Australian Parakeets

by Warwick Remington Ballarat, Victoria, Australia

ohn Gould is regarded by many as the father of ornithology in Australia. In 1839 he wrote of our parrots "no group of birds gives Australia so foreign an air as the numerous species of this great family each and all of which are very abundant."

This statement is largely true today with most parrot species being found in good numbers in the wild. However two species, the Night Parrot and the Paradise Parrot, do verge on the brink of extinction. Some would argue that the Paradise Parrot has already gone the way of the Dodo. Many of our Australian species have adapted well to European settlement and can now be found in and around our cities and towns.

Of the 330 parrot species found throughout the world, 60 or so occur in Australia. This diversity of species is not matched by the parrots from any other country. From our Cockatoos, both black and white, to the tiny fig parrots of the Queensland rain forest, the range of species is incredibly diverse. Habitat obviously plays an important role when it comes to the diversity of our many parrot species.

It should be noted that there is obviously a close affinity between the cockatoos, Eclectus parrot, lorikeets and fig parrots of New Guinea and the Islands to Australia's north and our own endemic species. However, many of the other Austalian species are unique members of the parrot family.

The history of aviculture in Australia shows that parrots have been kept and bred in captivity for at least 150 years. In the early days stocks of birds were easily replenished by trapping, however, in the last 30 years stocks have been maintained and increased by successful captive breeding. Wild-trapped birds were usually more difficult to establish in captivity than those that are (now) aviary-bred. The keeping of non-domesticated pet birds in single cages has decreased dramatically over this same period of time due to the implementation of wildlife protection laws.

Unlike American and English aviculturists, Australians are fortunate to be able to keep native species in captivity under license.

Many species are now bred in such numbers that disposal of excess birds can be difficult. Some aviculturists now choose not to breed from the common species as there is no demand for youngsters bred. Ironically, species such as the Princess Parrot and the Scarlet-chested Parrot, which are two of Australia's rarest species in the wild, fit into this category.

With the large numbers of birds being bred in certain species the inevitable production of mutations has occurred. Many Australian aviculturists are now specializing in the breeding of color mutations in their various forms. In recent times, however, there seems to be more aviculturists expressing concern that some species are beginning to lose genetic integrity.

A concerted effort is also being made by some breeders to keep both species and subspecies genetically pure. For example, in recent years those keeping species such as the Port Lincoln Parrot or its subspecies, the Twenty Eight Parrot, have begun to carefully select birds that are true to type. In my opinion this augers well for the future of our hobby in Australia.

Intestinal worms have been a problem with aviary birds for many years. The high susceptibility of Australian parrots to this problem was first recognized in the 1960s. Most Australian species, with the exception of lorikeets and some cockatoos, are ground feeding birds. When kept in confinement (often in damp aviaries) the likelihood of worm infestation is very high. The popularity of Australian parrots worldwide in the 1960s and the 1970s probably stimulated the early veterinary research into this prevalent aviary disease.

Housing

Traditionally Australian parrots have been kept in open flighted aviaries with an attached shelter section. Fortunately the climate in Australia is mild enough to allow parrots to be kept out of doors.

In recent times lorikeet breeders realized the merits of housing their birds in suspended flights. Despite the fact that lorikeet breeders seem to be utilizing dry diets to a greater extent, these birds still have liquid droppings which are best suited to suspended aviary floors.

Apart from some of the small lorikeets and grass parakeets, an all-steel aviary is recommended to avoid the prob-

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lem of birds chewing aviary wood work. Double wire between flights is also required as most Australian parrots will squabble through the wire and in some cases injuries can occur. Half inch weldmesh is the most common wire used in aviary construction for all Australian parrots, as distinct from the cockatoos, which require heavy gauge wire.

Some aviculturists have been successful in breeding certain parrot species on a colony system. I have seen the *neophemas*, lorikeets and the Princess Parrot bred on the colony system. Rarely have I seen colonies work successfully when species are mixed. It is generally accepted that one pair to an aviary will produce better breeding results.

Feeding

The key to maintaining in good health the birds in your care is the supply of a well balanced diet.

