

# The Wheatbelt Hybrid

by John McGrath  
Yass, N.S.W., Australia

The Wheatbelt hybrid is a naturally occurring hybrid of the Port Lincoln Parrot (*Barnardius z. zonarius*) and the Twenty-eight Parrot (*Barnardius zonerius semitorquatus*). The birds of this population inhabit an area in Australia generally farmed for wheat, hence the name, Wheatbelt hybrid.

These birds, sometimes, are not easily identified as their plumage can vary slightly or greatly from either of the above subspecies.

## Description

The head is slaty-black in color with bluish cheek patches. Generally there is a red frontal band (i.e., red feathering above the cere). This band can vary greatly from being absent to being very prominent. There is a yellow band across the back of the neck. The back is fairly dark green. The flight feathers are blue, the rump is greenish blue and the tail feathers are green in the center and green, merging to blue in the outer feathers. The vent is yellowish green. The chest is generally green, but can be interspersed with yellow feathers or patches of yellow. The abdomen varies in color from true *semitorquatus* green to *zonarius* yellow, but most of the time it is a mixture of both colors.

Some young birds have a wing stripe. This stripe is a light, almost transparent portion of the flight feathers about three to four inches wide. This can be seen when the wing is outstretched or when the birds are in flight.

The cock bird is a larger, more robust bird than the hen with a larger upper mandible and a larger, flatter head. The head shape on a hen is more rounded and the upper mandible is smaller as with the *Platycerus* (rosella) group. The overall coloration of the hen is not as brilliant.

The size of the Wheatbelt hybrid is intermediate between both subspecies. These birds fall within the lengths of 15.5 inches for the Port

Lincoln Parrot to 16.2 inches for the Twenty-eight Parrot. Their weight can range from 170 to 200 grams.

Their flight usually consists of a series of rapid wing beats and a glide

very similar to those of the larger rosellas. They rise directly from the ground to a perch or tree limb and alight rosella fashion, fanning their tail before alighting.



Photo by Dale R. Thompson and George D. Dodge

The Wheatland hybrid is a transitional form between the Port Lincoln Parrot and the Twenty-eight Parrot. It is a naturally occurring hybrid found in Australia.



I once had the opportunity to observe this bird in flight outside of an aviary. It was an escapee that was crossing a road near Lake Burley Griffin in Canberra. This parrot in flight had a rapid wing beat and a very extended glide. It was this glide that first drew my attention to this bird. The glide was similar to (but much more extended than) the local Crimson Rosella (*Platycerus elegans*). The bird was alone, whereas the Crimson Rosellas are normally found in pairs or flocks.

The voice of this hybrid more closely resembles *zonarius*. It sounds like a tink-tink-tink, starting soft and slowly, and increasing in volume and speed before stopping. There is also a contact whistle similar to the larger rosellas, usually three notes in quick succession, sounding like a det-det-dit. Their alarm call is a courser variation of the rosellas, it is a drawn out harsh twink, repeated rapidly several times. Once one becomes familiar with their calls, they can easily be recognized.

### Distribution

As stated earlier, this bird is from a hybrid population between two subspecies, therefore as you would expect, it is found in an area where these two subspecies merge with each other.

It is distributed west of the line of Moors, Goomalling, Wickepin and Hyabing and northeast of Perth through the Darling Range to just west of Albany. You have *semitorquatus* in the forest area to the southwest and *zonarius* in the more open country to the east.

This bird is apparently very abundant in this region, possibly due to the fact that man has helped it with their food supply coming from cereal crops and extra watering points. This is also true with the Galah (*Eolophus roseicapillus*) in eastern Australia.

### Aviary Observations

Obviously, because these birds are broadtails, one should refrain from housing them adjacent to parrots of the *Purpureicapalus*, *Barnardius*, *Platycercus* or *Psephotus* genera. Due to the fact that these birds are territorial during the breeding season, they will see the other parrots as a threat and fighting will occur through the mesh.

These birds are susceptible to parasitic worms because they spend a large amount of time on the ground

picking up fallen seeds, etc. They can pick up worms very easily. This is particularly evident with freshly wild-caught specimens, as the extra stress of handling, caging, transportation, etc. tends to weaken the birds and the worms will take over. I had one particular experience where I caught up a cock bird late one afternoon for a show and decided not to feed him until my arrival at the show the next morning. That morning the bird appeared well and was fed. As the morning wore on, he became fluffed and had weakened to the point of standing in a corner of his cage until he finally died. I necropsied him the following morning and his gizzard was full of round worms. A worming program should be implemented for these parrots.

Other than these problems, these birds are easy to cater for in the aviary. The aviary should be well constructed using a welded fabric mesh covering. It should preferably be constructed of a metal frame from 10 to 20 feet long, three feet to four feet wide and at least six feet high. The total length could be covered, or at least six feet to the rear. Both sides, back and top should be covered. The aviary should face north to east for the early morning sun. A perch should be placed at either end of the aviary. I prefer to use natural native branches.

My birds spend the morning and evening feeding and moving about the aviary. This includes the sides of the flight and the ground which, in my case, is concrete. During the main part of the day, the birds rest in the shelter. At night they sit along side each other in the open, on the perch at the very front of the flight. The temperatures here at Yass can vary from 40° (104°F) in the summer to -10° (14°F) in the winter.

Feeding is very easy, for my birds will eat all the usual parrot type seeds from sunflower to millet. The seed offered is in a pre-mixed form placed in a garbage tin lid placed upside down on a metal pipe stand about four feet off the ground. Green food is readily taken as seeding grasses. Other foods include fruit, dandelions, thistles, cape weed, oats, lettuce and spinach. They will also eat pumpkin, flesh seeds, apple, pear, oranges and nuts such as walnut and almond. I also give them pademelons which, as the name suggests, are melons about four inches in diameter. I collect these from various loca-

tions, as they grow wild. When offered to the birds, they are partially decomposed and the birds remove and consume the seeds. The seeds are very much like watermelon seeds. These birds will also eat the smaller dog food nuts. And, when they have young, I have given them sponge cake and milk biscuits. They especially like whole grain breads.

