

# breeding the Australian Eclectus Parrot

(*Eclectus roratus macgillivrayi*)

by Graham Taylor  
Director, Pearl Coast Zoological Gardens  
Broome, Western Australia

My association with this amazing parrot goes back to 1968. I was contracted to an American Television Documentary team who was planning on going to Cape York Peninsula, North Queensland, Australia to film the Great Palm Cockatoos.

In those days, little was known about the Australian Eclectus Parrot. Most species held by Australian aviculturists were *Eclectus roratus polychloros* or *solomanensis* which originated from imports the late Sir Edward Halstrom imported into Australia from Papua New Guinea and the Soloman Islands prior to 1954.

It was during the eight weeks I spent in Cape York in July and August 1968 that I first saw these birds. We were setting up to climb a Palm's nest to film, which was located on the edge of thick rainforest. These birds would start to call out their alarm calls and, on many occasions, quite large groups of mostly males would be flying about screeching loudly. It was not until the following year I realized that the reason for mostly males flying around was all the females were nesting.

Over the course of the next 20 years or so, I spent many hours watching these birds, learning all I could about them and their breeding and feeding habits in the wild.

The Australian Eclectus would mainly nest in the large Ficus trees in deep rainforest on the edge of a river or creek. They sometimes nest in colonies. In fact, I have located up to three active nests in the same tree. Small family groups would all fly together when disturbed and it was not uncommon to see up to three males attending one female at nest.

Those nests were all above a height of 80 feet and would require a lot of hard work to inspect the nest at this height, and if you were not a climber then you had to take one with you.

In those early days, it would take us

up to four hours or so to climb these large trees. These Fig trees would go up 50 feet before there would be a branch to which we could attach a rope. Over the years, I have developed a system by which we could climb most trees in less than an hour.

From 1972 to 1978, I was based in Cairns, North Queensland, where I developed a small bird park that was open to the public. I had on display many species of Australian parrots and in 1974 I was granted a collecting permit for the Australian Eclectus. I made three expeditions to Cape York that year, the first two to refresh my memory and to gather fresh data and to locate new nesting sites.

In November, I collected a number of fledglings, returned to Cairns and handreared the chicks until they were 14 weeks old and placed them in the aviary for the first time. When these birds matured, which took three years, I realized their true beauty and how large they were. I had two breeding pairs of *Polychloros* on display in the bird park and when they were placed in the same aviary for comparison the size difference was unbelievable — at least six inches larger, due mainly to the longer tail. The *Polychloros* has a short stocky tail where the *Macgillivrayi* has a long tail tipped with pale yellow (male) and the male's beak is a deep coral orange color, where *Polychloros* has a pale yellow-orange colored beak.

On the field trips to Cape York from 1974 to 1984, one could not help but be amazed by these birds. By this time I had an extensive knowledge and I knew with proper housing and diet these birds would breed well in captivity.

In 1978 my family and I moved back to northern New South Wales to concentrate on a breeding facility that was not open to the public. This way I could devote more time to

breeding and research of some of the rarer Australian parrots. I only had about 30 breeding aviaries and these were conventional type, 12 feet long, three feet wide and seven feet high and not suspended.

Over the next few years I visited many aviculturists who had Eclectus Parrots, to see if I could locate any *Macgillivrayi* to add to the number I had. They were very scarce and females were impossible to obtain so I did not have much to work with. In 1985, with three males and two females, I started my breeding program.

All birds were placed in a large flight aviary so they could pair up naturally. Once paired, they were moved into the breeding flights. Their diet consisted of 75% fruit and 25% seed. The fruit was made up of banana, pear, apple, grapes, guava, wild figs and cotoneaster berries, which only fruited in winter and was a favorite diet of Gang Gang Cockatoos in the wild. Their seed diet consisted of grey sunflower, millet and plain canary seed and during winter some hulled oats were added, along with some pine nuts and other tidbits.

The nest box was 30" deep and 12" square with a metal ladder inside to allow the bird to climb down rather than jump. An inspection door was at one side but this was difficult and as most breeders of Eclectus would know, they become very aggressive when nesting. Males will attack and I had to wear a hat to ward off a male that would delight in hopping on my shoulder but then proceed to bite my neck, and you know when you have been bitten by an Australian Eclectus! Although all the birds were hand-raised, once they had paired up and were nesting, you could expect to get a bite or two.

