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The Mulga Parrot

(*Psephotus varius*)

by Drew Smith
Myponga, South Australia

Also known as Many-colored Parrot, the Mulga Parrot is a particularly beautiful medium to small parrot which is related to the Red-rumped Parrot and, more distantly, the Hooded, Golden-shouldered and nearly, or supposedly, extinct Paradise Parrot. Unfortunately, it is this last species that some individuals have tried to reproduce, unsuccessfully, by hybridizing Mulga Parrots with either Hooded or Golden-shouldered. It is likely that the Paradise Parrot is the nominate form, from which the other species developed and is, therefore, unattainable through hybridizing, as much as it would be impossible to reproduce a wolf by cross breeding domestic dogs, the ancestor from which they originated.

Description and Sexing

Mulga Parrots are sexually dimorphic, which is to say the feather coloration between sexes is quite different, thereby allowing simple and obvious visual identification of sexes, from prior to fledging and onwards.

Male: Predominately a light green bird with a varying degree in depth of color being darker particularly on the dorsal surface. The cheeks, ear covert and throat area have a distinct iridescence and slight aqua appearance in some birds. There is a prominent forehead stripe which can sometimes be evident in some females although much paler. There is a dark crimson

patch on the crown of most males and some females will show a slight degree of this also. The wings, which are predominantly green, exhibit a bright yellow or golden blaze on the shoulder with the outer or leading edge of the wing dark to light blue and the primaries and secondaries dark blue. Primary flight tips are black. The underside of the bird has a light green breast with a bright yellow vent and lower chest surrounding, in most birds, a bright red or orange abdominal patch. The tail feathers are green graduating to blue and the bird has a dull crimson strip across the upper tail covert to rump area. The eye is dark and the bill is dark grey with a silver sheen.

Female: Is distinctive and should not be confused at all with Red-rumped females. Although they have a similar olive green color, the Mulga has many more colors, with notably a red shoulder blaze. There is also the slight red crown in some females, the occasional frontal stripe and definitely a bright pastel green abdominal area. Some individuals can exhibit a slight degree of dull crimson in the abdomen area.

Immature: Birds can be sexed accurately as soon as the feathers on the dorsal surfaces have developed enough to give clear indication of color. The shoulder blaze is not always clear and may show a slight

degree of both colors, red and yellow, in the early stages, most particularly in males. The general body color gives clear enough indication of sexes in the same fashion as immature Red-rumped Parrots, *Psephotus haematonotus*. One very important consideration is that young birds, when first fledged, have yellow bills to some degree. Other than this, immature females closely resemble adult females. Therefore, it is worthwhile to have the adult female leg rung, as the yellow in the bill of immatures can quickly disappear.

If this should occur, the adult female will be a slightly bigger bird, have older, greyer looking legs and feet and the bill should also be darker with the silver white sheen more developed. She will also, no doubt, be a more accomplished flier and therefore wiser about the net and how to avoid it. Immature birds should not be left with the adults long enough for immature males to color sufficiently to make it difficult to distinguish between the adult male. Whether you observe it or not, in most cases the adult male will become aggressive towards his offspring, most notably the males.

Distribution

As the colloquial name suggests, the Mulga Parrots inhabit low rainfall areas such as Mulga scrub, *Acacia aneura*, Myall, *A. sowdeni*, Blue bush, *Maireana* sp. and Saltbush, *Atriplex* sp., as well as Casuarina/Saltbush country and a large degree of the various Mallee habitats. Generally speaking, they are an inhabitant of arid to semi arid, hot dry climates south of the Tropic of Capricorn. They are found often in association with the different species of Blue-bonnets over their range. Blue-bonnets, once regarded as *Psephotus*, have been renamed as a separate group, genus *Northiella*, being distinctive from *Psephotus* in many ways.

The sight of Mulga Parrots low down on dead and fallen timber of the Mallee, flitting low over the undergrowth or alighting on a saltbush is indeed a memorable sight, difficult to surpass. All of their colors become brilliantly apparent, as if lit up, while they are in flight and all the while uttering a beautiful fluty call quite different to so many parrots. They are, indeed, a gem.

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Nesting

In the wild, I have observed Mulga Parrots inspecting hollows as late as October in northwestern Victoria and have seen young birds on the wing and accomplished at flying also in early October in places such as Mt. Mary near Morgan, south Australia. Generally I feel they breed quite early, at the same time as or just prior to Blue-bonnets. In captivity they will usually go to nest in mid July in Adelaide, being, of course, mid winter and then again in mid to late spring if they will double brood.

