

THE NEOPHEMAS...AUSTRALIAN AVIAN ICONS

By “Pulchella”

The genus *Neophema* consists of six species of small predominantly green parrots about 23cm (9”) in length. All show patches of brighter colour on various parts of their plumage. Four of the six species are popular aviary birds. The Rock Parrot, *Neophema petrophila*, is the least common in private aviculture; while the Orange-bellied Parrot, *N. chrysogaster*, is not permitted to be held by private individuals.

The four commonly held species have adapted well to avicultural conditions and are readily bred in captivity. Indeed, the Scarlet-chested Parrot, *N. splendida*, can now be considered to be completely domesticated. Established mutations exist in the Scarlet-chested, Elegant, Blue-winged and Turquoise parrots, and a cinnamon mutation of the Rock Parrot is becoming established. There is no known mutation of the Orange-bellied Parrot.

To enable fellow members to more fully understand these attractive little parrots, the following notes on their wild habitat and habits are offered. The species will be presented in the order they were first scientifically described.

THE ORANGE-BELLIED PARROT

Neophema chrysogaster

Latham, 1790



Photo: J.J. Harrison
South-west Conservation
Area, Tasmania
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The Orange-bellied Parrot is endemic to southern Australia, the adult male has bright grass-green upperparts, yellow underparts and an orange belly patch. Adult females and juveniles are dull green in colour. Both the adults and juveniles have a blue frontal-band and blue outer-wing feathers. Their staple diet consists of the seeds and berries of small coastal shrubs and grasses.

Breeding occurs in Tasmania, but the winter months are spent in coastal grasslands on southern mainland Australia. As the wild population is currently estimated to be fewer than fifty birds, it is a critically endangered species. In April 2010 the Australian Government decided to capture up to twenty of the remaining wild population to improve the genetic diversity of the birds in the existing government sponsored captive breeding programme.

Vocalisation consists of soft tinkling notes, and a distinctive rapidly repeated “chittering” call unlike that of other members of the *neophema* genus. A quickly repeated “tzeet” is used as an alarm call.

The Orange-bellied Parrot only breeds in south-west Tasmania, the preferred nesting sites are in eucalypts bordering grasslands that predominately consist of button grass, *Gymnoschoenus sphaerocephalus*.

When the entire population migrates to the coast of south-eastern Australia for the winter they congregate in their favoured salt marsh habitat, including sites in, or close to, Port Phillip such as Werribee Sewage Farm, the Spit Nature Conservation Reserve, the shores of Swan Bay, Swan Island, Lake Connewarre State Wildlife Reserve, Lake Victoria and Mud Islands, as well as French Island in Western Port. A few individuals also come to the Coorong area of South Australia.

The Orange-bellied Parrot is most commonly found in pairs or small flocks, usually on the ground or in low foliage searching for food. Their diet mainly consists of seeds, including those of the grass *Poa labillardieri*, Saltbush, *Atriplex cinerea*, Seabligh, *Suaeda australis*, and Sea Heath, *Frankenia pauciflora*. Berries, such as those of the introduced weed Looking Glass Bush, *Coprosma repens*, are also taken. There are also reports of them being observed eating Kelp (Phaeophyceae spp.).

The breeding season is from October to January with one brood per year being raised. Nesting occurs in a tree hollow, less than 5m (16') above ground level. A clutch consists of four or five white eggs with an average measurement of 20mm x 23mm (0.79 X 0.9 inches).

As the current wild population is at such a low level recent modelling suggests that on current trends the Orange-bellied Parrot will become extinct in the wild within five years. At present there are 160 birds in captive breeding programmes, all government controlled. The main captive population is at the Healsville Sanctuary in Victoria (eighty birds all descended from three pairs). The remainder being in Hobart and the Adelaide Zoo.

It is ironic that the first *Neophema* to be scientifically described looks like being the first to become extinct.

In the early 1970s a prominent South Australian aviculturist, the late Fred Lewitska, of the suburb of Broadview, bred the Orange-bellied Parrot, a world first. Mr. Lewitska managed to successfully hatch and rear young two years in a row, but unfortunately the short-sighted South Australian National Parks and Wildlife authorities of the time made him release his birds to the wild. If such an able bird breeder as Mr. Lewitska had been able to continue with his breeding programme, it is very likely there would now be many more Orange-bellied Parrots in captivity than is now the case.

Next month this series will feature the Turquoise Parrot. Ed.