In November 1985, one of the pairs laid two eggs. The incubation period

was 28 days. I did not inspect the nest once I knew she had laid until a week after the hatching date. On inspection there were two healthy chicks just getting the familiar grey down. I decided to remove them for hand feeding and in the hope the parents would double clutch. This they did but both eggs this time were infertile.

Again in those days, little was known about hand feeding and incubation. It was not until around 1987 that the boom happened and suddenly everyone was handfeeding and new formulas started to appear in avicultural magazines. I developed a feeding formula that suited me which was half a weetbix plus half a wheatmeal biscuit, soak with half a cup of boiling water, cover and let swell, prepare dry mix of half a teaspoon of millet meal, half a teaspoon of sunflower meal, half a teaspoon of fine oatmeal, two teaspoons of high protein baby cereal, 1/4 teaspoon of fine raw peanuts, and two teaspoons of fine Mueslie. This was added to the weetbix and wheatmeal biscuit and mixed, three drops of corn oil and one or two drops of vitamin were added, plus one teaspoon of baby mixed vegies and fed at around 105°F four times a day.

At six weeks these birds can be sexed as they start to show color. These both turned out to be males, but I was happy just the same and it could well be the first breeding of this species in captivity.

In 1986, I accepted the position as Curator of Birds at Pearl Coast Zoological Gardens, Broome, Western Australia. Broome is situated 2500 miles north of Perth in an area called the Kimberleys. It is a tropical but dry area of Australia and although on the coast, it is also on the edge of one of the largest deserts in the world. As I had never been to Broome before, in fact I had never been to Western Australia, it was quite an experience to fly in for the first time. Broome had a population of 7500 people and is considered a tourist town - it is famous for pearls and cattle, some of the largest cattle stations in the world are in the Kimberleys.

For the first 18 months or so, my job was to put together the largest collection of parrots and cockatoos in Australia, as it was Lord McAlpine's wish to have as near as possible a full collection of all the 65 species of parrots native to Australia, a feat, I might add, that has never been attempted

by any zoo or private aviculturist in this country.

Other species such as softbills, waterfowl and zoo species were on my shopping list and on two occasions I transported large consignments of birds by private plane from the east coast to the west coast which took two days because no commercial flight flew across Australia, all domestic flights flew around the coast. When I had a shipment of softbills or valuable parrots, we decided to charter a private plane and fly directly to Broome.

When I moved my wife and son to Broome to live, of course I took the seven Eclectus Parrots with me. Lord McAlpine was instrumental in the next phase of this breeding program. He had developed this zoo to breed rare and endangered species and the Australian Eclectus was high on our list of priorities for future breeding programs.

Over the next two years, I concentrated on obtaining the right staff to feed and look after the 1000 odd birds and the 120 aviaries at that time.

It was not until 1988 when a new breeding program was attempted, as we were still developing this zoo, building now larger flights housing species like Palm Cockatoos, macaws and the tiny Fig Parrot.

Our two pairs were set up in the same aviary, this aviary was 120 feet long and 20 feet wide and 15 feet high. It was well planted and had a running stream through it, nest boxes were placed at each end of the flight in case they would prefer to nest apart, but, as I predicted, both pairs nested next to each other and to this date (June 1992) they have nested next to each other, although there were eight nests to choose from and from time to time they would swap over, we never had a problem. All chicks were taken and hand reared and there was quite a deal of excitement when we had hand reared our first female. "Betty" was hatched on the 9th July 1988 and her nest mate turned out to be another male.

Over the next few years with selected pairing and hand feeding every chick, I am proud to say we have now reached our goal of ten pairs of unrelated stock and our third breeding pair 2nd generation has now produced young. It has been a tremendous effort by my bird curator and his staff of extremely dedicated

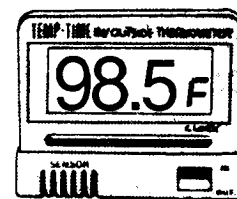
bird keepers. Without their devotion to duty and after-hours feeding, this breeding success would not have been possible.

The six years I have spent here at Pearl Coast Zoo, first as curator of birds and now as director, has been exciting and we can now boast over 1400 birds, including 51 species of Australian Parrots and Cockatoos, over 300 breeding aviaries. During 1990/91 over 700 birds were bred at this zoo and many of them threatened or endangered species, for example the rare Golden Shouldered Parrot, *Psephotus chrysoptorygius chrysopterygius*. Out of four breeding pairs, 47 young were produced. These have been sent around Australia to other aviculturists who wish to breed this species.

During the 1992/3 breeding season we plan to offer a few unrelated Australian Eclectus to other Australian aviculturists who are keen to obtain this species of parrot.

