

Australian *Polytelis* Parrots as Pets

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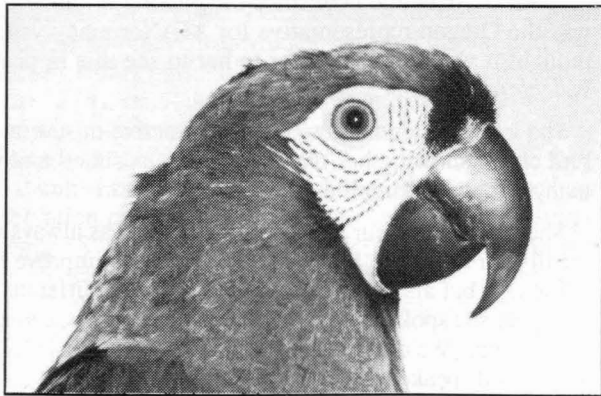
I suspect there is a growing number of readers of *Watchbird* who, like I, dream of someday building wonderful aviaries and filling them with prolific breeding pairs of all the species of birds we have ever desired while, in reality, we are faced with the challenge of providing the best possible care for our birds in an indoor and, in fact, a highly urban setting. We are constrained by busy work schedules, space limitations, and the fear that noisy birds will upset the neighbors next door, or across the hall. I do believe that, even in these situations, with careful planning and careful selection of species, it is possible to enjoy keeping birds that will thrive in an indoor environment and reward their keepers many times over with good health, fascinating behavior, companionship, and breeding successes. If you, like I, are an indoor aviculturist and find yourself leafing through bird books for species that catch your eye, then may I suggest you consider the Australian long-tailed parakeets of the genus

Polytelis: the Barraband's parrot, the rock pebbler, and the Princess of Wales. They are often described as "the ideal aviary birds" but it is not often recognized what affectionate and gentle pets they can be as well. I have kept all three of these beautiful birds as tame pets over the past three years, and love them to no end.

These three species of *Polytelis*, or the polytelids, as they are generically called, range broadly through Australia: the Barraband's parrot inhabits eucalyptus forest to semi-open land in southwestern Australia, the rock pebbler is found in similar habitat in southeastern Australia, and is sometimes seen in public parks in the Sydney area. The Princess of Wales, in contrast, leads a highly nomadic existence in the arid interior and, therefore, is much less frequently

observed in the wild. Each of the three polytelids have well-established aviary populations in Australia and the U.S., so any young bird acquired here will have descended from a fairly long line of captive-bred birds.

The rock pebbler, Princess of Wales, and Barraband's can be very fine pet birds if they are acquired when young, and ideally as hand-fed babies. Although the sex of young birds just out of the nest typically is difficult to determine, the adults of all three species are clearly dimorphic. Males and females are equally good as pets, and both sexes of each species can and will learn to talk. My birds love every attention they get, and will fly to my shoulder if they think I have something good for them to eat. It's hard to say which of the three makes the very best pet because they all share some similar behavior and personality characteristics, and they each have a special grace and elegance in their appearance and deportment that is unique to these fine Australian parrots alone. I can place any one of



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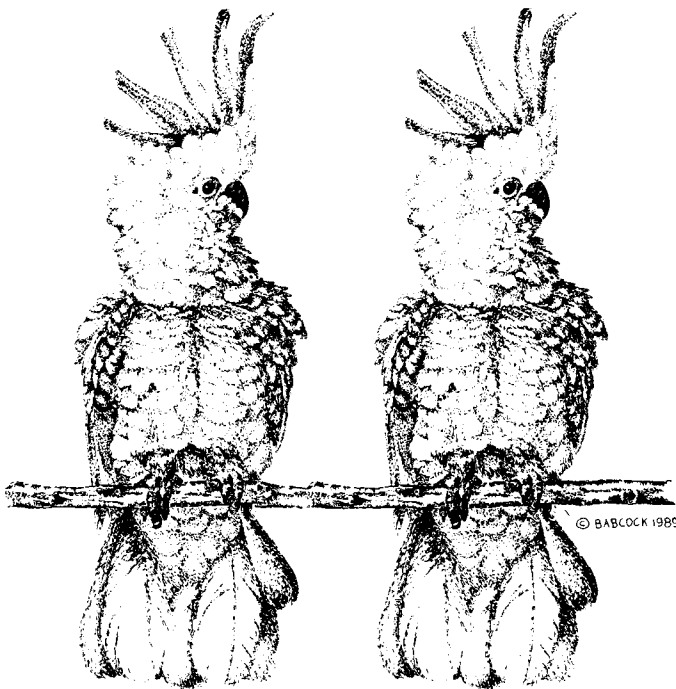
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them on the hand of a friend with confidence that they won't bite, which is something I can't truthfully ensure about some of my other pet birds, however tame they may be with me. The fact that the beaks of the polytelids are relatively small, in keeping with their graceful proportions, makes them seem less intimidating than many other parrot-family birds of similar size, and makes them decidedly non-destructive to cages, woodwork and furniture. Even when sexually mature, the polytelids rarely display the aggressiveness or temperamental moods often seen in other parrots. These characteristics contribute to making them ideal subjects for an intermediate or conscientious novice bird-breeder who may want to expand his or her horizons with new species which are adaptable to the special circumstances of indoor living.