Most Australian parrots in the wild eat a wide variety of food which includes fruits, seeds and berries. Their diet is largely seasonal which can be duplicated to some extent in the aviary. Different forms of green food, berries and fruits are available for limited times throughout the year and can be fed when they are in season.

Prior to the breeding season it is important to increase the supply of green food, seeding grasses and soaked seed. When feeding green food and seeding grasses it is always wise to check that it is uncontaminated by animals or chemical sprays. Soaked seed should be soaked in water treated with an antibacterial solution. Fruit in the form of apples, oranges and grapes is also appreciated.

These additions will help stimulate pairs into breeding, as the extra foods given mirrors conditions in the wild prior to breeding. When youngsters hatch it is also important to continue a regular daily supply of these additives. Vitamin supplements are very easy to include with soaked seed. Some aviculturists in Australia also feed plain cake and whole grain bread to parrots feeding youngsters.

The feeding of Australian lorikeets is a subject in its own right. Lorikeet breeders in Australia are now widely using dry food mixes as a staple food diet. To this they add a liquid nectar formula as well as a variety of fruit in season.

Trichoglossus - Psitteuteles - Glossopsitta

Australia has seven members of the lorikeets family and all are reasonably well established in aviculture. They are nomadic birds in the wild and can often be seen in large numbers where nectar producing blossoms are found. In my home city of Ballarat we have the pleasure of seeing three species, the Musk Lorikeet, Little Lorikeet and the Purple-crowned Lorikeet when the eucalyptus are flowering.

There is obviously a close affinity between the Australian lorikeets and those from New Guinea and Indonesia. The Rainbow Lorikeet and Red-collared Lorikeet are but two of the 21 subspecies of *baematodus* recognized by Forshaw. These 21 subspecies range from Tanzania through Australia's eastern and northern coastal forests to New Guinea, Indonesia and South West Pacific Islands.

Our Varied Lorikeet also shows many similarities to Goldie's Lorikeet of New Guinea.

In the early days of Australian aviculture lorikeets were kept on poor diets, often being fed seed only. This of course led to the lorikeets being difficult to maintain and breed in captivity. Over the past 15 years lorikeet breeders have begun to improve the dietary requirements of these birds.

As aviary birds the lorikeets are both active and noisy inmates. They are also aggressive towards other species but will live and breed in colonies with their own kind.

The advantages of cleanliness and disease control make suspended aviaries the best choice in housing lorikeets. For those keeping lorikeets in other than suspended aviaries, concrete floors are a necessity. As lorikeets are active birds I recommend a minimum aviary size of 9 ft. x 2.5 ft. The smaller lorikeets have also been kept and bred in large planted aviaries without damage to plant life.

Lorikeets that are now kept in suspended aviaries should be wormed on a regular basis.

Both the Rainbow and Red-collared Lorikeets are hardy aviary birds which has enabled them both to become well established in captivity.

Over the last 15 years the smaller lorikeets have also been established in aviculture. The Purple-crowned, Little and Musk Lorikeets have all responded well to the improved diets being used by breeders.

The Varied Lorikeet on the other hand is considered by most breeders to be the most difficult of the Australian lorikeets to breed. As this species inhabits northern Australia it has not adapted easily to the colder conditions provided to it in southern aviaries.

Although numerous color mutations of Australian lorikeets have been bred over the years, the Olive Scaly-breasted Lorikeet is the only established mutation in Australian aviaries. The Olive Scaly-breasted has been hybridized with other lorikeet species in an attempt to introduce the olive mutation. I have grave reservations regarding the breeding of mutations by this method.

A number of hybrids have been recorded within the Lorikeet family. One of the most unusual hybrids occurred in Victoria where a Rainbow Lorikeet hybridized with an Australian King Parrot.

All Australian lorikeet species can be difficult to sex by observation, so surgical sexing is advisable. Lorikeet breeding has benefitted greatly from the introduction of this method of sexing.

Cyclopsitta

Australia has three of the eight subspecies of the Double-eyed Fig Parrot, which are found in northeastern Australia. The other members of this species are found in New Guinea and its surrounding islands.

