

Australian Grasskeets

The Perfect Aviary Birds

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Photos by Jon Marhenke

We consider Australian grasskeets to be the perfect community aviary birds. They are colorful and active, with pleasant, quiet calls. They are generally compatible with smaller birds such as finches, yet bold enough to mix with some larger parakeets such as Princess and Barrabands. We raise the four species that are readily available to breeders in California: the Scarlet-chested, Turquoise, Elegant and Bourke's.

Our aviary was designed to house Neophemas and other smaller Australian species, giving special attention to the climatic extremes in Central California of hot (110°+) summers and chilling and foggy winters. The aviary is of conventional construction with concrete floors with drains, T1-11 siding on the outside and hardboard and sheetrock interior with insulation in the ceiling. The hardboard is painted with an epoxy coating to facilitate periodic cleanup. The building has large screened openings low on the west and clerestory windows high on the east. This allows a natural convection of heat to leave the building and takes advantage of frequent evening breezes from the west in the summer. These windows may be closed in the winter so that the birds are protected from the chill breezes at that time of year. The 4 ft. wide flights attached to the east side of the building extend 4 ft. into the

An exterior view of the Marhenke aviaries.



These roomy exterior flights offer protection from inclement weather. The east-facing windows allow the morning sun into the aviaries and promote ventilation.

building and 8 ft. outside, giving the birds a protected area as well as extensive flying space in the open. The 8 ft. height of these flights was achieved by mounting 6 ft. wide 1/2 in. x 3 in. welded wire on a low concrete block wall. Inside the building several 8 ft. x 32 in. flights are arranged on the west side, with the remainder of the side devoted to 2 ft. x 2 ft. x 4 ft. suspended breeding cages. Access to feeding doors and access to flights is readily available from a 4 ft. wide central aisle. There is also a work area on the east side with sink, shelving and storage area for feed and other necessities.

Although the suspended cages keep the birds separated from droppings and spilled food and water, the 8 ft. high flights extending to the floor offer some significant advantages. Like most birds, ours prefer to sit near the top of the flight and look down on us, but during extremes of temperature, both hot and cold, the birds will usually be on the floor, taking advantage of the temperature buffering effect of the concrete. The birds also very much enjoy the direct sun streaming in through the clerestory windows in the early morning. Although the flights are separated by only a single wall of welded wire (1/2 in. x 1 in.) there is a minimum amount of fighting between the grasskeets, and in fact we often have more than one pair of

breeding birds in the same flight.

The exterior flights have dirt floors so that various nontoxic plants may be grown. However, unless protected by aviary wire the plants (garlic, chives, millet, spider plant, bluegrass, pineapple, guava and others) have succumbed to the birds who sooner or later discover the joy of digging in the dirt and eating the plant roots. The birds do spend many hours trimming the trees and shrubs planted outside the flights. Although one is often cautioned to avoid dirt floors because *Neophemas* are known to be susceptible to intestinal worms, none of our birds has ever tested positive for them.

During the nesting season, January through July, the birds are provided with conventional parakeet boxes mounted about 5 ft. from the floor to allow easy nest inspection. The same type of box is attached externally to the front of the breeding cages. Some of the pairs of birds seem to prefer a horizontally mounted 8 in. x 8 in. x 11 in. box with the entrance hole near the end of the long side. The hens do not like to sit in the middle of such a large box, so the concave depression should be very near a corner of the box opposite the opening. We put pine shavings in the box, which are used by some hens and completely removed by others.

The *Neophemas* breed in all three dif-

ferent types of enclosures. The smaller, suspended cages house individual pairs of grasskeets. While these smaller cages are perfectly adequate during nesting season, we move weaned juveniles and resting parents to larger flights for the fall and winter.

The more spacious flights, both with and without the structure, house several pairs of birds each. When setting up these community flights one has to observe the birds carefully for signs of incompatibility. Occasionally birds that have shared space together peacefully for months get aggressive when breeding season arrives. We have been successful breeding two pairs of Elegants or two pairs of Bourke's in the same flight. Most commonly we breed a pair of Bourke's along with a pair of the "green" grasskeets - Scarlet-chested, Turquoisines or Elegants. We never mix the different species of "green" grasskeets lest they hybridize. Another favorite combination is a pair of grasskeets along with a pair of larger *Polytelids* - Princess or Barrabands. To date attempts to mix the grasskeets with members of the *Psephotus* family have been unsuccessful - in each case as breeding season neared, the Red Rumps or Many-colored have attacked the grasskeets. A Hooded male interfered with the breeding of a pair of Scarlet-chested. Nearly every flight has its resident pair of Australian doves, and outside flights have Button Quail. We consider this one of the real pluses of raising *Neophemas*, we can raise them in the same aviary with other compatible Australian birds that we enjoy.

