Bardonia Convention Centre during the national avicultural convention held in Brisbane, Queensland.

(Dale Thompson was a guest speaker at this convention). Because they are such a common sight in this part of Australia the Queenslanders didn't bother looking at them.

When feeding on the ground in the wild this species is quiet. Because of this, together with the mottled back coloration, they are often not noticed or disturbed by humans.

The Mealy Rosella, *Platycercus adscitus palliceus*, was first officially bred in captivity in South Australia by U. F. Coneen in 1937. The Blue-cheeked race, *Platycercus adscitus adscitus*, was not officially bred in captivity in South Australia until 1966 when Alan H. Lendon was successful. [The Mealy Rosella, *P. a. palliceus* was first bred in the United Kingdom by C. P. Arthur in 1889.]

Brown's Rosella

This strongly marked rosella, *Platycercus venustus*, whose correct common name is Northern Rosella is widely known in America, the United Kingdom and Europe by its alternative name—Brown's Rosella. It inhabits the "Top End" of Australia, frequenting northwestern and northern Australia from the Kimberley division of Western Australia east to the Northern Territory-Queensland border. It is also found on some of the larger (northern) offshore islands.

Because Brown's Rosella is a tropical bird, its habits and general demeanor are quite different from the other rosella species. Although popular in Australian aviculture, it is not widely kept and, due to the difficulty in arranging compatible pairs, does not breed as easily as the other rosellas. In addition, it is intolerant of damp, cold conditions which means that only experienced aviculturists should keep them. Because it consumes a wide range of insect life in the wild (including beetles and grubs) it is prone to tapeworm infestation—a factor that should be monitored at all times with captive birds.

Brown's Rosella was first bred officially in captivity in South Australia by Alan H. Lendon in 1939. [The first known breeding of Brown's Rosella in the United Kingdom was by the Duke of Bedford in 1928.]

Green Rosella

The Tasmanian or Green Rosella, *Platycercus caledonicus*, is the most common parrot resident in the island state of Tasmania. The other rosella resident in Tasmania, which is south of mainland Australia, is the *P. e. diemenensis* race of the Eastern Rosella, a subspecies confined to eastern Tasmania, which features large snow-white cheek patches.

The Green Rosella, which occurs only in Tasmania and some of the off-shore islands, frequents "... all habitats except moorlands and farmlands devoid of tracts of timber" (Forshaw). The terrain they frequent ranges from high mountains (by Australian standards, e.g., up to approximately 4,600 feet) which are mostly covered with dense forests to open grazing and cereal growing country through to other habitats including shrub covered areas.

My first sighting of this large parakeet in the wild was of small flocks of adult birds flying from treetop to treetop, at treetop height, in the suburbs of Hobart, the island's compact and beautiful capital city. I quickly became aware of how well they blended in with the foliage of the trees due to their somber coloration—particularly the green and black scalloped wings.

In Australian aviculture it is the least popular of all the rosellas because of its dull coloration compared to the other rosellas. Due to the colder climate of its natural breeding habitat (Tasmania's weather comes straight up from the Antarctic and can be extremely cold) young Green Rosellas cannot tolerate the excessive hot weather which frequently prevails in the other areas of Australia where it is kept in captivity.

The first official breeding of the Green Rosella in captivity in South Australia was by R. E. Lewitzka in 1938. [The Duke of Bedford, 1934, was the first person to officially breed the Green Rosella in the United Kingdom.]

Stanley Rosella

The delightful Western Rosella, *Platycercus icterotis icterotis*, is well-known by its alternative common name, Stanley Rosella, in America and

other overseas countries. It is the smallest member of the *Platycercus* genus and its fine, slim build, together with the distinct differences between the sexes, makes it a particularly interesting species.

It is the only rosella found in south-western Western Australia where it inhabits "... the wettest, and lushest, area of south Western Australia" (Hutchins & Lovell). It also lacks cheek-patches when immature.

The southwestern inland form, known in Australia as the Red-backed Western Rosella, *Platycercus icterotis xanthogenys*, is a strikingly colored subspecies of the Stanley Rosella. True-to-color specimens are highly prized in Australian aviculture—and rightly so. Cognizance of this is the difference in the suggested price, between members of the Avicultural Society of Australia, when the nominate race *P. i. icterotis* is priced at \$US82 per pair, whereas the Red-backed race *P. i. xanthogenys* is listed at \$US375 a pair ("Guide to Bird Prices - 1997/1998").

The Stanley Rosella, *Platycercus icterotis icterotis*, was first officially bred in captivity in South Australia by H. J. Packer in 1936. [The first known breeding of the Stanley Rosella, *P. i. icterotis*, in the United Kingdom was achieved by Messrs. Astley, Fasey, and Perkins in 1908.]

Mutations

As is to be expected, several mutations have evolved over the years and this phase of rosella-culture has many followers. Suffice to say that some mutants are exceedingly striking, e.g. the blue mutation of Pennant's Rosella; some are softer and attractive, e.g. cinnamon mutation of the Eastern Rosella; whilst others are of questionable value. As in the production of other aviary birds (e.g. the Gouldian Finch *Erythrura gouldiae*) it is essential to continue to breed "true to color" birds so that ample stocks of the normally-colored bird are available, both now and for future generations of aviculturists, because there are no signs that the Commonwealth Government of Australia is ever likely to allow legal trapping of Australian rosellas from the wild.

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Recommended Reading

1. *Australian Parakeets and Their Mutations* by Herman Kremer. Published by Uitgeverij Ornis, Noordbergum, The Netherlands
2. *Australian Parrakeets: Their maintenance and breeding in Europe* by Dr. H. D. Groen. Published by Dr. H. D. Groen, Haren (Gr.), The Netherlands.
3. *Australian Parrots* by Joseph M. Forshaw. Published by Lansdowne Editions, Melbourne, Australia.
4. *Australian Parrots: A Field and Aviary Study* by B. R. Hutchins and R. H. Lovell. Published by the Avicultural Society of Australia, Melbourne, Australia.
5. *A Guide to Rosellas* by Kevin Wilson, Published by Australian Birdkeeper, Tweeds Heads South, Australia.
6. *Parrots: Their Care and Breeding* by Rosemary Low. Published by Blandford Press, Poole, England.
7. *The Rosellas* by Jim Hayward. Published by Aviculturist Publications, Carterton, England.

About the Author

Graeme Hyde began in the hobby 52 years ago. He has been secretary of the Avicultural Society of Australia for 15 years and editor of *Australian Aviculture*, the society's monthly journal for 22 years. He was on the staff of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (RAOU), Melbourne, for five years and edited the quarterly RAOU Newsletter (now Wingspan). He was the only person in the world editing an avicultural journal and an ornithological magazine at the same time.

His interest in studying native Australian birds in the wild has evolved over the years and was stimulated by working with the RAOU. He was the Co-ordinating Editor of the best selling book, *Australian Parrots: A Field and Aviary Study*, by B. R. Hutchins and R. H. Lovell. In 1994 he was the recipient of an Avicultural Federation of Australia, AFA Award for "Exceptional Services to Aviculture." 