

Scarlet-chested Parrot

Neophema splendida (Gould)

Text by Joseph M. Forshaw

Photo by Cyril Laubscher

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When recalling his original description and naming of the Scarlet-chested Parrot in 1840 from a single specimen procured in Western Australia, John Gould wrote in his *Handbook to the Birds of Australia*, "It is a source of much regret to me, that I am unable to give more than a very slight notice of this beautiful bird". For almost a century the species remained an enigmatic inhabitant of the arid interior of Australia, with very few sightings of only single birds, pairs or small parties being reported, and this gave rise to widespread concern that it was extremely rare, or even in danger of extinction. It was 'rediscovered' in August 1931, when several pairs were brought to Adelaide, South Australia. The striking beauty of these living birds caused much excitement, and made such a strong impact that a pair was purchased by the Governor and sent to Britain as a gift for King George V. The remaining birds were acquired by local aviculturists, and the first confirmed breeding in captivity was achieved in that year by Simon Harvey. From these beginnings, the Scarlet-chested Parrot progressed to become one of the most successful parrots in aviculture, eventually reaching its present-day domesticated status with numerous color mutations well established in aviaries throughout the world.

In Praise of Beauty

From the time of its discovery, writers have extolled the beauty of the Scarlet-chested Parrot, and I have no hesitation in adding my praise, for I consider the adult male to be one of the most beautiful of all parrots! Approximately 20cm in length and weighing some 40g, the adult male has the upperparts bright green, extending to sides of the neck and breast, while the head is brilliant blue, becoming markedly deeper on the cheeks and throat. The wing-coverts also are blue, becoming darker on outer webs of the flight feathers. Scarlet extends from the foreneck to middle of the breast, giving way to bright yellow on the lower underparts. The central tail-feathers are green, and the lateral tail-feathers are blue broadly tipped yellow. The bill is grey-black, the iris brownish-grey, and the legs greyish-brown. Females and juveniles have paler blue restricted to the forehead and face, and the breast is green.

That a species so familiar in captivity remains so lit-

tle-known in the wild is due to the remoteness of its range across the arid interior of southern Australia from southeastern Western Australia to extreme southwestern Queensland, westernmost New South Wales and far northwestern Victoria. Within this vast region, the parrots are associated closely with dry mallee or mixed Eucalyptus-Acacia scrublands, usually where there is a sparse groundcover of *Triodia* or *Plectrachne* grasses. A predilection for recently-burned country has been reported from parts of the range, and it is likely that an upsurge in new growth with abundant seeding grasses probably attracts the birds to these lands. Also, it has been noted that birds often are encountered many hundreds of kilometers from available surface water, prompting the claim that they satisfy their moisture requirements by drinking dew or chewing succulent plants. However, an apparent dependence on surface water is demonstrated by a report from South Australia, where three birds were disturbed repeatedly as they came to drink at a dam, eventually forcing one bird to settle on the water in the middle of the dam and drink from the surface.

Irregular Irruptions and Fluctuating Numbers

I am sure that the Scarlet-chested Parrot is not as rare as is generally claimed, and any assessment of its overall status is made difficult by the often largescale irruptions that occur at irregular intervals. The stronghold appears to be in the Great Victoria Desert from western South Australia west to southeastern Western Australia, where the species can be locally common, though I suspect that even here population levels fluctuate in response to prevailing climatic conditions. After the 1890s, little was heard of these parrots until 1939, when there was an irruption near Wynbring, in southwestern South Australia, and more than 500 birds were captured for the avicultural market. Since that time there have been further irruptions, most notably in eastern South Australia during the 1960s, and in mid May 1993 a count of 240 birds was made near Vokes Hill Junction, in the Great Victoria Desert, with the total population at this locality at that time being estimated at between 300 and 500 birds.