If I must admit a personal favorite, it is probably the Barraband's (*Polytelis swainsonii*). I acquired my Barraband's as a just-weaned, hand-fed baby from Bill and Lorraine Vokoun, Chicago-area lifelong aviculturists and real experts with Australian birds. Bill hand-fed one of their young aviary-born birds for me, and a couple of weeks of taming and hand-training right at the start produced a bird who is a thoroughly delightful pet. Young Barraband's are all bright, glossy green with red thighs, and it is very difficult to distinguish the sexes. I named my bird Alexander and hoped for the best, and now in his second year, he displays a vibrant mustard yellow mask and red throat characteristic of the males. The females retain the red thighs, and are an overall bright grass-green. Both the males and the females have a very high gloss that is almost an iridescence in their feathers which is genuinely stunning when observed at close range. Barraband's parrots make a great array of chuckles, chortles, squeaks, squeals, whistles, and cackles, many of which have a "fun" sound and have a decibel level somewhat like a cockatiel's. My bird says "hi" in a very robust voice and, to my surprise and delight, has proved to be very adept at learning to say new words from my pionus parrot. A male Barraband's will display, or "strut his stuff" at every opportunity, which consists of ruffling his headfeathers, clacking his beak, flashing his pupils, and pacing back and forth with his body low to the ground, in the man-

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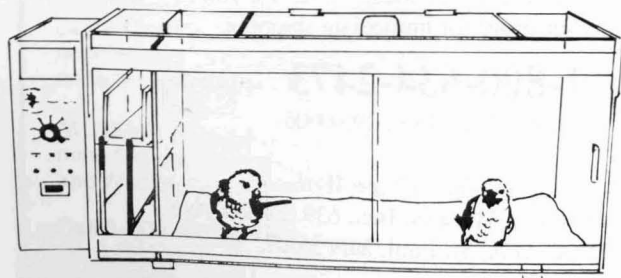
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ner of Groucho Marx. It goes without saying that this is as entertaining to watch as it apparently is to perform, and is a very endearing trait of these birds.

The Princess of Wales (*Polytelis alexandrae*) is similar in size and shape to the Barraband's, but is feathered in pastels with a soft moss-green back, pink throat, flanks, and tailfeather margins, and striking chartreuse wing coverts. The female's coloration is somewhat paler overall and both male and female have an extravagantly long tail which can be 12 inches or more. Many consider these to be among the most attractive of the hookbills, and they are certainly unique in their coloration and proportions. They are truly beautiful birds. My Princess adores being spoken to and listens intently to every word and often responds with an eye-flashing display similar to the Barraband's. The male Princess also has a tiny crest just above his cere which he will raise in the height of his display. The Princess makes a great array of sounds including low clucks, squeals, squawks, and whistles, but prospective keepers should be warned that, on occasion, the Princess also enjoys making an obnoxious, repetitive low bark which may go unnoticed in an aviary but which some people may consider objectionable in an indoor situation. Fortunately, my Princess utters this less-than-desirable sound for only five or ten minutes each day, and usually in the evening. On the plus side of the vocal repertoire, the Princess of Wales can become a fairly good talker, and although Charles, my Princess, has not yet talked, I have heard a Princess speak words very clearly in a sweet, high, almost child-like and charming voice.

The rock pebbler (*Polytelis anthopeplus*) is the largest and has the heaviest body of the three polytelids, and is every bit as desirable a pet bird as the Barraband's and Princess. Its personality is exceptionally sweet and gentle, and while the females are somewhat subdued olive green, the males display an unusual and striking lemon-yellow coat of feathers when mature. Both sexes display a brick red and a chartreuse flashing on each wing. Their vocalizations consist of an assortment of muffled croaks and chortles which can be very appealing and not at all unpleasant. They can become quite creditable talkers with a minimum of effort, and can be counted upon to give a salutary

“croak!” when their keeper approaches.

I should note that the Barraband's and Princess of Wales are sometimes referred to as “touch-me-not” birds, and while hand-fed individuals certainly tolerate being petted, they generally don't crave stroking and feather-ruffling in the way cockatiels do, for example. This is not to say that they do not seek out attention, however, and while they may not enjoy being cuddled, they will respond in a very positive way to being allowed to sit on a finger or a shoulder and to being lavished with admiring words. Unlike the Barraband's and Princess of Wales, the rock pebbler is very receptive to being stroked and handled, and my hand-fed female pebbler is a bird I can do almost anything with who will always retain her characteristic good humor, especially if she knows I have a treat for her to eat.