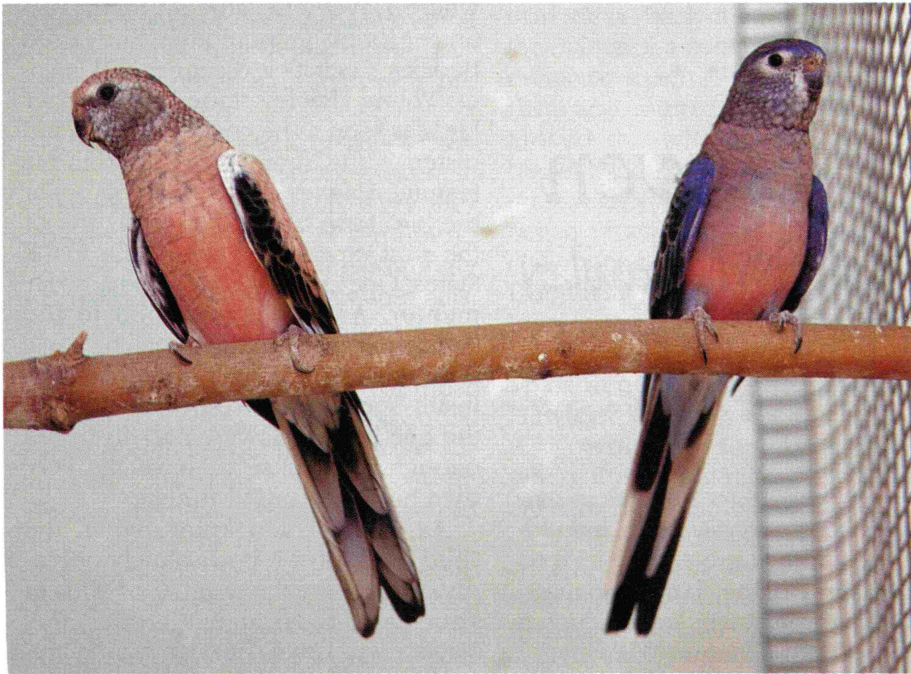
All of our birds are fed a basic diet of 44% parakeet seed, finch seed and a soft diet of cooked rice, cooked beans, canned corn and Roudybush breeder crumbles. Calcium and avian vitamins are added to the soft diet. Oyster shell and a mineral grit are always available to them. The birds enjoy home-grown Swiss chard, apples, oranges, or chickweed, depending on the season. When handfeeding is necessary, we use Roudybush Formula 3 Handfeeding Formula.

We encourage you to design your own spacious Australian aviary including a variety of safe plants in or around it. Enjoy a mixed community aviary with Australian finches and doves. . . just be sure and include some beautiful grasskeets. *Neophemas* will reward you with years of pleasure and satisfaction. ➤

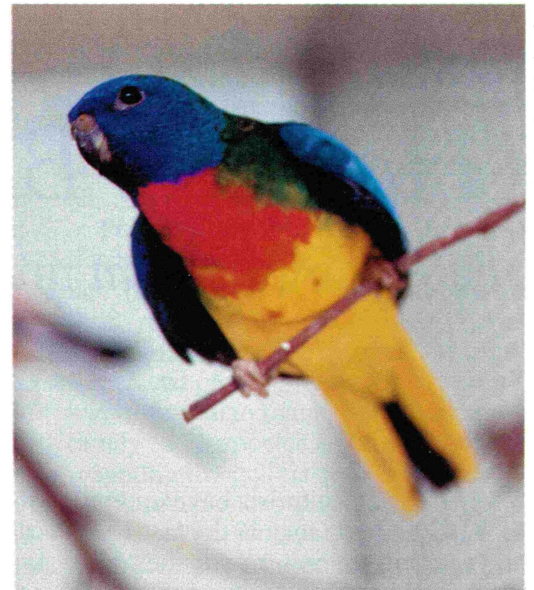


Photo by John Marhenke

This view of the interior flights shows the access doors and the interior trays upon which feed bowls are placed. Note the low placement of the west-facing window.



This female Rosy Bourke's and her split to Rosy male have raised babies for eight years.



Few aviary birds can match the brilliant colors of the male Scarlet-chested Parakeet.

Photos by Jon Marhenke



This male Turquoise Parakeet frequently checks on the nest box activity.



Elegant babies such as this one rarely leave the nest until fully feathered.



Two breeding pairs of elegants have been successfully raising babies in this interior flight.