

The Grandest Lory of Them All

The Eclectus Parrot *Lorius roratus*

by Dale R. Thompson
Canyon Country, California

Having reproduced the eclectus parrot for over 20 years with a count numbering in the hundreds, I have often wondered if this bird was not just one big lory. Now having the lory as a pet and observing many lorries in the collections of successful breeders, I am even more convinced that there is a correlation between these two bird groups.

Behavior and Breeding

When observing the *Lorius* group of lorries, the similar traits become even more clear. Most of us relate lory behavior to the *Trichoglossus* group of lorries. These are the "rainbow" lorries which have a great variety of rainbow colors, energetic behaviors and are overall wonderful pets when handfed. The *Lorius* group of lorries, however, are much larger in size and have a much more sedentary behavior than the jerky movements of the rainbow lorries. The common lorries belonging to the genus *Lorius* are the Chattering and Black-capped Lorries; the uncommon lorries in the this group (of which several are found in captivity) are the Purple-bellied, Purple-naped (Purple-capped), Yellow-bibbed and the White-naped Lorries.

My theory is that the eclectus parrot belongs to the *Lorius* group of lorries or at least is closely related. The large lorries, as the Black-capped Lory, are still much more active than an eclectus parrot. This would be the opinion of almost anyone knowing both of these groups of parrots. However, I would like to dispel this observation. Even though most breeders feel the eclectus parrot is extremely sedentary, this is because their eclectus are almost always kept as pairs or singles in one cage or flight. Of those eclectus kept as pairs, the female is often spending extended periods of time within the nest box.

Most breeders have not had the priv-

ilege of observing their eclectus in group situations or they would see a very different behavior. The statements that eclectus parrots are dull birds would change immediately. They certainly do not have dull personalities. The energetic personality of an eclectus can also be seen in the young, handfed pet bird.

In the wild, eclectus parrots are most often seen in pairs or small groups. Sometimes they can be seen in very large groups within a fruiting tree. Eclectus are quite noisy and conspicuous with their loud, raucous vocalizations.

Their flight is somewhat slow with full deliberate wing beats having brief periods of gliding. Joseph Forshaw in *Parrots of the World*, relates that eclectus do not raise their wings above body level during their flights.

With the possibility of being somewhat slow in flight, the above description could be said of a lory. And a large lory would obviously be slower with its large body mass than a small lory or any of the lorikeets which are certainly fast on the wing.

In captivity, eclectus parrots are usually purchased as singles or pairs and pair bonding behavior is seldom observed. George Smith relates in his book, *Lovebirds and Related Parrots*, "The courtship has not been described save that the males make a seriously hollow-sounding *chee-ong chee-ong* or *bong-ing*. They make this sound year-round; but the intensity increases with courtship. Sometimes he may *bong* almost in the ear of his wife as he pursues his hen; and most particularly after she has entered the nest cavity. I have been told that males "flash" their red sides by suddenly lifting the wings or by taking short flights in the vicinity of the hens. When pairing, as with the hanging parrots and lovebirds, they frequently change sides."

Lories also show the same behavior in courtship except that it is done with

greater intensity. But how many eclectus breeders observe their males getting excited as George Smith describes?

I have been only one of very few eclectus breeders to have bred this species in a colony situation. After several years of infertility, I placed four pairs of eclectus parrots together within a 12 ft. flight that had four partitioned areas within that the birds could utilize as nesting booths. Each of these areas contained one nest box. To aid the stimulation of the males, I added an extra mature male. This made a total of five males and four females.

The behavior of the males within this colony situation changed dramatically. For years the males had appeared to be very lethargic as they only had a dominating mate to contend with. Now with other males in their direct vicinity, it was as if each male received a large dose of hormones as they immediately responded to the challenge of an opposing male. With a resurgence of energy they each immediately chose a mate and began to defend her from any advances by another male. Completely different personalities began to emerge. When pair bonding had occurred, a visual courtship was observed. Eye blazing, bobbing and "beaking" between the mates occurred. I actually observed a male hop over its mate on one occasion. This correlated to George Smith's description of mates frequently changing places. Only on rare occasions did I observe the wing-lifting behavior of the males and it was done as a reaction to another male instead of a courtship behavior. Now for the first time did I observe a lory behavior among the eclectus. This was the first time that I began to firmly believe that the eclectus may be a large lory in disguise.

When discussing my theory of eclectus being lorries, the topic of female dominance in eclectus is almost always brought up. First and foremost, have you ever seen a "wimpy" female lory? If there

ever was a dominate parrot, this behavior belongs to the lory group of parrots, both male and female. Lories, both as breeders and pets have very dominant personalities. They are not afraid of very many circumstances.

Taxonomists refer to the eclectus parrot as being related to the *Tanygnathus* parrots. In my experience the eclectus is certainly "closer" to the large lory group than it is to the Great-bills and Mueller's parrots. Both the Great-bill and the eclectus parrots are referred to in the german texts as *Edelpapagei* or "noble parrots." Certainly the Great-bill is a noble parrot but the eclectus is a noble and grandiose lory. The *Tanygnathus* parrots lay a three to four egg clutch while the eclectus lays a one to two egg clutch.

