

NEOPHEMA PARAKEETS:

AVIARY FAVORITES FROM AUSTRALIA

By Joseph M Forshaw
Canberra, Australia



Photo © Cyril Laubscher
Male Turquoise Parrot

Because of their popularity as aviary birds, the *Neophema* parakeets probably are the most familiar of smaller Australian parrots. Their quiet, unobtrusive habits make them ideal aviary birds and contrast markedly with the bold, noisy behaviour of their larger relatives – the *Platycercus* rosellas. Together with the rosellas, they are members of the platycercine or ‘broad-tailed’ group of parrots, which take their name from the broad, long, graduated tail that is present in most species. Another prominent feature is the presence in females and immatures of a pale ‘underwing-stripe’ comprising a series of white or yellow-white spots on undersides of the flight feathers, and this can be a useful guide in sex determination.

Approximately 20cm in length, *Neophema* species are ground-frequenting, seed-eating parrots widely distributed through central and southern Australia, including Tasmania and offshore islands. Plumage coloration is predominantly green and yellow, with yellow being particularly conspicuous on the undersides and outer webs of the tail-feathers. Within the genus there are two species groupings, which are differentiated by patterns of plumage coloration and sexual dimorphism. These two groupings are treated as subgenera, and sometimes have been separated generically, though the differences certainly do not warrant recognition at that level. A prominent blue frontal band, an absence of red in the plumage, and very slight sexual dimorphism are distinguishing features of the four species belonging to the subgenus *Neonanodes*, while two species in the subgenus *Neophema* show strong sexual dimorphism, with red in the plumage of adult males, and have extensive blue facial markings. The distinctively colored Bourke’s Parakeet *Neopsephotus bourkii* no longer is included with the neophemas.

CONFUSING TWO SIMILAR SPECIES

Identified by extensive dark blue wing markings, a pale green throat to upper breast, and a dark blue frontal band not extending above or behind the eyes, the Blue-winged Parakeet *Neophema chrysostoma* is widespread throughout much of southeastern Australia, though breeding is restricted to southern regions, and the Tasmanian population is migratory, with most birds crossing the 200km wide Bass Strait to overwinter on the mainland. It is the least specialized of the neophemas, occurring in a wide variety of habitats, though favouring forest clearings, savanna woodland, sparsely timbered grasslands, and cultivation, including orchards and farmlands. It is quite common, especially in Tasmania, and generally is seen in pairs or small flocks, though large

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flocks may be encountered in winter, and at times it associates with other neophemas in mixed foraging flocks. Near Robe, in southeastern South Australia, I have seen it with Elegant Parrots *N. elegans* and Orange-bellied Parrots *N. chrysogaster* in a single flock feeding on seeds of sea-rocket *Cakile maritima*. In the morning and late afternoon, pairs or flocks spend much time on the ground searching for seeds, and while feeding among grasses or in low bushes their plumage blends well with the vegetation so that they may be overlooked until they take flight. They are tame, and normally will allow a close approach, but if disturbed the entire flock will rise simultaneously and fly to a nearby tree or will rise high into the air. During the middle of the day, they shelter quietly in trees or shrubs, often sitting on leafless uppermost branches of a tall eucalypt, all turned so that their heads face into the prevailing wind. Nesting takes place late in the year, with egg-laying normally commencing in late October, and chicks may fledge as late as mid February. Nests are in hollows high up in tall eucalypts or near to the ground in decaying stumps.

The Elegant Parakeet *Neophema elegans* can be distinguished from the Blue-winged Parakeet by

the less extensive blue wing markings, by the paler blue upper frontal band extending above and behind the eye, and by a generally brighter, more yellowish plumage. These two similar species frequently are confused, and I have found misidentified specimens in museum collections. Whenever I have seen Elegant Parrots in the wild I always have noted their brighter, more yellowish appearance, as opposed to the generally duller appearance of Blue-winged Parrots, and this difference is most obvious when both species are together in a mixed flock. The differences are clearly described and illustrated in my recently published *Parrots of the World: An Identification Guide* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

