

THE ANTHILL PARROTS

By Barry Schultz

In the April 2011 edition of *Bird Keeping In Australia* R.V.C. gave an overview of the Paradise Parrot, *Psephotus pulcherrimus*. As an addition to R.V.C's comments I have noticed two recent claimed sightings (2008 & 2009) of Paradise Parrots mentioned on the internet. In this article I would like to cover the other "Anthill" parrots - the Hooded, *Psephotus dissimilis*, and Golden-shouldered, *Psephotus crysopterygius*, parrots.

Status: The Hooded is classified as rare, possibly endangered in the wild. It inhabits the top end of the Northern Territory. In aviculture it has been neglected and has become harder to find in recent years.

The Golden-shoulder is also classified as rare, possibly endangered in the wild. These come from Cape York. In aviculture they appear more secure than when I first started breeding them in 1982 - from memory there were only eighteen kept in South Australia in that year. In fact if it was not for the efforts of a few dedicated people fighting to keep them, we would not be able to hold them in South Australia at all.

Both species are apparently suffering from habitat alteration as a result of changed burning practices.

Background: I have been fortunate enough to breed many of both species. Both can be very prolific, given compatible pairs and the right conditions. At times I have taken nest boxes out to give pairs a rest and they have still gone down - one pair rearing young on the ground under a water trough, while another tunneled under the cement floor of the walkway adjacent to their aviary! Up to fifteen young a year from a pair is not unusual!

The methods described below work for me in the Copper Triangle of South Australia where we have hot, dry summers and mild winters, but can have deep frosts when the birds are breeding in Autumn and Spring.

Always be conscious of where the species you keep come from - these birds are tropical. They will tolerate our colder southern climate, but you may have to modify your management to successfully breed them.

Housing: My aviaries are 3m long (shelter 1.8m, flight 1.2m) and 2.2m - 2.4m high. These dimensions suit the species, but were arrived at from the commercial materials available with minimal waste. The division walls are Hardiflex - I find that this diminishes the heat and cold better than iron sheeted walls. Flight divisions are light (1.2mm x 12.5 x 12.5) weld mesh, as these birds don't chew the wire, and it also suits other species I keep. If you need to keep other *psephotus* in adjacent aviaries double wiring would be an advantage as aggression can occur.



GOLDEN-SHOULDERED AVIARY

My aviaries have covered service walkways - these also act as safety flights and can save much grief if an important bird escapes. Mouse proofing is a must, as anyone in country South Australia will attest this year.

Water bowls are glazed pottery at waist height for easy cleaning and auto fill twice a day. Sprinklers come on every hour for five minutes if the temperature is over 30°C.

Floors are dirt/sand. I spray all my aviaries, perches & nest boxes several times a year with Insectigone (an artificial pyrethrum) - It comes as a liquid concentrate and has an advantage over Coopex in that it doesn't leave the white residue.

Feeding: My diet is fairly simple - approx 50% small parrot mix, 50% budgie mix and a little extra canary seed, fed in large open trays as they don't block if I'm not around for a few days. I feed soaked seed each morning and greens (silverbeet, seeding-grass, bok choy, saltbush *etc.*) in the afternoon. Golden-shoulders don't seem to take many greens normally, but the cock birds will always "give the plot away" the day chicks hatch by coming down to greens as soon as they are put in! Cuttlefish and grit are always in the aviary.



BOK CHOY
Brassica rapa chinensis
Photo: "JS"

Sexing: I won't go into a description of each species as there are many photos available. Adult birds are easily sexed as both species are dimorphic - the cock birds being much brighter than the hens.

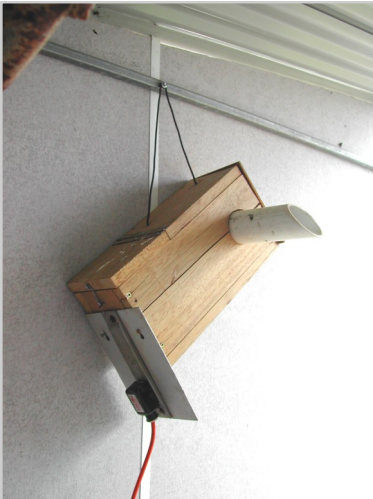
The simplest way to tell the difference between Golden-shoulders and Hoodeds is that both cock and hen Golden-shoulders have a yellow band above the cere - Hoodeds don't. Even the hens of each species, which do look very similar to the uninitiated, can easily be separated this way.

Young birds (both species) can be sexed from the nest. Young cock birds have much brighter ear-coverts than the hens. Hoodeds can become a little harder for a while after fledging, but are easy after their first moult.