Australia's three subspecies are the Red-browed Fig Parrot *C.d. macleayana*, the Blue-browed Fig Parrot *C.d. coxeni* and the Marshall's Fig Parrot *C.d. marshalli*. Of the three only the Red-browed Fig Parrot is currently found in aviculture. Whilst stocks of these lovely little birds are low, a few breeders are now beginning to have some success with them. Those who have bred them recommend they not be fed an oily or fattening diet as they do tend to become overweight rather quickly. They also take live food in the form of mealworms, especially when breeding.

The Blue-browed Fig Parrot is an extreme rarity in the wild. It was recently observed in the mountainous rain forests of southeastern Queensland after a long absence from bird lists.

Marshall's Fig Parrot is found on the eastern side of Cape York Peninsula but is not kept in captivity at present.

Aprosmictus

The Red-winged Parrot is the only

member of this genus found in Australia. Another member inhabits Timor and adjacent islands to the north of Australia.

There are two recognized subspecies of the Red-winged Parrot found in Australia. The nominate form occurs in northern New South Wales and southern Queensland. A smaller and generally duller subspecies is found across the top section of the Australian continent.

It is probably only the last 10 to 15 years that aviary bred stocks of this species have become available to aviculturists. In the past, trapped birds were the only birds available to breeders and, unfortunately, heavy losses were recorded. Many birds brought from the north to southern aviaries seemed to fade away within weeks of arrival. This problem was finally overcome when trapped birds were fed on a diet of soaked maize before being weaned onto hard seed.

Red-winged Parrots can become quite spiteful when breeding so pairs should be kept in isolation. A log or box up to six feet in length is often successful in enticing them to nest. If the log extends to ground level you will find they nest at this level. I have also seen Redwinged Parrots nest and rear youngsters

on the ground in a quiet corner of the aviary. If this occurs it is wise to provide them a little privacy by placing a low wall between the brooding hen and the aviary front.

Adult birds can be sexed visually. However, young birds cannot be sexed until adult plumage is attained at two to three years.

Alisterus

There is only one member of this genus found in Australia, with two other members occurring in New Guinea and the Moluccas. The range of the King Parrot extends down the forested mountain areas of the east coast of Australia. A subspecies of the Australian race occurs in far north Queensland. It varies from the nominate race by being slightly smaller.

Like the Red-winged Parrot the King Parrot prefers a long log extending to the ground level. When a compatible pair is obtained they make quite good breeders. If King Parrots fail to nest the pair should be swapped around until a compatible pair is obtained.

The sexing of immature birds can be difficult so surgical sexing is an option that can be used to overcome this problem. Young birds attain adult plumage at about two years of age.

Eclectus

There are 10 subspecies of Eclectus Parrots found in New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Australia's Cape York Peninsula. Only one of the ten subspecies *E.r. macgillivrayi* which is the largest of the subspecies, occurs in Australia.

Aviary stocks of our own subspecies are very low, having only entered aviculture in recent years. There are, however, good numbers of the New Guinea race which have been kept and bred in our country for many years. It is probable that this aviary population is not genetically pure as the original aviary stocks originated from indeterminate sources. They are popular aviary birds which can breed quite freely when given suitable dietary and housing conditions.

Successful breeders with this species all mention the importance of feeding a varied fruit diet.

Polytelis

There are three members of this genus found in Australia. The Princess

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Parrot, Superb Parrot and Regent Parrot are all popular aviary birds in Australia.

All three species are well established with large aviary populations. The Princess Parrot is rare in the wild and the Superb parrot is now becoming rare as well.

The only subspecies recorded for this genus is the western race of the Regent Parrot. The males of this subspecies are not as brightly colored as the nominate form.

As these birds are ground feeders from arid regions in the wild, they do pick up intestinal worms easily in captivity. The Princess Parrot is, in my opinion, the most susceptible of all Australian parrots to worm infestation. Regular medication for worms as well the provision of clean dry aviary conditions is essential.

The three species are sexually dimorphic when they reach adult plumage at two years of age.

One feature that is unique to the Princess Parrot is the spatula wing feather found on adult male birds. I am not aware of any other species displaying a spatula feather.

Lathamus

Historically many regarded the Swift Parrot as a member of the lorikeet family. In the wild they feed and move through the forest canopy like lorikeets. Their diets in the wild, however, includes a large proportion of insects, berries and fruit.