One of the greatest reasons for placing the eclectus parrot within the lory group is that it lays a one to two egg clutch. This is exactly the clutch size of the large lories and is so dissimilar to the larger clutch sizes of most of the large parrots.

Unlike almost all of the large parrots such as macaws, cockatoos and the *Tanygnathus* parrots, the eclectus is a light to moderate chewer. They do not destroy wooden perches and nest boxes as do other large parrots. The eclectus is very similar to the large lories in this behavior.

Dietary Needs

In *Parrots of the World*, Joseph Forshaw states that eclectus in the wild feed on fruits, nuts, seeds, berries, leaf buds, blossoms and nectar procured from the tree tops. Is it not surprising that this is also the diet of lories in the wild?

Although captive eclectus need to be fed fruit, seldom is a captive eclectus given nectar as a part of its regular diet. For those eclectus breeders who supplement their diet with nectar, it is not surprising that the nectar is one of the first food items these birds go to.

Eclectus have a large "true" stomach which is very long. This is an indication that their diet must consist of items that are both bulky and fibrous. This is obtained from fleshy fruits, leaves and blossoms. This is the same as the leaf-eating monkeys (langurs) with their extended stomachs. For the eclectus parrot that this is only a slight variation of a lory's diet which includes more pollen and nectar. The nectar is used by lories

to add subcutaneous fat which is quickly burnt off with their energetic behavior. The similarities in their dietary needs gives credence to the concept of the eclectus being a lory.

Eclectus parrots are not primary seed-eaters and must be given green foods and fruit. In the past years, the eclectus parrot was plagued with *candidiasis* produced by an infection of yeast-like molds. This was thought to be strongly linked with the lack of Vitamin A. Vitamin A is synthesized in the body from carotenes, which gives the color to plants. Seeds are generally very low in carotenes. Green foods in the form of blossoms, buds and nectar is used to fortify eclectus in the wild. In captivity, green foods including fruits and vegetables should always be given to eclectus parrots. Seeds should be fed in minimum amounts.

I personally feed eclectus parrots on a regular basis, two times a day. This is similar to their feeding habits in the wild when they have two main feeding times (morning and dusk). Eclectus can often become very radical in their behavior when given a nutritionally deficient diet. They can show very erratic behaviors both as babies and as adults.

Giving a nutritionally balanced diet on a regular basis to eclectus is important. This is similar to lories which absolutely must have a routine schedule in their feeding times. They must replenish their energy and nutrition both in the morning and evening and periodically throughout the day. They should not be without food and this is also important for eclectus.

Although the lory's tongue with its brush-tipped papillae is different than the eclectus' smooth tongue surface, this does not mean the eclectus parrot cannot obtain nectar from a bowl. Just provide some to the eclectus and you will soon see the nectar begin to disappear. I have observed the tongues of several young (3 to 18 months of age) eclectus and they are somewhat different in shape than those of the cockatoo, macaw and Amazon. The tip of the eclectus tongue is thinner and flatter than those of the other parrots which have a well defined pad for holding solid food items. The eclectus' thin tongue enables it to consume the juices of fleshy fruits and nectar. If the lory tongue, which narrows towards the end, lacked its brush-like papillae, it would, in my opinion,

be very similar to that of the eclectus.

Although this is my opinion, I know for sure that the eclectus parrot must be given a nutritionally sound diet that includes a variety of fruits and vegetables. Why not try one of the lory nectar foods that are commercially available? It will increase the eclectus' consumption of many of the amino proteins lacking in many parrot diets and they will certainly enjoy it.

Size and Color

Joseph Forshaw gives a measurement of 31 cm (12.4 in.) for the Black-capped Lory versus 35cm (14 in) for the Eclectus Parrot. The large lories and the eclectus are very close to being the same size. The large lories of the *Lorius* genus are much more stocky than the rainbow type of lories and they have a squared or rounded tail. They have the same outline form of the eclectus.

The dominant colors of the large lories are red, green and blue/purple. Guess what the main colors of the eclectus parrot are? Yes, they are red, green and blue/purple.

One big difference is that the eclectus parrot divides these dominant colors by sex; even so, both sexes have these colors somewhere on their bodies.

When observing colorful birds in the wild, the colors red and green turn black under the canopy. When the sun hits a green bird, it is reflected as the green of the forest vegetation. Seldom does the red eclectus parrot perch in the sunlight. If they do reflect the sunlight, they are generally on the move and the necessity of camouflage is not needed. While observing the female eclectus parrot in New Guinea and Australia, they were always dark and were lost in the canopy. Why should not there be a large lory that is sexually dimorphic?

