

Kakarikis

By Henry Buckland, Brisbane, Australia
(as told to Danielle Jones)

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In the mid nineties my youngest daughter returned home after about three years flatting with mates. The goods and chattels that she returned with were about 25% of what she had left with; however, she did bring home a new possession which was to change her parents' lives greatly. She had with her two brightly coloured birds in a cage no bigger than a medium-sized nest box. I remember thinking at the time that they were some kind of new variety of canary. How wrong. The subsequent identification of said birds revealed they were Scarlet-chested Parrots; and they left the Bucklands with an "itch" which they are still scratching vigorously today.

My first foray into parrots was to gather together an aviary of "pretty birds" which appealed to me mostly from an aesthetic point of view. These included Scarlet-chested Parrots, Western Rosellas, a Hooded Parrot and, at one stage, a Short-billed Corella which was noisy and bitey and made me realise that I should concentrate on a breed that can be suitably accommodated on a 600m² suburban city block.

At around this time fellow PSOA Member, Paul Beard, introduced me to Kakarikis. They appealed greatly, as they are pretty green birds which, although quiet, are very active and comedic. Paul also mentioned that those I had acquired from him may produce cinnamons. I knew nothing about genetics, but read as many books as I could find, and eagerly peered into the nest box at every chance I got to see what the birds had produced. There was a huge cause for celebration when one of the chicks turned out to have a white toe nail—the sign that a pied mutation had been produced.

At this time few people had cinnamons; and it was really by pure fluke that I had bred one. This, however, got me hooked on producing mutation Kakarikis and I acquired a pied from Paul. He advised me not to go overboard with trying to breed mutation birds to the point where the quality declines, which can be seen by a reduction in the size of the birds and a general lack of hardiness. This meant out-crossing the piers to healthy new stock which I constantly kept an eye out for, particularly large hens; and I have managed to make some good contacts who alert me to any that become available. This selective breeding has kept the quality of the birds high, while the yellow feathering continues to increase.

A mutation Kakariki that I have come across is the Red-fronted clear-eyed, reverse pied, which is an entirely yellow bird other

Yellow-fronted Kakariki.
(Credit: Mark Moore)

than the red eye-stripe. I always ask people who have these birds what they have paired them with, and have never gotten a satisfactory answer, as no one seems to have had any luck with breeding from them. I am not convinced that they are mules; but I have not heard of them reproducing at all despite having a hefty price tag.

Hybridization is also something that people should be aware of, who are interested in obtaining Kakarikis. Although in the wild there is a distinct strain of Orange-fronted Kakarikis, some breeders try to replicate this by cross breeding Red-fronted with Yellow-fronted Kakarikis. Of course, this should be avoided at all costs. Personally, I prefer to concentrate on the Red-fronted Kakarikis because these are more prevalent and (I find) easier to breed, which increases the chances of producing mutations.

Behaviour

Kakarikis are inquisitive and lively birds which are comparable in their behaviour to lorries and caiques, but at the same time display a very placid nature. The cocks in particular will investigate all corners of their enclosure; and they will open doors or squeeze their way through any opening that they can find. Unfortunately, if they escape from the enclosure, their urge to explore means that they tend not to stay around the aviary and are usually never found.

With a lot of patience, Kakarikis can be taught to talk and do make good pets. When handled from a young age, they become friendly and confiding, in contrast to other non-aggressive parrots like Neophemas, such as Turquoisines, which remain flighty despite any handling that they may receive. They also make excellent foster parents; and I am aware of a number of aviculturists who have used them to raise lorries, caiques and Red-rumps—basically any parrot that lays a similar sized egg.

Although very placid, it should be noted, that there are always exceptions to the rule; and close observation should be made when pairing up males and females for the first time. Occasionally an aggressive cock will torment his hen; and it is always best to separate them in this situation. Night frights can also be a problem with these parrots; so cats and other vermin need to be addressed to avoid the panic and anxiety that these can cause the birds which can lead to death or a severe disturbance to the growth of their feathers.

Kakarikis can also be considered for a mixed collection so long as the other inhabitants are similarly docile. These can include most Neophemas, Western Rosellas and King Parrots, while Red-rumps and Hooded Parrots should be avoided.



Above: Red-fronted Kakariki. (Credit: Mark Moore) Below: Some of the author's aviaries.



Housing

Three pairs will happily reside in a 12ft x 6ft conventional aviary or a 12ft x 3ft suspended. They are quite at home in either conventional or suspended aviaries and like nothing better than scratching like a chook in leaf litter (they have even been observed doing this in snow in the wild).

Brisbane is probably the Northern limit of their temperature range in Australia, as Kakarikis do not do well in hot, humid weather; and keepers should be careful not to stress the birds, for example by trying to catch them when the weather is particularly humid. A well ventilated roof is also a must.

Care

They are a bird that frequently forages on the ground and do need to be wormed at least four times annually, as their habit of scratching at the aviary floor means they are prone to contracting parasites in conventional aviaries. This is not a problem when housed in suspended aviaries; but I have found



Kakariki baby.