Elegant Parrots are widely distributed in southeastern and southwestern mainland Australia, where they inhabit most habitats in open or lightly timbered country. During the breeding season, from August to December, they usually are encountered in pairs or family groups, but at other times they congregate in flocks of 20 to 100 or more birds. Like Blue-winged Parrots, they spend much time on the ground foraging for seeds, and their plumage blends extremely well with the groundcover, especially during

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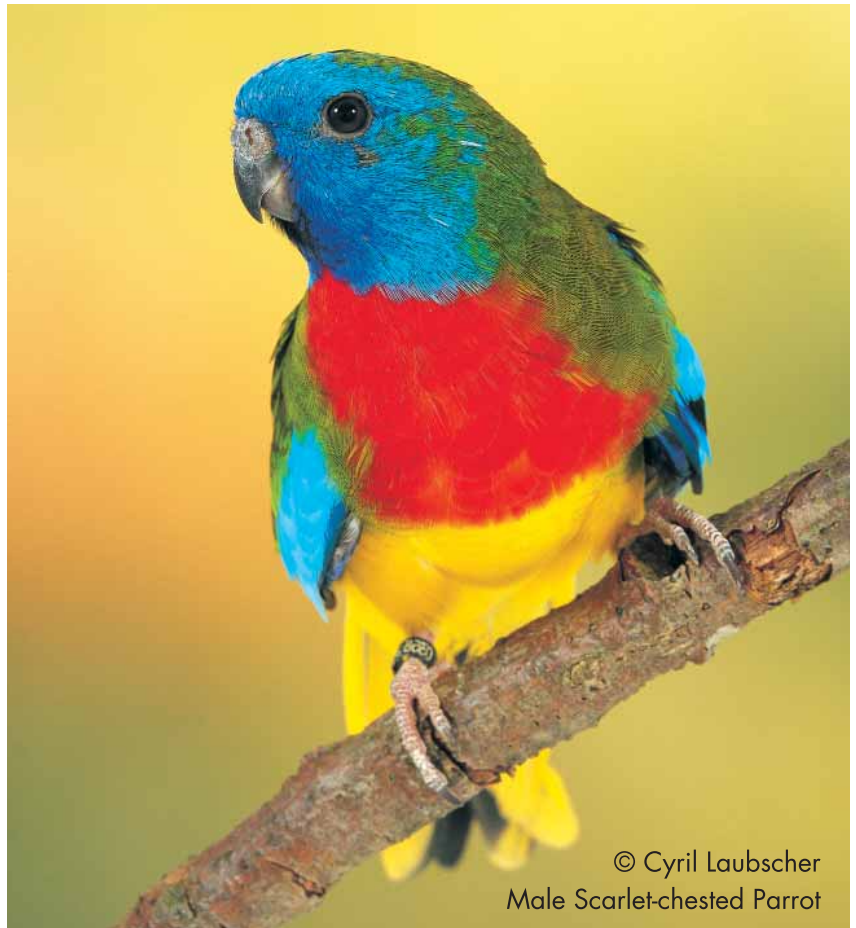
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summer when yellow and brownish hues prevail in the predominantly dry grasses. In September 2001, near Mount Barker, southwestern Western Australia, I observed a small party in the company of Red-capped Parrots *Purpureicephalus spurius* and Twenty-eight Parrots *Barnardius zonarius* feeding amidst seeding grasses between rows of fruit trees in an orchard, and the Elegant Parrots were far less conspicuous than the other species.

I have found Elegant Parakeets to be rather shy, and more difficult to approach than are Blue-winged Parakeets. When disturbed, they may sit motionless and then at the last moment fly to a nearby tree or alight on the ground behind a shrub or tussock. If pursued again or if disturbed out on an open plain away from shelter, they will rise high into the air and soon disappear from sight. When coming to drink, they often fly in high overhead and then plummet straight down to alight at the water's edge. Just on nightfall, pairs or small parties come to communal roosts in low, densely-foliaged trees, and departure from these nighttime roosts is at sunrise. Nesting behaviour is similar to that of other species, and the clutch of four or five eggs is laid at the bottom of a hollow, usually high up in a living or dead tree.