Wild birds may be forced to nest in whatever location is available including hollowed fence posts and at varying heights. Casuarinas, Eucalyptus and other large hollow producing trees such as Myall, *Acacia* sp. and Sandalwood, *Pittosporum* sp. when available, however the hollows I have seen are nearly always in a vertical position. For captive birds, I have only used hollow logs in a near to or vertical position. An internal diameter of 125 to 150 mm is quite adequate. I have experienced with the Red-rumped Parrot, young birds, prior to their eyes opening, falling from the hollow when it is placed on too low an angle. Therefore, together with their natural tendency toward upright hollows, I prefer to place logs at a steep angle. These have always been readily accepted. The hollows are generally around 600 mm in length with a side entrance close to the top. These are hung in a reasonably light position and one also providing privacy if possible as I have found this to be an effective inducement to nesting.

Before capping the bottom of the log with tin, I prefer to shape and fit a 25 mm thick piece of wood inside the log. Although this is not particularly necessary for Mulga Parrots, it is an added insurance against eggs coming into contact with the cold surface of the tin capping. Some species of parrot are prone to emptying the nesting substrate from even a vertical hollow. The tin is then an insurance against the birds chewing through the wood but more importantly is a good seal. The substrate used consists of approximately 50% peatmoss mixed with natural wood, dirt or chain saw chip-pings. This is moistened and rammed into the bottom of the hollow where it will dry and harden although it will

remain workable for the parrots. I have always avoided sawdust or shavings, etc. as I have repeatedly seen eggs that have been bogged down in the dry, loose mix which are then difficult for the birds to turn successfully.

My original Mulgas were purchased as immature and not fully colored. They proceeded to nest in their first season, having two successful clutches, producing a total of nine young. Both clutches consisted of six eggs each, one egg infertile, one shell dead and one died at approximately one week old. Their normal clutch ranges between four and six eggs and I have found four eggs and four young to be normal for my birds. That particular pair has always double brooded but not all young have successfully fledged, some occasional nests failing completely. I have, on a couple of occasions, found the nest completely saturated including the young, and although I do not know for sure why, I have taken to opening the lid of the log slightly when the young are around three weeks old to allow condensation to evaporate more efficiently. This has been successful to date.

Incubation takes approximately 18 to 21 days and the young fledge at four and a half to five weeks of age. Usually there is a day between the first two fledging and then variable from the same day to consecutive days or up to two or three days apart. Prior to the birds fledging, it is advisable to thickly cover portions of the aviary with fresh branches — gum, mela-leuca, etc. The front of the aviary is preferable as the young birds can see a visible barrier and are not as likely to injure themselves by crashing into the wire end of the aviary.

The first few days out of the log are spent sitting quietly in the foliage, gaining strength and becoming familiar with the surroundings. Young Mulgas are erratic and rapid fliers, frequently crashing into obstacles. It may be necessary at odd times to remove a few secondary flights from each wing. It is important to retain good balance and control of flight, but simply slow it down. I nearly always use this method when acclimatizing new adult birds. As the adults are stronger fliers, I remove the four feathers after the first three primaries at the wing tip. These are simply cut off with scissors, level with the coverts

on both wings, once again maintaining stability.

As the young collide with aviary walls they tend to slide down this surface to the floor, so it is also worthwhile keeping water bowls out from the walls. The young birds are generally independent enough to feed themselves at four weeks after fledging. I would not care to remove young earlier than two weeks but definitely prefer to leave them in the pen a good four weeks if possible.

The basic seed diet for Mulga Parrots should consist largely of smaller seeds, the millets and canary. A smaller percentage of sunflower during the winter and spring until approximately midsummer can also be added. If buying a premixed seed, then "Small Parrot" or "Parrot A" mix will be sufficient. Other than this, a finch mix is good with approximately 25% of sunflower added. Otherwise, simply give Small Parrot mix from winter to summer then during late summer and autumn give only finch seed.

If you have watched parrots in the wild, you will have noticed this is a very lean time of the year for food. I try to replicate the food season and try to maintain trim, healthy birds. Fat birds tend to be poor breeders and sluggish at that. The natural increase in quality and protein buildup of natural foods most likely would act as a stimulus to breeding, just as does the rain and length or daylight hours. Fresh foods consist of such things as apple pieces, sweet corn, silver beet (not every day), pear and generally any fruit or vegetables you would eat can be tried and even the odd cooked chop bone may be beneficial in supplying animal protein, which may also be obtained from mealworms, primarily during the breeding season. One important food source I like to supply whenever possible is fresh seeding grasses. Velt oats or miniature oats are highly favored as are other seed heads grown from discarded aviary waste. Generally speaking, small quantities in variety supplied fresh, not wilted or soft, regularly will be a great benefit to the birds. Cuttlefish bone should be available for calcium and a mineral grit should be supplied if the birds are over concrete or a wire floor as in suspended cages.