Kakarki at nest box.

that they relish the dirt left on weeds or a sod of grass placed in their enclosure; and I worm these birds as well as a precaution. Their partiality to dirt is so intense that I am considering cutting up some turf and placing it in their enclosures for the enrichment that this would provide for them.

They enjoy bathing regularly; and wormer must be placed in both their drinking water and bath water to ensure they receive the proper dosage.

Feeding

They are not fussy eaters and eat well. A good quality seed is recommended; but their habit of scratching in it means that steps need to be taken to prevent seed being dispersed to all corners of the flights, as this proves to be very wasteful. This means getting a little creative with how the food is presented. One method is to place the bowl of seed in a bucket which will catch any being raked out. Being an inquisitive parrot, they have no problem with entering such a container and do so eagerly even while the seed is being topped up. Another option is to supply the seed in a plastic container with a lid that has a hole cut into it. This leaves enough room for the birds to reach the seed only with their beaks (and invariably one foot).

From August to November I give them a special diet of half a loaf of wholegrain bread reduced to crumbs, mixed with

an equal amount of egg and biscuit mix and enough calcium powder to slightly change the colour of this mix (about two tablespoons). This is then stored in an air-tight container; and each morning a portion of this is mixed with hot water and made into rissoles of about one teaspoon per pair. These are eagerly accepted by the nesting birds, usually with the cock arriving for the first bite and then calling to his hen to get her share. I believe that keeping their calcium levels high is important for the health of the bird and the quality of the eggs being laid. Observation by myself and other Kakariki keepers has indicated that Kakarikis which are calcium deficient tend to move around their enclosure solely by climbing the cage wire rather than flying from the floor or one perch to the other.

Green vegetables and fruit are a delight for these birds; and six inch bowls are fed daily to each breeding pair with these also resembling a rubbish tip five minutes after feeding. I give a variety of fresh foods such as apple, orange, carrot, sprouts, endive, broccoli, bok choy and celery. They also eat chillies—the seeds more so than the flesh; and this serves to intensify the red colouring in their feathers. This level of variety is kept up for 2–3 weeks after the babies are fledged.

Breeding

Breeding is generally late August to early September; but the time that they go to nest is mostly determined by the weather, as rain stimulates them into breeding mode. They are capable of breeding at 3–7 months of age; but I do not pair them up until they are around 18 months old, as it is better for the health of the parrots and produces much stronger offspring.

The nesting boxes that I use are the standard “small parrot” 150mm x 150mm x 250mm plywood box. I have found the best substrate to be a custom-blended Cymbidium orchid mix to ensure that there are no added chemicals such as fertilizers. The Kakarikis will vigorously rake this just as they do the seed; and some may be lost from the inspection hole because of this. I sometimes add zeolite to the orchid mix to absorb moisture as Kakarikis are messy nesters; and the box can become quite

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Kakariki bowls designed to save food.

soiled when there are a number of chicks in the nest. I am aware that sawdust is sometimes used as nesting substrate; but I will not use this, as I believe that even the “untreated” shavings may contain harmful additives.

Conclusion

Kakarikis are an excellent “beginner’s” bird, while experienced breeders can get a lot of enjoyment from the mutations that can be bred. In fact, it is becoming difficult to source normal type Kakarikis; and I see many people at bird sales selling the progeny of my own birds.

The outward excitement that I displayed a decade ago when seeing that first “white toe” has gradually been replaced by an ear that is capable of hearing a 5 decibel “cheep” from a nest box (other noises need to be a minimum of at least 50 decibels). Fortunately, the other expectations still burn within and are probably getting stronger than they were when first introduced to those birds by fellow enthusiasts.

Kakariki Parrots.

Genera: Cyanoramthus.

Other Names: Red-fronted, Yellow-fronted Kakariki.

Description: They are a smaller-sized bird slightly larger than a bush budge, but smaller than a Cockatiel, 27cm in length with



Red-fronted Kakariki. (Credit: Mark Moore)

males weighing 63–113g, females 50–90g. Wing span: males approximately 135mm, females approximately 123mm.

Colour: Specimens are predominantly green with lighter chest and underparts, with a red strip above the cere and in the case of Yellow-fronted, followed by yellow. A red-eye strip travels beyond the eye in the cock bird. The beak is bluish-grey and tipped with black, and is much broader in the case of the cock bird. The male’s beak is broader than the females; and this is evident at a young age.

Life span: They are relatively hardy and generally live for 8–9 years.

Distribution and Status: New Zealand and outlying Islands, Norfolk Island and New Calendonias. Formerly Lord Howe and Macquarie Islands.

They are now scarce in the wild in New Zealand and are listed as endangered in the wild under Appendix 1 of Cites.

Calls: *Kek-Kek-Kek* is the normal call for most things, will repeat at length on anything unusual or “here comes breakfast”. Usually about 40 decibels BLA. There is a quieter *tu-tu-tu* that is mostly used. Not noisy in an urban situation.

Mutations: Pied, Dominant and Recessive Pied Clear-eye, Yellow (Reverse Pied).

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