PARAKEETS AT THE SEASHORE

It is incongruous to see parrots at the seashore or on bleak rocky islets, sometimes sitting on rocks alongside gulls or cormorants, but that is where Rock Parakeets *Neophema petrophila* are found along the coastline of southern and southwestern Australia. In habitat preferences, they are the most specialised of the neophemas and seldom are encountered more than a few hundred meters from the sea. They are the duller of the neophemas, but when seen in the wild can be deceptively bright, due mainly to the yellow underparts. At close quarters



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Male Scarlet-chested Parrot



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An Orange-bellied Parrot. Photo by Bob McPherson

they can be recognised by pale blue on the face and the meagre blue wing markings. They are stocky, plump birds, lacking the slim, graceful appearance of both the Blue-winged and Elegant Parakeets. During the breeding season, from August to December, many pairs may congregate to nest on favourite islands, regularly making daily flights of up to 20km over the open sea to mainland feeding sites, but at other times pairs or small parties usually are seen. They are inconspicuous while foraging for seeds among low bushes or long grass and may be overlooked until flushed into the air. When feeding, they are tame, and will allow a close approach. While a strong, blustery wind is blowing, these parakeets are reluctant to leave the shelter of rocks or low bushes and when disturbed merely fly a short distance, always staying low to the ground. However, on a still day, they will rise up and circle high overhead, calling intermittently, then alight on the tops of distant rocks or bushes. On Figure of Eight Island, in the Recherche Archipelago, southwestern Western Australia, I found large numbers of Rock Parakeets sheltering under intertidal

rocks to escape the hot summer sun and, when I stepped on one of these rocks, parrots darted out from underneath and took flight in all directions. Nests are in crevices in limestone rocks, under rocky overhangs, or in burrows excavated by seabirds.

With a population estimated at less than 200 birds, the Orange-bellied Parakeet *Neophema chrysogaster* is critically endangered, and is one of the rarest of Australian birds. An intense recovery effort involving government wildlife agencies, professional and amateur ornithologists, and some private aviculturists, who participate in the captive breeding program, has succeeded in maintaining, but not increasing numbers. Although occurring almost exclusively in coastal and subcoastal areas, this species is less restricted to littoral habitats than are Rock Parrots. It is the only species in the subgenus *Neonanodes* with bright grass-green upperparts, and this is the key identifying feature rather than the orange abdominal patch, for other neophemas, with which it sometimes associates, often show orange markings on the



© Cyril Laubscher
Elegant Parrot

abdomen. The Orange-bellied Parrot is migratory, with departure from the breeding range in southwestern Tasmania occurring in late February to early March, when all birds move north across Bass Strait to overwinter in coastal areas of extreme southeastern mainland Australia, and earliest arrivals of returning birds are in late September. At the wintering grounds or during migration flocks of up to 50 birds occasionally are encountered, but most sightings are of small groups of less than 10 individuals. Large groups tend to remain separated from other species, but single birds or pairs often feed in the company of other neophemas, European Goldfinches *Carduelis carduelis*, European Greenfinches *C. chloris* or House Sparrows *Passer domesticus*. At night the parrots roost communally in tall shrubs, departing at dawn to spend much of the day feeding on the ground or amidst low, scrubby vegetation, where they are well camouflaged. They are rather timid, seldom allowing a close approach, and when disturbed they rise high into the air, calling loudly, before dropping down again to move away just above ground or water level, soon

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disappearing from sight. The buzzing alarm call differs from the twittering calls of other neophemas, and is a valuable aid to identification. The nest normally is in a hollow limb or hole in a living or dead eucalypt, but pairs are utilising nestboxes set up as part of the recovery effort.

SHOWING EXCEPTIONAL BEAUTY

Males of the two species belonging to the subgenus *Neophema* are easily identified by striking differences in their brilliant plumage coloration, but the females are alike and can be confused. Distributed

discontinuously in southeastern mainland Australia, where it occurs in scattered areas of suitable habitat, the Turquoise Parakeet *Neophema pulchella* has the upperparts bright green and the underparts rich yellow, while brilliant blue is present on the face and wings, and males have a chestnut-red 'wing-bar'. In addition to lacking the red 'wing-bar', females are paler blue on the face and wings, and the lores (in front of the eyes) are white instead of blue as in males and in the female Scarlet-chested Parakeet. During the early 1900s, Turquoise Parakeets declined dramatically, and disappeared from many districts where they had been common. Changes to groundcover vegetation brought about by the grazing of livestock and introduced rabbits may have caused this decline, though disease also may have been responsible, but a recovery commenced in the 1940s and is continuing in some districts. Populations are concentrated along the lower to upper slopes of the Great Dividing Range, where they frequent woodlands, open forest, and timbered grasslands, with a strong preference for the margins of forest or woodland adjoining open grasslands or pastures. Flocks of up to 300 birds occupy communal nighttime

