

KING OF THE WEST THE RED-CAPPED PARROT

By Peggy Cross and Bob Philpot

This unique bird, the only member of its genus, is native to the south-west area of Western Australia, primarily in an area framed by Esperance on the south coast and within a diagonal line stretching to and above Perth by at least 70 kilometres. In Western Australia this species is often referred to as the Western King Parrot and in the Eastern States of Australia it is known as the Pileated Parrot. Pileated means capped and the generally accepted name throughout the world of aviculture is the Red-capped Parrot.

MALE - Red-caps assume varying amounts of plum red feathers on the head during the first year. The full red cap is acquired in the second year. The red on the cap at maturity comes clearly down to the eyelid. The colouring on the under tail feathers below the vent is usually a good indication of the sex of the bird. In the male the red colour forms quite a solid triangle. The wing stripe is variable in both sexes during the first year but males I have examined do not have a wing stripe into the second year.

FEMALE - Red-caps can be as bright red on the head as the males, but this red does not come down to the eyelid. A thin band of green feathers as much as 3mm in width occurs between the red feathers and the eyelid. Hens usually have a wing stripe in the first year and this sexual indication is variable in the second and subsequent years. The red feathers near the vent are not as intense red as in the male and these feathers have a broken outline, appearing to be barred with pale green feathers. As female Red-caps get older the barring becomes less. This barring is a good guide for birds aged six to twelve months.

There is an enormous variation of colour and shading in mature birds, mainly on the throat, chest and stomach.

The colour can vary from pale mauve to deep purple in both males and females. Overall, males tend to be much brighter in colouration. The yellow green 'cheek piece' on mature birds has a fluorescent quality. Some photographs show this cheek piece as brilliant gold. This may be the result of photographic filters or colour distortion of flash equipment. Observation of over 100 young bred in personal aviaries from more than eight breeding pairs has never produced any birds with gold cheeks.

Some specific colour variations have been reported, most notably in an isolated flock in which many of the Red-caps exhibit a red rump stripe across the yellow-green rump feathers. Other individual birds have been observed with a maroon stripe or patch on the shoulder. This characteristic has usually been seen in male birds.

Recently the presence of Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease has been confirmed in wild flocks in the Perth area. Murdoch University is conducting extensive research on this disease.

Red-caps will breed in their first year. Nests in my aviaries have never had more than six young, but nearly all pairs do produce six eggs. Incubation usually commences early in the clutch, therefore the young do not hatch at the same time. This sometimes means that in extreme conditions of heat or cold or lack of adequate food the younger chicks may not survive because the parents concentrate their attentions on the older and, therefore, stronger chicks. In extremely hot conditions parents also feed less often, which would weaken the younger chicks more than the older hatchlings. The young birds fledge at about five weeks but are fed by their parents for many weeks longer. Experiences in aviary breeding, hand raising and observations of wild flocks indicate that this parrot remains a dependent family member much longer than many other species.

The attentive display and courtship of a pair of Red-caps is beautiful. Few of the Australian parrots that I have observed are as loving and delicate as a compatible pair of this species. The males spend time each day strutting back and forth on a perch, crimson cap raised, shoulders slightly elevated and held out to display his yellow rump, announcing to the world with his metallic sounding 'krrick, krrick', that this hen and this area is claimed. When apples and other treats are presented in the late afternoon they quickly sample the offerings and rush to present the hen with a regurgitated bite. She usually accepts readily and he rushes back to the treat dish for more. With their unusually shaped, long, curved bill this is a very delicate procedure. Mating is a quiet affair and is very typical of other closely related parrots, such as the Rosella (*Platycercus*) family.

Red-caps can be aggressive, especially towards the same or closely related species. Typically the aggressive display consists of flaring the tail, squaring shoulders and raising the feathers on the head while chattering excitedly. Both sexes participate in this display and often the female appears to be more determinedly spiteful than the male. In an aviary situation a male Red-cap has been observed repeatedly knocking his mate to the ground in an effort to convince her to cease hostilities with a Rosella neighbour. It is a generally

accepted practice to never house Red-caps next to any of the Rosella or Ringneck (*Barnardius*) species. Hybrids have occurred between the Red-capped Parrot and these species and also the Red-rumped Parrot (*Psephotus haematonotus*).

The hen shows interest in the nest soon after mating occurs. Red-caps are reputed to be nervous while on the nest and a degree of caution is advisable when entering the flight for servicing. The hen will usually come up to the top of the log and barely peer around the edge to see the cause of the disturbance. When satisfied about the degree of danger she will either retreat noiselessly backwards into the log or briefly venture out and partake of the fruits, vegetables and whole wheat bread that are evening treats. The cock bird does not share incubation with the hen and is usually not as aggressive towards neighbours after incubation commences as he is before the hen is contentedly in the nest log.

Males are generally larger than most females and often the head shape is discernibly broader. In an aviary situation one male will mate with two females in the same breeding season and help raise both nests of young. Courtship is often shared between the two hens and this situation usually stimulates some competition between the females. The dominant female is the first to lay and commence incubation. The male can then devote enough time to the other hen to induce her to successfully lay also. I have had two trios nest in this manner for three breeding seasons. One obvious advantage to this situation is having two broods of young in one space. A disadvantage can be that the male may be overworked in attempting to assist feeding two broods at one time and perhaps more clutch mortality occurs. Personal choice of aviary management for this species would be to have a single pair in an aviary.

My first efforts at handfeeding this species came about as a result of a night fright which left the hen dead on the aviary floor. Five eggs were placed in the incubator and three hatched successfully, during the same few days that two abandoned Western Rosella (*Platycercus icterotis*) eggs hatched.