Nest Boxes: These are wooden, approximately 400mm long, 150mm square and have a 50mm entrance hole. Golden-shoulders seem to prefer a spout - a piece of bamboo or 50mm plastic conduit will do, sliced at 45 degrees to allow

easy access from above. Nest material is a handful of course, sieved wood-dust and chips from the local wood-yard - Mallee root dust is excellent. Hoodeds don't seem as fussy and will generally accept a box without a spout. An inspection flap is situated over the nest chamber for easy access - I check chicks regularly. Hoodeds, in particular, can sometimes be a bit sloppy in their droppings and this can accumulate on toe nails, but this can easily be removed if a problem.



NEST BOX WITH HEATER

I hang all my boxes on about a 45 degree angle. All boxes can have a small 20 watt heat bar, on a heat sink, fitted to the base. By placing the box at an angle no thermostat is needed as the chicks will find their own comfort zone by easily moving up or down the box. Heating may be a contentious issue but in the wild both species use white ant mounds to nest in and I believe the nest chambers in these do not fall below 20°C. Both species, particularly Golden-shoulders, have an undeserved (in my opinion) reputation as poor parents. In the wild they don't have to brood their young after hatching. In my area I have placed a thermometer probe in a Hooded box

and recorded a minimum temperature of 1°C! We regularly have -3°C frost! *Psephotus* chicks aren't equipped to handle these temperatures. I have deliberately purchased supposed "poor parents", provided heated boxes and successfully reared chicks, With heat...if they hatch, they fly! (Heaters are only turned on the day chicks hatch)

Boxes are usually hung at about 1.6m. If a box is not accepted try it in a lower position - in the wild they tunnel into conical ant mounds at around 1m from the ground. In Darwin I have seen conical ant mounds transferred to an aviary and being used by Hoodeds - but not really practical here!

Breeding: If pairs are compatible, and conditions acceptable, breeding can occur in both Spring and Summer - sometimes continuously. A good cock bird will be very responsive if you whistle to him - standing up, squaring his shoulders and whistling back, telling you how good he is. Poor breeders will rarely do this.

In the wild both Hoodeds and Golden-shoulders are triggered to breed by the seasonal rains. I regularly trigger them, if it is dry (we only get approx 400mm of rain annually), with sprinklers on the aviary, to make them think the season is better than it actually is.

Another pair of *Psephotus* housed nearby can also stimulate a pair into breeding condition.



A GOLDEN-SHOULDERED FAMILY

Four to six eggs is the usual clutch, incubation takes approximately twenty-one days, fledging four to five weeks and independence about three weeks.

Compatibility: Both Hoodeds and Golden-shoulders can be aggressive to other birds. I do not house them with

other parrots but have kept Hoodeds in a large planted aviary with finches - they were very successful, breeding forty-three young in six years. I didn't notice any aggression toward the finches (which also bred well) but there were plenty of visual barriers to allow respite if required.

Cock birds can be very aggressive to their hens when they want them to nest, in extreme cases killing them! Cocks will usually push hens to nest by only allowing them to land on the nest box. If excess aggression is noticed, I recommend pulling a couple of flight feathers from one wing of the cock to unbalance him. This needs to be done as soon as the problem is noticed, if not it can be fatal for the hen. The cock will still be able to catch the hen but only when she is ready! Having said this, a good cock bird always has a bit of "attitude". Out of the breeding season the hen rules the roost.



YOUNG GOLDEN-SHOULDERED COCK

If for any reason you lose a hen and have to introduce a new one don't put it in with the

cock in his old territory. If you have to use the old aviary remove the cock, place the new hen in the aviary for a week or so, and then reintroduce the cock bird. Don't put a nest box in until you are happy with the "vibes".



ONE DAY OLD HOODEDS

Aggression to young can also occur if the cock wants the hen to go down again. Keep a close watch after young fledge and remove them if dad is a problem. I have had this happen within a week of fledging, moved the young to the aviary next door (luckily only containing Neophemas). The parents went to nest again, but continued to feed the young through the wire!



FIVE DAY OLD HOODEDS

Hoodeds seem to be more aggressive than Golden-shoulders, and all my “disasters” have been with Hoodeds.

Problems: Birds, in particular Anthill Parrots, are no different to any other stock. Murphy’s Law of Aviculture states: “Where you have live ones you will have dead ones!” Our job is to see that we don’t have too many of the latter.

The major problem I have experienced with these species has been worms, as both species spend much of their time fossicking on the ground. A regular worming routine is crucial. I use Moxidectin Plus in the water (5ml/ litre for 24 hours) or 0.1ml of Panacur 2.5, Combantrin or Moxidectin Plus direct to the crop using a crop needle.

Suitable housing is also a must. Draughty, damp quarters lead to stress and stress brings on its own set of problems.

Conclusion: The Anthill Parrots are quiet, attractive, challenging and delightful avicultural subjects. Given a little extra care and attention they will reward you with very satisfying results.

What a pity we don’t still have the Paradise to work with as well. Our job now is to see Hoodeds and Golden-shoulders don’t go the way of the Paradise.

All photos, except that of Bok Choy, by the author