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A flock of Blue-winged Parrots. Photo by Bob McPherson

roosts in densely-foliaged bushes or low trees, and in late winter these roosts are abandoned as pairs disperse to breeding territories. During the breeding season, from August to December, all-male groups of up to six birds commonly are seen, but at other times most sightings are of pairs or family parties. They are quiet, unobtrusive birds, spending much of the day feeding on the ground, usually in the shade of a tree or within 30m of the forest edge if in open grassland. They are tame, merely walking away from an observer or fluttering a short distance to realight on the ground. When coming to drink, they approach cautiously, pausing in a nearby tree before dropping to the ground, running to the water's edge, and departing immediately. The nest is in a hollow in the trunk of a small tree or in a hole in a stump, fencepost or log lying on the ground, and pairs have accepted artificial nestboxes placed in trees or attached to fenceposts.

Rightly considered to be one of the most beautiful of Australian parrots, the male Scarlet-chested Parakeet *Neophema splendida* is instantly recognized by the brilliant red throat to breast, while the remaining underparts are bright yellow, and blue is present on the face and wings. The duller female has the entire underparts yellow, and is paler blue on the face and wings. It is ironic that a parrot so familiar in captivity remains little known in the wild because of its occurrence in the remote, arid interior of

southern Australia where it is seldom encountered. It is almost 40 years since my only good sighting of wild Scarlet-chested Parakeets north of Poochera in South Australia, but I recall vividly the thrill of that observation. 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, their outspread yellow tail-feathers confirming identification, but searches in the surrounding scrubland failed to relocate the birds. These parakeets are closely associated with dry scrublands where there is sparse groundcover, and they are attracted to areas recently burned or regenerating after fire. Although generally scarce, they can be locally common, and are subject to periodic irruptions, which apparently follow upsurges in breeding when conditions are favourable. During these irruptions, large flocks sometimes are recorded, but at other times they usually are seen in pairs or small parties. Being very quiet and unobtrusive, they can easily be overlooked despite the brilliant coloration of males. They are tame, merely walking off through the undergrowth or fluttering to a nearby tree if disturbed, and they are strongly curious, even being known to come to perch on a low branch just above an observer. Birds often are encountered far from water, and it is claimed that they obtain moisture by drinking dew or chewing succulent plants.

NEOPHEMAS IN MY AVIARIES

In *Parrots: Their Care and Breeding* (Blandford Press, 1980), Rosemary Low writes of the Scarlet-chested Parakeet: "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 statement for it summarises the features that make this species extremely popular with aviculturists worldwide. That the great numbers now held in captivity in many countries originated from a few hundred birds taken from the wild prior to 1939 is striking evidence of the capability of this desert species to adapt to captive conditions. It is one of my favourite birds, and pairs have nearly always been included in my collection. Indeed, at times I have kept all *Neophema* species, except the Orange-bellied Parakeet, and found them to be ideal aviary birds, for they will breed freely in small aviaries or large cages and can be housed in a mixed collection with finches, doves or softbills. However, they should not be kept with other small parrots because males may become aggressive when breeding, and it is for this reason that the best breeding results are obtained from pairs held in separate aviaries.

Aviaries for neophemas must provide full protection against cold winds and driving rain. The aviary that I found to be very suitable was 4.2m in length, 1.2m in width and 2.2m in height, with the rear 1.8m fully enclosed in a shelter which had the roof sloping up to a height of 2.5m at the front wall, and this same wall extended 40cm down below the wire roof of the adjoining flight so that the elevated front section of the shelter gave privacy to the birds at the highest point in the aviary. Nestboxes were positioned in this elevated section of the shelter.