The foods, particularly dry foods, should always be in a weather pro-

tected position such as in the shelter area. Weather-spoiled damp seed can kill your birds. The seed must also be situated in a rodent proof position, either on a steel pipe pedestal firmly fixed with the tray at least 12 to 16 inches (300 to 400 mm) away from any obstacle and 18 inches (450 mm) or more high, or on a hanging tray suspended from a smooth ceiling and away from perches, etc. This will cut down on the chance of birds picking up diseases carried by mice which urinate in accessible food trays.

The water bowl can be of a reasonable size as Mulgas, like most parrots, enjoy a bath and the bowl, naturally, should be out of line from perches. I like to use terracotta dishes around 40 mm deep and 250 mm wide placed in a position to avoid disturbing birds unnecessarily. Mist sprays are really enjoyed by parrots as a method of bathing in hot weather, but only in one portion of an aviary.

Aviary Notes

When selecting Mulga Parrots, I maintain that the best birds to purchase are young birds prior to their first year and full adult plumage. The age is then not in dispute and the reason for sale is most likely due to being surplus offspring and not a problem bird. The other major point is that I believe pairing up with an unrelated bird to be far more successful, resulting in a compatible pair of birds more likely to breed. I believe they should not be housed next to other *Psephotus* of any species as this can lead to fighting and unstable pairing despite double wiring.

I have found that Mulga Parrots are completely at home in a well planted aviary and will not destroy the plants, provided that they are introduced to an established, well planted aviary. Initially they will chew but soon stabilize once the novelty of greenery has worn off. My first pair were housed in a 20' x 5' x 8' (6.15 x 1.5 x 2.4 m) aviary of which 5' or 1.5 m was shelter. While the birds initially kept the African Yellow Broom (*Cytissus racemosus*), neatly trimmed, eventually I had to take over the job of pruning. They did not bother the Japanese Sacred Bamboo (*Nandina domestica*), at all, and fed on the seeding heads of Johnson grass. This was the ideal situation to keep some finches so a pair of Crimson Finches (*Neoch-*

mia phaeton), were chosen and were very successful rearing many young without any negative interaction between parrots and finches.

Aviary Design

Although Mulgas will nest and live in a fairly small aviary, e.g. 10' x 4' x 7' (3 x 1.2 x 2.1 m), I like to see an aviary 15' x 5' x 7' or, better still, 8' high (4.5 x 1.5 x 2.4 m). The added height gives a greater sense of security to the birds. A secure bird is a happy bird and a happy bird breeds. Extra height takes up no extra room in any outdoor situation. The larger aviary allows more scope for planting and decorating and can, therefore, be quite an attraction in a garden area.

A five foot (1.5 m) deep shelter is quite adequate and the door is best placed in the shelter end of the aviary where the feeding and watering can be done without having to disturb birds by walking up and down the flight. A coarse, cleaned, washed sand is a good substrate for the aviary floor. Perches are best kept to the ends of the aviary or close to the side so as not to obstruct the flight path. In cold climates, a sheet of plywood, masonite,

hardiflex or similar material mounted to the underside of the shelter roof as a ceiling will reduce condensation. This is of benefit to nearly any bird, particularly dry arid zone birds. It is also a great advantage to have a solid barrier one to two feet (300 to 600 mm) high around the outside perimeter of the aviary flight as it serves as both a kick board and protection from dogs, etc.

If the aviary is not planted, then a regular supply of fresh branches, Eucalypt, Melaleuca or any flowering shrub will be highly beneficial as both a food source and shelter. Half inch or 12 mm netting is quite strong enough to use on the aviary and an electric fence system is a bonus in keeping predators from the aviary roof.

The Mulga Parrot is indeed, a beautiful bird, one of my favorites, always in good demand and challenging enough to breed but not too difficult and makes a good bird for both beginners and experienced breeders. These notes are all from my own personal experience and observations and may be in conflict with some other specific cases but should prove reliable in most instances. ●

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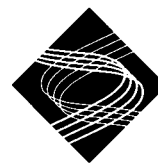
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