Until the babies were well feathered they were as identical to each other as my eye could determine. Photographs of the chicks taken immediately after hatching show the two species to be virtually identical at that early age. The red and green/blue Western Rosella feathers were distinguishable as soon as the feathers burst from the quills, but in head shape, body and head size, shape of beak, and begging noises the two species were identical. It was only after the appearance of the feathers that the unique elongated beak of the Red-capped Parrot became apparent.

All of the chicks were very easy to feed, waiting their turn for the spoon quietly and patiently, until they were close to their fifth week, and fledging. Then they became more assertive, grabbing at the spoon and bounding away, instead of eating. At that point in their development their closed box went into the flight reserved for babies at feeding time and very soon they were flying around the flight between bites.

Red-caps are very responsive to their human foster parent, but not cuddly, like Cockatiels (*Nymphicus hollandicus*) can be. They show a high degree of intelligence and are very aware of which human person has had their care and remain cautious of others but still curious. They love to investigate what treat they might get, or an earring, or a hair comb, but do not want to be touched, although they will land on a palm for apple seeds. When they are that close the prominent moustache like feathers at the join of the upper and lower mandible are obvious, giving them a rakish appearance.

All of the young Red-caps displayed the characteristic behaviour associated with the species. Upon sighting me they would fly to the wire of the flight, raising the feathers on the upper half of their head, voicing their staccato call with great enthusiasm. Both sexes raised their shoulders, chattered and wagged their tails when indulging in minor territorial disputes over perch space or feeding competition.

The young birds from this initial hand-raising during the 1984-1985 breeding season, successfully bred in the 1986 season. The five birds from three families sorted themselves into one pair and one trio of one cockbird and two hens. The single pair nested late in the season, November/December, raising four healthy young, and the trio double brooded with one hen bringing out four in the first nest and 6 eggs in the second nesting. The second hen of the trio was unable to breed, because of human mismanagement, but she had been interested in breeding.

Their long hooked bill is worthy of respect and can be very damaging to fingers. It is often suggested that this beak shape has evolved to enable the bird to extract the seeds from the fruit of Marri trees (*Eucalyptus calophylla*) and another favourite, Jarrah (*E. Marginata*). *'Diets of Three Species of Parrots in the South of Western Australia'* by J.L. Long, a 1984 research project of Australian Wildlife, showed that Red-capped Parrots fed on seeds (including fruits) of 29 species in eleven families of plants (including 12 introduced species in five families) and on 2 orders of insects. This information was obtained from the crop contents of specimens collected. The food specialisation of the Red-cap may not be as narrow as mentioned previously by other authors. This fact may contribute to the range of this

species being further north in Western Australia than indicated in available reference sources.

In our experience, the Red-capped Parrot tends to be of a flighty nature. Aviary bred birds, even from quiet parents, may still dash madly about the aviary. Legally trapped birds can take years to steady down and many owners part with them because of this trait. Hand reared young are exactly the opposite. They make delightful aviary inhabitants, and have no hesitation in crawling all over their owners. Aviary bred, wild-trapped and hand reared birds may all be excellent parents. Red-caps in my aviaries have shown a preference for deep (1200mm), narrow (180mm), natural tree hollows for nest sites. These logs have been hung vertically or at only a slight angle off vertical. Equally acceptable in a controlled situation are man made nest boxes of similar dimensions. All nests are suspended under cover.

FEEDING is not difficult for the Red-cap. They remain healthy and productive on a varied diet of fruits, such as apple, orange, and many others; greens and vegetables in the much desired form of Silver Beet or Swiss Chard, Broccoli, Carrot and any wild seeding grasses; gum nuts, sunflower and mixed small seeds. Soaked or sprouted seeds are usually very appreciated. Equal parts whole wheat, good quality whole oats and grey sunflower, sprouted, is a very welcome addition to the diet in my aviary, year around. These birds will readily come to the ground to feed. This trait provides a susceptibility to worm infestation that must be treated for. Red-caps vigorously enjoy bathing so spacious water dishes with frequent refills are required.

For the aviculturist interested in the Red-capped Parrot other questions remain unanswered:

1. Is there a purpose for the extreme length and shape of the upper mandible other than the assumption that the beak has evolved for the extraction of seed from large eucalyptus nuts?
2. What is the purpose of the large gap between the top and bottom mandible?
3. What is the reason for the prominent group of feathers at the junction of the mandibles? These feathers protrude somewhat like a fan shape. Is it possible that they give some protection to the tongue which may be otherwise exposed because of the gap between the mandibles? Could these feathers assist in the seasonal gathering of pollen or food?

The Red-capped Parrot is often avoided by Australian aviculturists when choosing aviary birds because of its nervous, flighty nature. Wild caught birds are unpleasantly timid in an aviary situation. Elsewhere in the world of aviculturists the Red-capped Parrot is regarded as a fascinating bird to observe, study and successfully breed. Aviary bred, hand-raised birds are among the most charming and beautiful of any parrot available to our aviaries. Their feeding and space requirements are simple to fulfil. The most important ingredient to successfully enjoy this unique bird in our aviaries is a willingness to appreciate an unusual, inexpensive and readily available bird.

Pause in your aviary duties of scraping dung and scrubbing water dishes and savour the afternoon sun glinting on the iridescent colour flashes of the Red-capped Parrot. He will confidently cling to the wire waiting for the treat he knows that you have for him. You cannot help but smile back at his cheeky grin, framed by whiskers and topped by a flaming Punk Haircut.

The King of The West is a rewarding and very individual friend to enjoy in your aviaries.

References:

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