When I sit at my desk in my office in Broome, it is not that hard to let the mind drift back to those days in the late sixties when collecting and filming expeditions were exciting, to say the least. That first trip to Cape

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*This pair of juvenile Australian Eclectus has plenty of space to socialize within this planted aviary.*



*This photo shows the difference in subspecies of male Eclectus. The bird on the left is Eclectus roratus polychloros and the one on the right is E.r. macgillivrayi.*



*Eight pairs of Eclectus Parrots are housed in this large flight aviary at the Pearl Coast Zoological Gardens. This beautiful aviary is decorated with many plants and trees, rock work and waterways.*



*The director, Grahm Taylor of the Pearl Coast Zoo, has a good relationship with these Eclectus Parrots.*

York in 1968 was a real challenge because at that time there weren't any roads, just tracks. People today cannot believe that in those days it took five days to travel from Cairns in north Queensland to Portland Roads on the east coast of Cape York, a distance of 430 miles, crossing sixty creeks and rivers, and I remember one particular day it took us seven hours to travel just 14 miles. Today it is just a matter of catching a plane and in three hours you are there. Somehow I prefer the good old days. There was a real feeling of achievement in those days and also disappointment.

In 1975, I decided to fly up from Cairns during the wet season (Cairns received about 130 inches of rain during February and March). I arranged the loan of a Land Rover 4 x 4 for the six day scouting trip. I spent six days caught between two tributaries of the Claudie River and only heard a few bird calls, it rained non stop for those six days, a cyclone passed about twenty miles from my camp and in just one night they had 13 inches of rain, but if I had the chance all over again I would be the first one on the plane. Cape York is the type of country that once you have been there you can't wait to return.

I am sure aviculturists around the world get the feeling I get when they breed something for the first time. I hope they enjoy my experience with this amazing parrot, the Australian Eclectus Parrot *Eclectus reoratus macgillivrayi*. ●



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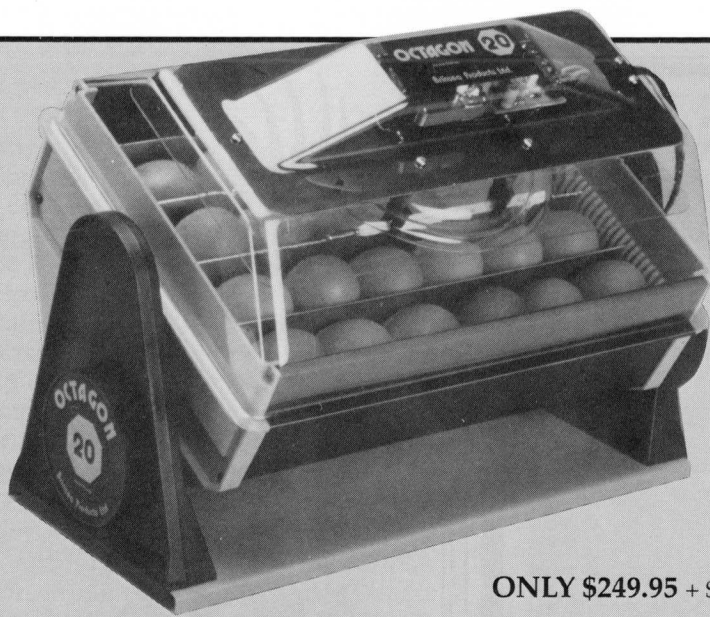
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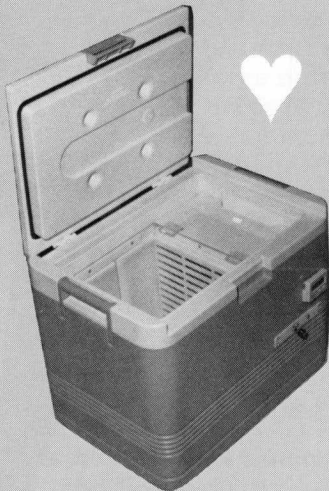
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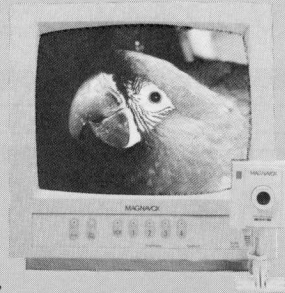
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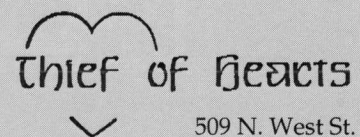
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