The Swift Parrot normally breeds in the island state of Tasmania and its surrounding islands and migrates to southeastern Australia during the autumn and winter.

This species has in the past been largely unsuccessful in Australian aviaries.

During recent years, with the introduction of improved aviary feeding, reasonable numbers are now being produced. For many years European breeders have done well with Swift Parrots.

Females tend to be less brightly colored than males. However, surgical sexing is recommended.

Purpureicephalus

The sole member of this genus is the Red-capped Parrot of the forested areas of south western Australia.

Unless handreared, this species tends to be a very nervous aviary inmate. They often fly about the aviary with reckless abandon when disturbed. An aviary of at least 15 ft. in length is desirable as it allows them a little more privacy.

Although they are nervous aviary birds, they do breed quite well in captivity.

Females tend to be duller versions of the male birds.

Platycercus

The rosella family is one of the largest Australian parrot families. All members are represented in Australian aviculture and most are well established in other parts of the world.

As most members of this family are usually pugnacious they should be kept one pair to an aviary. Some pairs may also fight, causing the death of a partner.

Apart from the Western Rosella all members show little sexual dimorphism, so surgical sexing is recommended.

Rosellas are easy to care for with regard to diet as they will thrive on a mixed seed diet with the addition of green food, soaked seed and fruit.

The Green Rosella from Tasmania is the largest member of the rosella family. Until recent years it was uncommon in Australia's mainland aviaries. Fortunately, numbers increased. The reason for this increase in numbers is probably due to improved husbandry techniques as well as the high value placed on these birds during the last 10 to 15 years.

Probably the most beautiful member of the rosella family is the Crimson Rosella, which is a common aviary bird. There are, however, very few bred in captivity due, in part, to their low value and the ease with which illegally taken birds find their way into aviculture. There are a number of recognized subspecies recorded, with the notable ones being known as the Adelaide Rosella and the Yellow Rosella.

As its name suggests the Eastern Rosella inhabits the southeastern section of Australia, including Tasmania. There are two recorded subspecies, the first being the Golden-mantled Rosella *P.e. cecilae* being found in the northern parts of the range. The second subspecies *P.e. diemenensis* from Tasmania differs from the nominate race in having much larger white cheek patches.

Eastern Queensland is the home of the Pale-headed Rosella and its three subspecies. Each of the subspecies is differentiated by the amount of blue shown on the head and neck region. All three subspecies are well established in Australian aviaries.

The Northern Rosella is found in the north of Australia. In captivity the nominate race is reasonably well established, although in Australia they are still the most expensive of the Rosella family. However, a little known subspecies *P.v. billi* is not well known in aviculture. The cheek patches of this subspecies are violet blue.

The smallest member of the rosella family is the Western Rosella. It is found in the southwest corner of Western Australia. As an aviary bird they are very popular, being free breeders and brightly colored. There is only one recorded subspecies, the Red-backed Western Rosella P.i. zanthogenys. It is distinguished from the nominate race by having more red in the back, paler yellow cheek patches and a grayish-green rump. This subspecies has received a great deal of interest from aviculturists in recent years. Unfortunately many of the birds being sold as the Redback form do not possess all the necessary plumage characteristics.

Geoffroyus

The Red-cheeked Parrot from Cape York Peninsula is one of 16 subspecies. All other members of this genus are found in the islands to the north of Australia.

This species, although not uncommon in the wild, is unknown to aviculture in Australia and elsewhere. Very few members of this genus have ever been kept in captivity. They have been described as being very delicate.

It is to be hoped that in the future aviculturists will have the opportunity of keeping and feeding these lovely birds.

Barnardius

This particular genus of broad tailed parrots has been classified by various ornithologists in a number of different arrangements. Forshaw recognizes two species: the Port Lincoln and the Mallee Ringneck Parrot. Each of these species having three subspecies.

Aviculturists in Australia keep the Port Lincoln Parrot and its subspecies, the Twenty Eight Parrot. In recent years increased efforts have been made to breed pure strains of both races. The Port Lincoln Parrot should have a pure yellow belly and no red on the forehead. The Twenty Eight Parrot should show a pale green belly and red on the forehead. Many aviary birds show markings

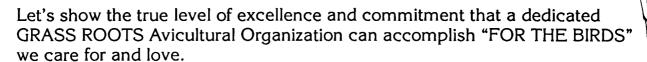


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which indicate that cross-breeding of the two races has occurred in the past. The Port Lincoln Parrot and its subspecies are found in the western regions of Australia whereas the Mallee Ringneck Parrot and its subspecies occur in eastern Australia.