Being an advocate of adaptation (not evolution) I often wondered if both sexes of the eclectus could have originally been green or red. Quite surprising, while reading from George Smith's book, *Lovebirds and Related Birds*, I found the following:

"Females [Eclectus] are said to be less common, yet captive records show that the sexes are born in approximately equal numbers for of 73 birds, 38 were hens. We do not know the age of the wild population, nor have we any population counts; but some explanation ought to be offered to explain

this apparent (or real?) disparity in numbers between the sexes. One explanation that must immediately be scotched is that because the hens are red, and therefore more brilliantly-colored (to us), they are more easily caught by predators. It is observed that a red parrot sitting just inside a canopy of leaves, in bright sunlight, is perfectly well-camouflaged; for, in the broken shadows of disrupted light coming from the green leaves, red becomes a dark shadow and inconspicuous. Hen eclectuses, like the red lorries, the red king-parakeets and red shining-parrots are seemingly this color because it is cryptic. For they are not red poppies in a field of growing wheat but a dark shadow in a tree full of shadows. If it happens that more hen Eclectus are killed by predators than males then the selective pressures to have cryptic plumage is higher. Therefore their redness is the consequence of a positive selection for this hue. Were they green, like the males, then even more would be killed. Perhaps they are killed inside the nesting hole. It appears that the "original" color of Eclectus is red and that selection has colored the male green."

Lastly, the beak color of the eclectus parrot is bright orange and black, the same as can be found in the lory group.

Taxonomy

In reading many books of an older vintage, I see where taxonomists have changed the genus name of the eclectus parrot from *Lorius* to *Eclectus*. Why did they originally give the eclectus the genus name of *Lorius* which should have been given to a group of lorries.

Not surprising, taxonomists *did* give the genus *Lorius* to a group of lorries sometime in the middle of the 1900s. This group of lorries including the Chattering and Black-capped Lorries and all of the large lorries I have mentioned at the beginning of this article. These large lorries originally were given the genus name of *Domicellus*.

In my opinion, they should have left the eclectus parrot in the genus *Lorius* and added the other large lorries to it. They are all similar in size and color (especially if the eclectus was "originally" red in both sexes), behavior and in their dietary needs. Would the taxonomists have called the eclectus the Red and Green Lory? or as I often fantasize, should it have been called the Grand Lory? For it is indeed the grandest

lory of them all. Why, they now call it the Grand Eclectus!

Although I will probably never change anyone's thinking, I will always enjoy keeping and reproducing this

Grand Lory. For when it clings to the side of its cage or stands on a perch, it will turn its head in an inquisitive manner giving me an all-knowing look and I truly know it is a Lory! ➔

This beautiful watercolor by Susie Christian depicts a pair of eclectus parrots in the center, a Black-capped Lory on top and a Chattering Lory at the bottom. The similarity of size, color, shape and color of the beaks, among other things, have convinced Dale Thompson and others that these species all belong in the same genus.

"Loryeclectus" — Kissin' Cousins!!

by Susie Christian
Morro Bay, California

Since my only roommates consist of nine Eclectus, and a plain ol' garden variety, Red Lory, I do have an opinion that they are *very* related.

First of all, the most obvious is the feather quality. Eclectus have hair-like feathers covering their heads and neck, and as I look at my lory, she also has soft, fine "hair-feathers." The general body shape and head structure of both parrots is also very close in my opinion. The lory's beak is so close in color to the male Eclectus; plus, shape-wise, it looks like an elongated Eclectus beak.

My lory is allowed the run of the house 24 hours, so I am able to watch her climb all over the Eclectus cage, and interact with them. Her favorite playmate is a male Biaki Eclectus, who is extremely animated and playful. The Biaki subspecies is on the small end of the Eclectus group, about the size of a Solomon Eclectus. They are never still for a minute. Inquisitive and charged with energy, the Biakis have an electric tension that equals and sometimes surpasses that of my lory. These pint sized Eclectus hang upside down from their perches, and are constantly into everything. Animation should be their middle name! I also find my Red-sided Eclectus is more active than the Vosmaeri Eclectus (which is one of the largest of the Eclectus). It seems that the larger they are, the more laid back they become.

One of the lory's favorite positions is

laying on her back, not surprising for a lory. I also have two Eclectus hens that are very comfortable on their backs. They do sea otter imitations of "riding the waves" in Morro Bay, quite comfortably in public, even with groups of people watching them.

I feel that the talking abilities are about the same in lorries and Eclectus. My lory says all the same words as does the Eclectus. Yes, the Eclectus do have a more slender tongue than other species of parrots and I've noticed that they use their tongues in a more probing motion, which is so much like the lorries.

As for food selection, both groups of birds (Eclectus and lorries) will pick out berries, grapes, pomegranates or any nectar-type of fruit as their first choice from the food dish. Both groups will throw out the boring stuff, only to investigate much later.

I have noticed that neither group really want to use a foot to hold their food. They will pick food up with their beaks but will place it back in the food dish rather than hold it in one of their feet.

Whether readers will agree with me or not, I sincerely feel that somewhere back in time (who knows how far), that both lorries and Eclectus were much more similar in appearance and that they evolved over the years to look as they appear today. They used to be brothers and sisters; nowadays it is probably more like first cousins. ➔