Feeding requirements are simple but, as a safeguard against obesity, fattening seeds, such as plain canary and sunflower seeds and hulled oats should be provided sparingly or excluded altogether from the diet. The seed mix given to my birds comprised white (French) millet, red millet and panicum with small amounts of plain canary seed and hulled oats added during winter. Regular supplies of seasonally available greenfoods are essential, especially for Rock and Turquoise Parakeets, and it is not uncommon for parents to cease feeding nestlings if daily supplies of greenfoods are interrupted. I supplied an assortment of greenfoods, comprising mainly endives, spinach, milk thistles or dandelions, but chickweed and unripe seedheads of grasses always were taken in preference to other foods. Cuttlebone and fine grit

should be available at all times, and I found the birds to be very fond of nibbling charcoal from a clean piece of charred natural timber.

Pairs will accept hollow logs or nestboxes for nesting, but I provided only nestboxes because of the ease of inspections and cleaning, and these were approximately 18cm square and 25cm deep, with a mixture of peatmoss and clean sawdust packed into the bottom to a depth of about 80mm. Chicks of Rock Parrots are particularly susceptible to heat stress, so in warm climates it may be necessary to give this species more spacious nestboxes with ventilating holes in the walls. Clutches normally comprise 3 to 5 eggs, and incubation by the female lasts approximately 20 days. Chicks leave the nest about 30 days after hatching, and for the first few days are timid and unsteady in flight, so care should be taken to minimise the risk of collisions with the aviary wire or framework. Most pairs are double-brooded, with the female occasionally commencing to lay a second clutch in another nestbox before chicks from the first nest have fledged.

A SPECIALIST BREEDER IN FLORIDA

I am grateful to Anne-Marie Harter of Visual Wings Aviaries in central Florida for telling me of her experiences with *Neophema* parakeets. Indeed, I was surprised to hear from a specialist breeder of neophemas who resides in Florida, for it has been my experience that all *Neophema* species dislike humidity. In response to my inquiry, Anne-Marie acknowledged that her birds are affected by summertime humidity, which makes them particularly prone to *Candida* infections, and cleanliness is the most important preventive measure. Scarlet-chested Parakeets have been bred at Visual Wings Aviaries for so long that virtually all 15 breeding pairs are from Anne-Marie's own acclimatised bloodlines. Fewer pairs of 'normal' Turquoise Parakeets and only a few pairs of Elegant Parakeets are included in the collection, with the most difficulty being experienced in breeding Elegant Parakeets. Pairs are housed in separate aviaries, which are approximately 3 feet long, 3 feet high and 2 feet wide, and all aviaries are located in a closed barn with huge windows. Temperatures in summer can range up to 95_F and in winter can fall to 25_F, so heat is provided when temperatures drop below 45_F. The daily diet comprises a small parrot seed mix of mostly millet with safflower and sunflower, and this is supplemented with kale, spinach, dandelion, celery, apples, oranges, whole grain bread, carrots and dry eggfood. Carrots are helpful in combating *Candida*

outbreaks, so are fed liberally. Breeding commences in February, and two or three broods are reared before nestboxes are removed from the aviaries. The wooden nestboxes are 8 inches square and 6 inches deep, with a layer of fine pine shavings lining the bottom.

Attesting to the popularity of neophemas as aviary birds is the number of mutations that have become established in collections. As expected, it is the almost domesticated Turquoise and Scarlet-chested Parakeets that have produced the highest number of primary and secondary mutations. The few mutations of the Elegant Parakeet have proved difficult to classify, and none of the very few reported mutations of Blue-winged and Rock Parakeets are well established in collections. To meet demands of the marketplace, mutations are bred at Visual Wings Aviaries, where the presence of about 10 breeding pairs of yellow Turquoise Parakeets, but only a few pairs of 'normal' birds reflects a stronger popularity of the yellow mutation. Cinnamon, par-blue, seagreen and pied mutations of the Scarlet-chested Parakeet and yellow Elegant Parakeets also are available at Visual Wings Aviaries.

Although not personally interested in mutations, I acknowledge that breeding these birds has become a primary interest of many aviculturists. My concern about an emphasis being placed on mutations is a tendency to overlook the need to preserve viable captive stocks of 'normal' or 'wild-type' birds, and already it is becoming increasingly difficult in Australia to procure 'normal' Turquoise or Scarlet-chested Parakeets. Surely, we cannot afford the loss from our aviaries of pure stocks of these exquisite parrots. ■



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