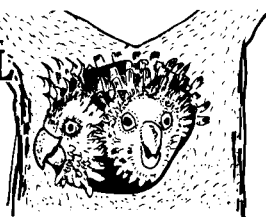


## THE NATURAL CHOICE

by Eb Cravens  
Santa Fe, N.M.



### Two *Polytelis* as Pets

Amongst the Australian parakeets, the Princess of Wales and the Rock Pebbler have a reputation for peaceful personality and trust of humans which has allowed them to carve out a distinctive niche in the American pet market.

Even in the wild where especially the Princess can be elusive and difficult to spot, reports confirm that these species may indulge in entertaining antics only a stone's throw

from human workers or campsites. As captive-reared, hand-fed babies; these long-tailed clowns can be considered "sleepers" in the pet trade.

They are attractive, quiet, non-destructive and non-aggressive additions to any home or aviary; and in fact may become avian companions to single cockatiels, budgies, pyrrhura conures or gentle, small parrots.

There is a growing trend in the pet bird trade across the U.S. these days. It is a move toward keeping hand-fed psittacines in full-flight natural environments in the home—be it an aviary, bird room, greenhouse or outdoor summer walk-in cage. Many times the choice of avian species for these environments are those hookbills which acquire an independent attitude after weaning and demand little hands-on affection from their owners. They are often kept in unrelated pairs and may breed, literally, in full view of their keepers.

As these parrots do not fit any of the "cuddle-bunny" categories, they allow the pet owner freedom from responsibility for providing full touch and petting input for the bird and freedom to have an expanded collection of psittacines without neglecting any single pet. Princess of Wales and Rock Pebbler Parakeets fit delightfully into this category of avicultural pet.

Princess of Wales, commonly called Princess Parakeets, are sleek, pastel packages of avian personality which will naturally pitty-pat around the floor curiously peering into every corner and sampling bits of grit, spilled seed or fluff. In fact, many of them seem to prefer hanging out with the doves on the ground of a

mixed aviary. They delight in grass bundles, picked flowers, greens and seeds offered in flat pie pans, logs, crumbly material, and driftwood play items encourage them to actively explore and taste, though most seem to chew little. After such a journey around their grounds, capped off by a playful bobbing and mumbling to their reflection in a stainless seed cup, one will spot them drowsily tucking their head behind a wing and settling in for a nap — while the rest of the aviary parrots scream and carry on around them. Sometimes I worry that the Princess Parakeets are not feeling well because they seem to fluff their feathers and doze often and at the oddest times.

In the living room, our two pets, Hansel and Gretel, would have a morning run around legs of furniture picking at tufts of carpet or the like. They sometimes will hop or jump-flap about as if chasing their tails, uttering little squeals of delight. Desert birds by nature, Princess tend to avoid excessive bathing; some must be chased around with a spray bottle for a weekly bath. Lyrae Perry, a noted Southern California Australian parakeet breeder, observed that young Princess will use a water dish for quick dips, but that adults prefer overhead misting systems which they use, wings spread, much like cockatiels. "Even the breeder Princess are friendly," she emphasized, "though they do not like being touched with hands. They prefer to pay a visit, beg for a nice goody and be on their way."

There are exceptions, of course. Male Princess are often bolder and more demanding of attention from their owners, flying to arms and shoulders for a nuzzle as if to ask "what entertainment do you offer me now?" Males are also the more consistent vocalizers, having attractive varieties of whistles, clicks, and tweets to go with a tiny computer-like voice. The learning of words seems to depend upon each individual parrot's bond to its owner and the amount of training, much as with male cockatiels. The non-verbal communication level is high, however. Males will often greet their owner with a flurry of bobbing and noise-making much akin to their joyful courting dance—tiny forehead feathers fluffed, eye pupils flashing, feet prancing back and forth sideways on the perch.

Such displays, along with their

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extremely keen flight skills, make these Australians a joy to watch when given plenty of room to actively maneuver. Their intelligent direct flying habits make them perfect parrots to negotiate inside take-offs and landings without stumbling or crashing into glass windows and unstable perch spots.

Rock Pebbler Parakeets are nearly unknown in America's retail bird shops. Few seem to be bred in the U.S.; even fewer reach private homes as pets. At this stage, we encourage the keeping of hand-fed Rock Peblers in unrelated pairs to encourage reproduction. When their numbers and availability increase, new pet buyers are in for a pleasant surprise.

Larger in body size than the Princess, Rock Peblers are more subtly colored in green, olive and yellow. The eastern race is distinctively brighter on chest and wing but is by far the harder to locate and acquire.

"Smokers," as these parrots are called in the Australian countryside, are somewhat less high strung than Princess parakeets. Ira Hertz of Bird Jungle in Scarsdale, N.Y. may be credited with first recognizing and promoting the desirable pet appeal of these endearing Australians. "They are very affectionate," he explained. "My four birds are all over me for attention, but they do show this funny thing for fingers and toes, they do *not* like to be pointed at," he said.

Hertz went on to tout the talking capability of his previously hand-fed Rock Peblers. "We have a male that lives with a pet African Grey — and out-talks the grey," he added.

Once again, however, the keeping of these Australian parakeets in groups of two or more may affect their talking. Such circumstances seem to produce more of the pleasing whistles, ticks, bowing squeaks and natural sound for which this genus is noted.

Rock Peblers' ground habits are slightly less pronounced than the Princess. In the wilds, they are seen often flying at greater heights. Their hand-fed personalities seem to dote on being noticed by their owners, and some of the Pebbler's playful mannerisms will bring delighted laughter to any keeper's lips.

So, if it's a compatible psittacine you seek which is guaranteed to cause no trouble in home or aviary, you might give these two gentle Australian beauties a try. ●

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