The nominate race, the Mallee Ringneck, is found in good numbers in captivity. Once a compatible pair is obtained they can become reliable breeders. Aviculturists in our country have always prized the subspecies known as the Cloncurry Parrot. Its soft pastel colorings make it a truly lovely bird.

All members of the *Barnardius* genus show little sexual dimorphism, so surgical sexing is recommended.

Psephotus

This genus of parrots contains two distinct groups. The first being the Redrumped Parrot and the Mulga Parrots. The second embraces the "Ant Hill Parrots": the Hooded, Golden-shouldered and Paradise Parrots. These parrots are referred to as "Ant Hill" parrots because of their habit of nesting in termite mounds.

Both the Mulga and Red-rumped Parrots are quite common in the wild, a fact that certainly does not apply to the second group, known as the "Ant Hill" parrots.

The Red-rumped Parrots, including its many color mutations, are extremely common in Australian aviaries. In early years the Mulga Parrots was known as a delicate bird, however in recent times this species has become firmly established in captivity.

The Hooded Parrot is the best known of the "Ant Hill" parrots and has now increased its Australian aviary numbers tremendously. Together with the closely related Golden-shouldered Parrot they have a reputation of nesting in our colder winter months and not brooding their chicks after ten days of age. Many aviculturists have overcome this problem with the use of heated nesting boxes. Having bred a number of Hooded Parrots over the years, I would recommend that they be prevented from bathing when they have chicks under three weeks of age. I find that when they bathe they return to the log to feed youngsters, which causes the log to become quite damp.

John Gould named the Paradise Parrot *Pulcherrimus* which means most beautiful or most fair. This description is very appropriate for this particularly beautiful bird. Unfortunately this species verges on extinction and many ornithologists consider it to be already extinct. From time to time unconfirmed reports of sightings of this species occur. Let us hope that this lovely species still survives within its range of northeast New South Wales and southeast Queensland.

All members of this family are easily sexed when adult plumage is obtained.

Northiella

The Blue Bonnet Parrot with its two subspecies was previously classified with the *Psephotus* Parrots. This species is without doubt the most aggressive of the Australian parrots. It is definitely a species that needs to be kept one pair to an aviary.

The nominate Yellow-vented and the Red-vented race are found in arid regions of New South Wales, Victoria and parts of south Australia, the Red-vented birds being found in the northern reaches of their range. A second subspecies known as the Little Blue Bonnet is found in the southeast of western Australia. In contrast to the yellow and red-vented races this subspecies is not well represented in Australian aviaries. Wildlife authorities in west Australia have recently given selected aviculturists in that state some wild-caught birds to breed with. This project has seen an increase in captive numbers.

Aviculturists have in recent years been careful in not mixing the yellow-vented and red-vented races. The two points to note when differentiating these birds are that the red-vented should show red median wing-coverts and aqua wing shoulders. In contrast the yellow-vented birds have olive median wing coverts and bright blue wing shoulders.

Neophema

There are seven members of this family of small grass parrots. All but the Orange-bellied Parrot are well known to aviculture in Australia. The popularity of this group of parrots has contributed greatly to the hobby of aviculture worldwide.

They have adapted well to captivity and breed quite freely. All species show sexual dimorphism which has, I am sure, contributed to their excellent breeding capabilities.

When observing *Neophemas* in the wild, the most notable feature seen is their very small size.

The Bourke's Parrot, being the only

non-green member of the genus, inhabits arid areas of central Australia. This species, with its color mutations, is a well established and popular aviary bird in our country

Both the Elegant and Blue-winged Parrots are very similar in appearance, so some care should be taken when selecting birds for breeding. I have noticed a number of birds in our country that have obviously been hybrids between these two species. Both species are well established both in the wild and in captivity in Australia.