It is more than 30 years since my only good sight-

ing of wild Scarlet-chested Parrots occurred north of Poochera, South Australia, but I recall vividly the thrill of that encounter, and especially the beauty of an adult male sitting in full view atop a small saltbush. Some 20 years later, in far northwestern Victoria, I had a fleeting glimpse of a small flock that flew across the track in front of my vehicle, but searches in the surrounding mallee failed to relocate the birds. At times of local abundance, these parrots may be seen in quite large flocks, which apparently are aggregations of smaller independent groups, but isolated pairs generally are encountered during the breeding season and parties of up to 10 or 20 birds at other times. Despite the brilliant plumage coloration, they are very unobtrusive, spending much of the day on the ground or in low shrubs searching for seeds. They are extremely quiet in their actions and, unless flushed, may be easily overlooked. They are very tame, normally allowing a close approach, and if disturbed merely walk off through the undergrowth or flutter to a nearby tree. As they take flight, the yellow outer tail-feathers become conspicuous and their feeble, twittering call-notes are heard. In mid May 1993, in the Great Victoria Desert, it was noted that small groups, twos or threes, or even individuals showed strong curiosity and would fly up to perch near an observer; they could be watched at leisure and it was possible to obtain excellent close-up views simply by standing underneath a dead tree to await the arrival of curious birds to perch in the limbs overhead.

Foods and Nesting Behavior

Scarlet-chested Parrots feed on seeds of grasses and herbaceous plants procured mainly on or near the ground, and on fruits, buds, blossoms and vegetable matter. They are particularly fond of *Triodia* seeds, and to take seeds from standing grasses a parrot will hold down each stem by placing a foot on it.

The breeding season normally is from August

through to December, though nesting may take place at other times in response to rainfall. Available evidence suggests that ovary development in females is rapid, and breeding pairs disperse from flocks only very shortly before going to nest. This is in keeping with the capacity of a desert-adapted species to breed quickly in response to favorable conditions, and contrasts with the behavior of many other parrots which may spend some weeks preparing the nesting hollow prior to laying of the first egg. The nest is in a hollow limb or hole in a tree, usually in a broken limb of a dead tree or in a dead spout in a living eucalypt, and nests have been found as

Photo by Cyril Laubscher



The male Scarlet-chested Parrot is one of the most beautiful of all parrots. The mutations don't rival the wild version

near as 4m to each other in the same tree. A normal clutch comprises three to five, rarely six eggs, and these are laid on a bed of decayed wood dust at the bottom of the hollow. In most nests there are a few green leaves, presumably taken there by the female tucked under her rump feathers. The incubating female sits very tightly, and is fed by the male. At nests under observation in the Great Victoria Desert, males were seen to come to feed the sitting females in the morning and evening. At one nest, the male came at 1700 hours, and as soon as he alighted in the nesting tree the female emerged from the

hollow, flew with the male to a nearby dead branch where he fed her, and then some ten minutes later she returned to the nest while the male flew off in a different direction. Parental care of the nestlings presumably is similar to that of captive birds and, after fledging, young birds remain for some time with the parents in family groups.

Ideal Aviary Birds

In *Parrots: Their Care and Breeding* (1980), Rosemary Low writes of the Scarlet-chested Parrot: "It has every conceivable virtue, being tame and confiding, exceptionally beautiful, the possessor of a quiet, almost finch-like voice and, of course, being very ready to breed in aviaries." I concur wholeheartedly with this

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* Position open: contact regional vice president if interested.

** indicates 2 year term has been fulfilled. If no interested party comes forward and indicates a desire to serve, incumbent remains in position.

For information about contacting any of these member clubs, please call that club's state coordinator.

statement for it summarizes features which make this species extremely popular with aviculturists worldwide. At times I am asked to recommend species that would be suitable for bird-keepers wishing to progress from breeding canaries, Budgerigars *Melopsittacus undulatus* or Zebra Finches *Taeniopygia guttata*, and I nominate the Scarlet-chested Parrot as ideal for bird-keepers planning to change from domesticated birds.

These charming parrots breed freely in small aviaries or large cages, and can be housed in a mixed collection with finches, doves or softbills, but should not be kept with other small parrots, for males can become aggressive when breeding. Feeding requirements are simple, Though I have found that supplementing the basic seed mix with greenfood and seeding grasses is essential for successful breeding. Pairs often rear two or more broods in a season so should be provided with two or more nestboxes or hollow logs, and young birds should be removed from the aviary as soon as they are independent.

Scarlet-chested Parrots nearly always have been included in my collection, but I keep only pure normal birds and must confess to being totally unenthusiastic about the numerous color mutations that have been developed. In my opinion, all have lost the exceptional beauty of normally-plumaged birds, and I do fear that emphasis on the breeding of mutations poses a risk to the longterm viability of pure strains of normal birds in aviaries.