My experience has shown that the polytelids can successfully and happily be kept as cage birds following a few simple guidelines. Since they are far-ranging and nomadic in their natural habitat, they need ample exercise and should be kept in as roomy a cage as possible. The axiom that “no cage is too large” certainly applies in this case. My rock pebbler and Princess of Wales live happily together in a wall hung cage 36" x 36" x 22" with natural branch perches, and my Barraband's lives in another cage of similar dimensions with his roommate of choice and best friend, a pionus parrot. I have two four-foot Vita-Lites suspended above the cages and controlled by a 24-hour timer. My birds are wing-clipped for taming and training, and now that they are mature, I have elected to leave them fully-flighted and allow them all supervised time out of the cages every day. Observing birds in flight is one of the delights of bird-keeping, and the beauty of the polytelids can be fully appreciated when they are in flight. Although they have easy access to other rooms, my polytelids limit their flights to the familiar environment of their bird room, venturing only occasionally into an adjacent room for a quick aerial loop or two. Of course, extreme caution about household hazards is necessary when birds are allowed full flight, and it is very important to ensure that there is not a single open door or window in the household before one's birds are allowed free flight but I feel that, in

the case of the polytelids, the opportunity to fly contributes greatly to their well-being and contentment when kept as cage birds. All three polytelids greatly relish bathing, and a morning bath with a hand-held sprayer is an event greeted with happy enthusiasm by these birds and keeps their plumage as glossy and buffed-up as any aviary inhabitant's.

A diet that is good for a cockatiel is good for the polytelids, and I supplement a cockatiel-type seed mix and Roudybush crumbles with as wide a variety of fresh foods as possible including cooked chicken meat and chicken bones, table scraps, occasional hard-boiled egg, and several fresh fruits and vegetables daily with a sprinkling of vitamin powder several times a week. Juicy fruits such as purple grapes, pomegranates, and peaches are big favorites. Cuttlebone and fresh water are always available. They especially enjoy pine nuts and live mealworms which they get as hand-fed treats. In contrast to their graceful and somewhat delicate appearance, they are very hardy birds and, given a well-balanced diet, are characteristically free of unusual health problems. The literature mentions that both Barraband's and rock peblers are susceptible to a “traumatic paralysis of the leg” which can be caused by excessive fright as in, say, the attack of a predator. I have always been curious about this and have not encountered it in the time I have kept my birds, but prospective owners of these birds would do well to be aware that in a situation of extreme stress, the possibility of this condition could exist. The Princess of Wales, in my experience, is susceptible to attacks of “night frights,” or uncontrolled thrashing in the dark in response to an unfamiliar sound or presence. My bird has thrashed out all his primary wing feathers on more than one occasion, rendering himself totally incapable of flying until these lost feathers could be regrown. The installation of a wall socket night light in the bird room has largely solved the problem of “night frights” and seems to make all caged birds feel more comfortable and secure.

The rock pebbler, Barraband's, and Princess of Wales are only rarely seen in the pet trade, but with a little effort it is possible to acquire these birds directly from their breeders. Everyone who keeps and raises them really loves them, and the best way to locate breeders in your area is “through the

grapevine,” through classified advertising, and/or through local bird show catalogs. At least one breeder in my area has had wonderful success breeding her rock peblers off-season indoors under artificial lights, but all three polytelids typically breed in the spring months, so early summer is the time when one would be most likely to locate individuals suitable for pets. Often, breeders who would typically let their birds be parent-raised will hand-feed babies in response to a special request if they are notified early enough to do so. A hand-fed bird will always be by far the best choice for a pet. Prices for the polytelids will vary quite a bit depending on the area of the country, the supply and demand, and whether or not the individuals have been hand-fed, but compared to many other parrot-family birds of similar size and scarcity, the prices asked for polytelids are usually quite reasonable.

I believe that keeping birds as pets is the first step on the road to developing an interest in breeding, and ultimately an interest not only in the propagation but in the preservation of bird species and the conservation of their all-too-quickly disappearing natural habitats throughout the world. In my opinion, this is the true spirit of aviculture. Those who keep and raise Barraband's, rock peblers, and Princess of Wales share a tremendous enthusiasm for these birds. With conscientious care, any of the polytelids can live a long, healthy life in excess of 25 years. I can testify to the fact that they make wonderful, fascinating, and friendly pets, and I would recommend them highly to anyone who admires them. ●

Photo references for Princess of Wales: *Watchbird* Oct/Nov '88, front cover, male, by Tony Bucci; *Watchbird* June/July '87, pages 52-53, mutations, by Roger Bringas; *Watchbird* Aug/Sept '80, front cover, pair, by Dale R. Thompson.

NOTICE

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