

Princess of Wales Parakeet

(*Polytelis alexandrae*)

by Jerry Jennings
Woodland Hills, California

When most people think of the Princess of Wales, they are summoning to mind the image of Lady Diana of the House of Windsor. Aviculturists, on the other hand, are likely to focus on the lovely, pastel colored parakeet native to Australia, which Sir John Gould named in honor of Lady Di's forebearer.

Princess parrots, as they are sometimes called, are relatively rare birds in the wild, confined to the arid interior of the western half of the Australian continent. They prefer open, dry, sandy terrain and scrubland, frequenting streams lined with eucalyptus trees in which they usually nest.

Princess parrots are becoming increasingly scarce and have disappeared throughout much of their former range, or at least are seldom seen. This decline may be due, however, to their very nomadic behavior, which sees them moving about in

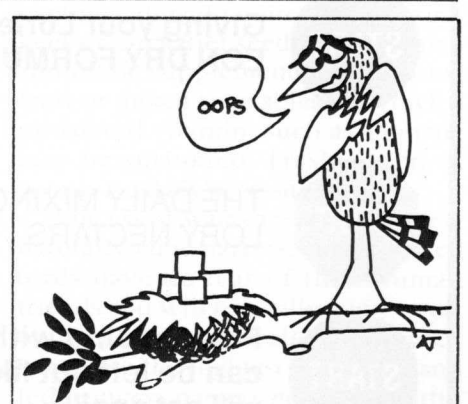
search of seasonal water sources and food supplies. Thus the scarcity of their sightings may be misleading. Fortunately, they have adapted well to captivity, breeding frequently and prolifically. Captive populations worldwide, in fact, probably exceed in number the wild population.

The male and female Princess parrots are very similar in appearance to the untrained eye. Both sexes have the soft pastel pink throat, chartreuse green wing coverts, greenish gray wings, back, and breast. Although immature birds (less than ten months of age) are indistinguishable sexually, adult males have a powder blue crown (gray in the female) and a sky blue rump (gray in the female). Furthermore, the tip of the male's outermost primary flight feather differs from the other primaries and the female's by ending in a spatulate shape. This un-

sual primary flight feather appears after the first moult of the wing feathers.

Princess of Wales are very gregarious birds. They occur in flocks up to fifteen or twenty birds in the wild and are known to nest communally. As many as ten active nests have been found in a single eucalyptus tree during breeding season, which occurs from September to January in Australia (their spring).

Continued on page 24



We failed to credit Patty Barcnas, Garden Grove, California, for photography on page 46 of the Aug/Sept '88 Watchbird.

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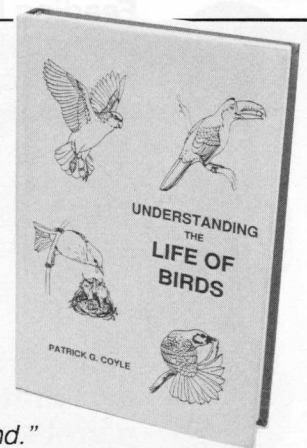
- How an egg is formed?
- If birds do need exercise?
- If grit is necessary in the diet?
- Why the birds mut turn their eggs?
- Why the air space in the egg is important?
- Why young birds are more prone to sickness?
- How birds adapt to the changes in the weather?
- If learned behaviors can be passed on to offspring?
- Why birds don't fall off their perches when sleeping?

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Princess are no less gregarious in captivity and may be housed in groups or colonies without fear of intra-specific aggression. They will readily nest in a colony, though they may also be set up one pair to a flight. Two birds may be paired arbitrarily, or several birds may be put together and allowed to select their own mates prior to being housed as individual pairs. Whether bred individually or in colonies, success is similar, though it is easier to keep track of bloodlines when the pairs are separated.

Housing needs for Princess are simple. Cages two feet by two feet by four feet in length are as likely to work as are flights four feet wide by sixteen feet long and larger. Cage size seems to play a very minor role in encouraging them to breed.



Princess of Wales youngsters four weeks old.

Nest box size may also vary, though boxes twelve inches by twelve inches by twenty-four inches tall are quite appropriate. At Walnut Acres Aviaries, Princess are provided with an "A" frame shaped nest box. The base is twelve by twelve inches, but only five inches wide by twelve inches at the top. Overall height is twenty-four inches with a three inch wide entrance hole. The box is filled with pine shavings to a depth of three inches.

Princess typically lay three to five white eggs in a clutch. Once at Walnut Acres, a clutch of ten eggs were laid, nine of which hatched and were successfully reared. Incubation lasts approximately 18 days, when white, down-covered chicks hatch. The eggs usually do not all hatch at the same



Adult pair of Princess of Wales, male on left, hen on right.

time, but over several days depending on the number of eggs in the clutch. This presents a problem, since the last chicks to hatch are often substantially smaller than those hatched first. These smaller chicks are likely not to get fed enough, and/or get trampled by their larger nestmates. Therefore, it may be

necessary to remove the smaller ones for hand feeding to ensure that all the nestlings survive.

Young Princess fledge the nest at five to six weeks of age and are weaned about ten days thereafter. If the entire nest is pulled for hand feeding (at two to three weeks of age), the parents will

usually recycle, producing a second clutch. If the parents are allowed to rear the first clutch to the weaning stage, they are then unlikely to return to the box.

Princess of Wales are primarily seed eaters in the wild, feeding on a variety of grass seeds. Though it is not known for sure, most biologists assume that Princess also consume other vegetable matter including fruits and berries. In captivity they do quite well on parakeet or cockatiel seed mixes, which should be supplemented with some fruit or mixed vegetables on which a powdered vitamin, such as Vionate, may be sprinkled. Fresh water, of course, is a daily necessity.

Princess of Wales are one of the few naturally tame parrots. Parent reared birds have no fear of their human friends and will naturally come to eat out of your hand or alight atop your head with the slightest coaxing. Hand fed Princess parrots make delightful pets readily learning to talk and whistle.

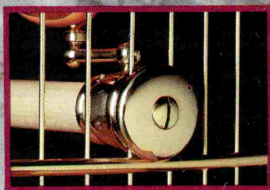
Whether the Princess of Wales parakeet or Lady Diana is in the eye of the beholder, no one can dispute that both are beauties. ●

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