It is only in recent times that Rock Parrot numbers have begun to increase to a position where they are now easy to obtain. Whilst they are not at all rare in the wild, they were historically considered a difficult bird to breed in captivity. This species does not appear to be well represented in aviculture outside Australia.

The beautiful Scarlet-chested Parrot is a real rarity in the wild. They are only sighted on odd occasions in various locations throughout their Central Australian range. I once recall one of Australia's eminent "parrot men," Len Robinson, describe his first sighting of this species in the wild. He said that the sighting of a lone female Scarlet-chested parrot "brought a tear to his eye." This, I think, amply demonstrates its rarity. In captivity this species has thrived and is found in good numbers throughout the world.

The Orange-bellied Parrot is the rarest of the Neophemas in the wild with possibly less than 200 birds remaining. Their numbers are holding on with the recent captive-breeding program being undertaken, which suggests the future for this species is reasonably bright. The Department of Lands, Parks and Wildlife in Tasmania has bred a number of birds in captivity, some of which have been successfully released into the wild flock. The 1993-94 breeding season saw 33 youngsters being reared in captivity by the DLPW. Another 30 youngsters were bred in the wild in nest boxes provided for their use. In addition to these birds, a further 31 birds were mist-netted, which brings the total of youngsters bred to 94. This is without doubt one of the most successful breeding seasons on record for this endangered member of the Neophema family.

They are a migratory species with the birds breeding in the rugged southwest of Tasmania. Following the breeding season they cross Bass Strait to mainland Victoria where they winter in Museum (Sydney) discovered the decaycoastal regions. Museum (Sydney) discovered the decaying body of a Night Parrot alongside an

There are no Orange-bellied Parrots in private aviculture in Australia.

Melopsittacus

The Budgerigar is one of the world's most popular cage birds. Its suitability for adaption to cage life is well recognized. This species has been bred for many years throughout the world and can now be seen in numerous color formats.

Unfortunately in Australia aviary stocks of the "wild type" Budgerigar are low. In recent times some aviculturists (myself included) have shown interest in breeding these delightful little birds.

During the last two years Budgerigar show breeders have imported English show stock, which has further removed any similarity between the "wild type" and show birds.

In the wild this species is quite common and ranges over most of inland Australia where suitable conditions exist. They can be seen in huge flocks and have been known to darken the sky when flying overhead. Alec Chisholm in his book *Bird Wonders of Australia* refers to a man recording 60,000 dead Budgerigars at a single dam in 1931 during heat wave conditions.

Pezoporus

The Ground Parrot is the only member of this genus. They are shy terrestrial birds and are largely nocturnal, being found in heath lands and swampy areas of the eastern Australian coastline as well as coastal Tasmania. A subspecies *P.w. flaviventris* is found in southern coastal regions of West Australia.

This species has only on rare occasions been represented in aviculture. There are no records of captive breeding. Stan Sindel of Sydney recently received wildlife authority permission to work with this species. To date he has not been successful in encouraging them to breed.

Geopsittacus

The Night Parrot is one of Australia's rarest birds. Historically this species ranged over a large area of inland Australia. It must now exist only in small isolated pockets in parts of its former range. The demise of this species is probably largely due to the introduction of animals such as the European Fox and feral cats.

In 1990 a scientist from the Australian

Museum (Sydney) discovered the decaying body of a Night Parrot alongside an outback Queensland road. This was the first confirmed sighting of this species since the early part of this century.

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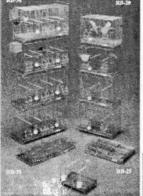
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"If it be desired to try and get a pair to breed, a few mealworms or daddy-long-legs may be added to the ordinary diet, but even these should never be offered to a solitary Leadbeater, kept as a pet in a cage, or chained to an ordinary parrot stand; for the degree that, where they are unable to gratify their inclinations in the natural way, they, very frequently, turn to and strip themselves of every feather they can reach..."

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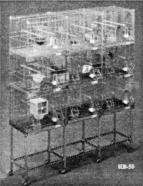
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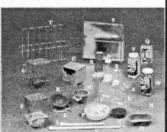
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COLOR CARE - (to get show results) - Beta-thin red / yellow & Nacho's red / yellow - Color enhancer with excellent results.

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SUNSHINE BIRD SUPPLIES

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