

SCARLET CHESTED PARROTS IN THE WILD

By Barry Schultz



WILD SCARLET-CHESTED FEEDING

I, like most people, have a “Bucket List” - a list of things I want to do or see. I have been lucky in the last couple of months and been able to put ticks by two on my list. I was able to fly to Lake Eyre, Birdsville, the Channel country, Coongee Lakes and Innamincka in July. To see this country in flood was the experience of a lifetime. The second off my list was to be able to see Scarlet-chested Parrots, *Neophema splendida*, in the wild!

In mid August I was talking to friend in Kadina who casually mentioned that another mutual friend had recently seen Scarlets in the wild! What? I have kept and bred all the Neophemas we are legally able to keep in South Australia. I have seen Orange-bellieds, Elegants, Rocks and Turqs. and have always wanted to see Scarlets in the wild. Within half an hour I was sitting in the second friend’s office!

He was more than happy to share his story with me. A photographer friend of his had had word that Scarlets had been sighted at Gluepot Reserve and asked him to meet him there. Gluepot is a 50,000ha (123553 acre) reserve 50km north of Taylorville in the Riverland of South Australia. It is owned by Birds Australia (an ornithological group) and contains the largest intact patch of old growth Mallee¹ left in Australia. In early August he made a quick trip and was lucky enough to see about ten pairs all busily searching hollows in large old Mallee trees.

Now, two weeks later we surmised that all the hens would probably be down on eggs, so only the males would be out and about. Still it was worth a shot as Scarlets are so rarely seen in the wild. It was now Wednesday afternoon - a quick trip was arranged to leave on Friday morning. Joc (my wife) and I were both fighting the flu but opportunities like this don’t come often - You don’t have to be mad to keep or watch birds but it helps! On Thursday night my friend rang to say he had also fallen foul of the “dreaded lurgie” - he and his wife wouldn’t be coming - bugga! He had given me directions to find the birds in a 50,000 hectare “haystack”...so we would go it alone.

Friday morning saw us, caravan in tow, on our way 300km (186 miles) to Gluepot. 50km (31 miles) off the bitumen but accessible by family car (as

¹Mallee is a generic term for many stunted dry land *Eucalyptus* species.

long as it is not wet), Gluepot is open to the public for day trips or camping. Fees are very reasonable (\$10/night) but facilities are Spartan - Long-drop toilets (very clean and well maintained), no power, fires, water or petrol. You must be self sufficient. On the way in we spent about an hour looking around the area of the sightings without much action - it was early afternoon and all the birds must have been having a siesta. We decided to go and register, set up camp and come back in the morning.

A large, well appointed Visitor Centre greets visitors and it is here that you must register and pick up maps and info for your stay. A large whiteboard recording recent “rarer” sightings indicated many people had seen Scarlets in the area near the boundary with Taylorville Station. There are five bird hides scattered around the property - all overlooking water troughs. Many well marked walks are also available - I do not recommend anyone walking



TYPICAL GLUE POT LANDSCAPE

away from a camp not on a marked walk unless you have been here before, are carrying a reliable GPS or have a very good sense of direction - the scrub is very thick in most areas and there are no noticeable land marks.

After an early night we made our way back about 8km (5 miles) from our camp to the area the birds had been reported.

When we left our car (about 7:30am) the temperature was 1degree C! After fifteen minutes walking, we had warmed up and were contemplating the meaning of a large cross someone had scratched across the path, when there was a familiar “squeak” and a beautiful male Scarlet flew past us, landing in a tree not 10m (33 feet) away! His red chest and iridescent blue head and wings just glowed in the early morning sunlight. Guess who still had the lens cover on the camera as he tried to get his first photo of a wild scarlet? One fumbling shot later and he flew off. We followed and found him 200m (650 feet) away feeding on the fleshy flowers and seed-heads of some salt-bush (one of the *Maireanas* spp., I think). Another long distance photo was all I got before he took off for parts unknown.



SCARLET COUNTRY

Unable to relocate our first bird we decided to head across country to the area we had been told of before we left Kadina. This proved harder than expected as we ran into an area of trackless, waist high spinifex - very uncomfortable walking! However, after about 2km (1.25 miles), we came out where we wanted to be. This area was very similar to the one where we had seen the first Scarlet - large mallees with plenty of hollows and similar understory of various saltbush species. But we couldn't locate any more Scarlets.

It was here that we came across another "mad" birdwatcher. He had flown from Sydney the previous night, driven from Adelaide that morning, found the right area from a GPS bearing given to him by another person who had seen Scarlets in the area, he was staying all day until he found them. Then driving back to Adelaide to catch a plane back to Sydney. And I thought we were keen! Over the weekend we were to meet many people from all over - Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne - all here just to see Scarlets! Their first greeting was always "Have you seen them yet?"

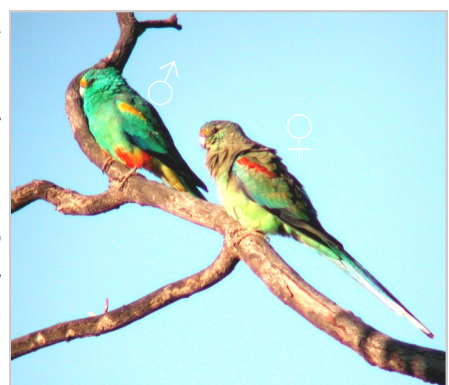
After lunch things were pretty slow again, so we decided to go back to camp, have quiet afternoon and come back on our way home in the morning. We spent the afternoon watching pardalotes, tree creepers and honeyeaters around the camp. The bush here was the best we had seen it for years. *Erimophilas*, wattles, mallees, saltbush and many other wildflowers were flowering in profusion - something that is rare in this dry country.

Next morning was another early start. We broke camp after being entertained by a Chestnut Quail-thrush poking around the sites near us, and then headed back to our search. We were about 20m (66 feet) from where we had met the chap from Sydney (don't know if he ever did find



MALLEE RINGNECK
Barnardius zonarius barnardi
Photo: Tom Tarrant

them) when a cock Scarlet flew over us and landed in a large tree. I tried to get closer for a photo but he was a bit nervous and before I could get too close he called his hen and they both flew past us, around the hill and out of sight. We spent some time quietly poking around the area but did not see them again. We did however see Mallee Ringnecks and



MULGA PARROTS
Psephotus varius
Photo: "Adviseda"

Mulgas before we called it a day.

After arriving home tired but happy, I went down and checked my birds. I came back and told Joc I had just seen more Scarlets in two minutes than we had seen for the whole weekend! - These didn't really count as I was thrilled to have seen Scarlets in the wild and tick something off my "bucket list"

Later we were talking to our son (he was in Italy on holidays with his family) He had spent the last few days in Pisa and Venice. "What have you two been doing?" - "Oh, just driven over 600Km, walked 12-14km through the scrub and seen three birds 175mm(6.9 inches) long for a total of about five minutes!"...and we wouldn't have swapped with him!

If you are interested in birds (and are comfortable in the bush) we can recommend Gluepot Reserve to put on your "bucket list".

POSTSCRIPT: If you are interested in some very good photos from people who have recently seen Scarlets at Gluepot – Google "scarlet chested gluepot reserve" and check out several of the sites. Some had more luck than I with the camera.

Glue Pot and Wild Scarlet-chested photos: Barry Schultz

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BIRD KEEPING IN AUSTRALIA