They enjoy eucalyptus branches, particularly if they are in flower, bud or seed pod. I also give them Hawthorne and Cotoneaster branches in berry. They will spend quite a good deal of time stripping all of these branches of leaves, twigs, etc. It is a boredom deterrent.

Grit should be provided and fresh water available at all times.

The birds should be fairly willing to go to nest if you have a compatible pair. These particular parrots are double brooded, meaning that they lay two lots of eggs and raise two broods of young per season.

My birds start nesting activities as soon as I put the nest box in each year. This is around the first week in July. The days at this time of year are starting to lengthen, which will add to the breeding urge.

I use a box for a variety of reasons. It can be cleaned or burned depending on its condition after successive seasons. Boxes can be easily constructed by the average handyman. My birds show no disapproval of using a box.

The nest box is constructed of 0.8 inch thick particle board approximately 40 inches deep and about 10 inches by 10 inches square. It is hung on an angle on the back wall of the aviary. It has an opening at the top front with a landing platform. A ladder of strips of plywood is tacked down the lower side. There is an inspection door on the front lower side and I also tack pieces of timber inside the lower corners for the birds to chew

Prior to putting the box up in the aviary, the base is filled to four inches with wood, dirt and large hardwood chips from the wood heap. This is first dusted or sprayed with an insecticide. The purpose of this dirt, chips and timber is for the hen to chew and arrange until egg laying commences.

The box is eagerly investigated by both birds, usually within minutes of being placed in the aviary. They check over the outside, then peer into the darkness and finally venture inside. From that moment until the

first egg is laid, the hen spends a great deal of time in the box.

During this time, the cock bird continually displays, typical broadtail fashion, shoulder squaring, tail wagging, chattering and whistling. Mating can be observed through August and early September. Incubation commences with the laying of the first egg.

I have never raised two broods of chicks even though the second clutch is laid and incubated. If the birds lose the first round, they get a chance to fully raise the second round. But if the birds raise the first round, they do not get significant time to raise the second.

Here at Yass, the breeding season is too short for these birds. By the time they lay and raise round one, it is around the end of November. They then turn around and commence round two of incubating eggs in late December. They will then start to lose interest and go into a molt, which discourages them from breeding. In our climate, we reach a high temperature around mid-February and as we progress into the year the birds start a gradual molt. The energy required to do this tires the birds and hence they lose their interest in nesting activities.

On the other hand, our coldest month is August; so they don't really start laying any earlier than September.

Joseph Forshaw, in his book *Australian Parrots*, states that breeding starts during the month of August and continues into December. If conditions are favorable, two broods will be reared. Conditions at Yass apparently are not favorable for double brooding. A more suitable climate to achieve double brooding may occur elsewhere, where there are milder winter months.

### Conclusion

Even though I have only raised five young in four breeding seasons, I still think these birds are worthwhile for keeping and breeding. They are now commonly available, but what if western Australia bans their export as they have done with other species? Therefore, why not breed up an aviary-bred population? This is one reason I believe in close banding, as this gives some evidence of aviary breeding to colleges and authorities.

These birds are commonly available through Sydney dealers as Twenty-eight Parrots, but once you

get to know the differing characteristics, you can tell them from Twenty-eight Parrots. This is an example that the dealers are not taking enough care with what species of birds they are selling, therefore encouraging hybridization, unintentionally, by novice aviculturists.

I have been accused of hybridization myself, but once I explain why I have my pair mated this way, the accuser will usually understand. Without closer observation, my cock bird looks like a Twenty-eight Parrot and the hen like a Port Lincoln Parrot. I would encourage anyone with examples of either pure subspecies to breed them pure.

Since I commenced gathering information for this article, I have been informed of a move to name this bird a differing subspecies of *Barnardius zonarius*. Lovell and Hutchins, in their book *Australian Parrots*, go so far as to give this hybrid form a name of convenience, *Barnardius zonarius dundasi* as devised by Matthews. I would agree with this move.

These interesting and active birds, although not being everyone's "cup of tea," should bring movement and sound to any collection of parrots. I highly recommend them as a good beginner parrot as they are only a little harder to breed and care for than the Eastern Rosella (*Platycercus eximus eximus*) and are quite readily available and inexpensive. I find them to be steady and confiding birds. As I mentioned earlier, I take liberties like driving the hen from the nest for a thorough nest inspection. She returns straight away as do most of my parrots.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The term hybrid used in the title *Wheatland Hybrid* is used to describe the transitional form between *Barnardius z. zonarius* and *semitorquatus* which are subspecies. B.R. Hutchins and R.H. Lovell in *Australian Parrots*, A Field and Aviary Study describes these birds as *Barnardius zonarius dundasi* (Matthews). "This form appears to be a typical transition between *z. zonarius* Port Lincoln Parrot and *semitorquatus* the Twenty-eight Parrot. . . . As *dundasi* is a hybrid form between these two races mentioned above, the coloration of some birds varies and the variations lean towards one race or the other. . . . Although we have mentioned the form *dundasi* is a hybrid, we have only used that name for convenience to describe the birds and their location."

Please understand that the term hybrid is used in the *Watchbird Magazine* only to explain this "subspecies" form found naturally in the wild (Flinders Ranges in South Australia [Parker 1979]) and does in no way give any credence to hybridization created in captive breeding of which the AFA does not approve. ●



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