

Major Mitchell's Cockatoo

By Mark Shephard

Major Mitchell's, or pink, cockatoo *Cacatua leadbeateri* has always held a special attraction for me. The bird's obvious natural intelligence, its friendly character and disposition, its affectionate nature, its power and grace in flight, together with its majestic crest and plumage must surely entitle it to be classed as one of Australia's, and indeed the world's, most aesthetically attractive birds.

However, in general, there has been very little information published on Major Mitchell's cockatoo, and therefore I have written this article in the hope that it will stimulate aviculturists to discuss, and perhaps relate on paper, their experiences with this most beautiful bird.

Description:

To me, the most striking features of Major Mitchell's cockatoo are:

- a) its beautiful crest which changes colour from red at the base to yellow, to red, and finally to white at the tip.
- b) the magnificent salmon-pink colour under the wings and on the head and chest.

The bird's back, wings and tail are white. The adult cock bird's eyes are jet black, while those of the female have a reddish-brown iris. Immatures are generally duller and paler than the adult; I always enjoy seeing a young bird with its very slender body and its fully grown crest, which seems to be completely out of proportion to the rest of the body.

Distribution and Habitat:

Major Mitchell's cockatoo is found mainly in inland Australia, from north-western Victoria to the south-western tip of Queensland, through the dry interior of Central Australia and north-western South Australia to Western Australia, where the species inhabits the north-western, central and southern areas of the State (1).

It was very disappointing to hear Mrs. Payne state at the 1st National Avicultural Convention in Adelaide (May 1980) that it has been estimated that there are less than ten thousand birds remaining in the wild in Australia, and that the more aggressive Galah *Cacatua roseicapilla* and the Sulphur-crested cockatoo *Cacatua galerita* are extending their range in the territory of Major Mitchell's cockatoo.

I should now like to relate to you my brief, but thoroughly enjoyable, experiences with Major Mitchell's cockatoo.

Aviary Notes:

Early in April 1980, I was very fortunate to secure a compatible pair of Major Mitchell's. Both birds were 6 years old. The birds were paired up by the previous owner in July 1979, but, despite showing considerable interest in the log, the hen did not lay that year. Indeed, relating

to this information, three points which any person who is thinking of purchasing a pair of Major Mitchell's should bear in mind are:

- a) in general, birds that are between 4-15 years old are suitable for breeding, while birds that are less than 3 years old may take several seasons before they are ready to breed,
- b) considerable time may be spent attempting to obtain a compatible pair. Many combinations of birds may be tried before a suitable pair is found in this regard. It is reasonably easy to tell when you have struck the right combination, as a compatible pair will sit snuggled close together on the perch, looking very happy and content with life, and
- c) it is very difficult to get Major Mitchell's to start to breed, however, once they do start, they may breed consistently for a number of years.

I proudly brought my newly acquired Majors home and placed them in my largest aviary. For the first month after the birds were introduced into their new environment, I found they went through an "adjustment phase", where the cockbird in particular, was extremely destructive toward the aviary furnishings, especially the thick wooden perches and even the heavy gauge wire netting. Even now, I find I have to replace a 2.4m Permapine post every two months!

After this brief adjustment phase, the birds settled down and for the next month they would sit for hours cuddled together on the front perch, with the hen never more than inches away from the cockbird. It really was a joy to see the birds so closely bonded to each other.

Breeding:

During mid May, a log (150cm long x 30cm internal diameter) was suspended at an angle of 45° along the back of the aviary. This log was purchased when I bought the birds and was the same log which the previous owner had used for the birds in 1979.

From the first week in June, the behavioural pattern of the Majors seemed to change. Early each morning, they could be seen inspecting the log, after which they would resume their favourite position on the front perch. Both birds began to indulge in long periods of mutual preening, and the cockbird was often seen courting the female. The courtship display involved the cockbird strutting away from the hen, uttering a weak quavering call, then turning around and marching slowly back to her; he would greet the hen by standing on his toes, raising his head high and then touching his beak gently against hers. The birds were seen mating on June 11, July 21 and July 28. A similar pattern of behaviour was observed in August and early September.

The breeding season for Major Mitchell's extends from September to November or December (1). Toward the end of September, the hen contracted a respiratory infection, which, although quickly cleared up by Dr. Schultz, seemed to adversely affect her interest in the log for several weeks.

On October 26, the cock enticed the hen into the log where she remained for five hours, the longest single period of time she had spent in the log. She emerged in the late afternoon and soon after was seen mating with the cockbird. The hen spent no further time in the log on

October 27 and 28. Just before dusk on October 29, the hen went into the log and stayed there overnight. Inspection of the log the next morning revealed one large, white, oval-shaped egg.

The average number of eggs per clutch is 3-4, with one egg being laid every two days until the hen has completed laying. Unfortunately, my hen only laid two eggs, with the second egg not being laid until November 3.

The incubation period is 28-29 days and both birds share the incubation - the cock bird usually sits on the eggs from early morning until late afternoon, while the hen bird takes the "night shift". Uncharacteristically, during the first two weeks of the incubation period, the cock bird would not sit on the eggs at all and the hen spent nearly all day and all night incubating the eggs - perhaps the cock bird was shy or nervous as this was the first time they had bred. Finally, on November 14, the cock bird began to do his share of the work. The hen and cock bird would spend alternate 1½ hour shifts in the log during the day, while the hen bird would again sit on the eggs overnight. During the incubation period, I repeatedly noticed the hen sitting in the water bowl. Nothaft (2) suggests this is done to provide adequate moisture for the eggs to hatch. Toward the middle of the incubation period, visual inspection of the eggs can indicate whether the eggs are fertile or not. If fertile, the eggs will be dark brown in colour - due to the developing embryo; in contrast, if the eggs are infertile, they will still be white, i.e., there is no deepening of colour.

As a golden rule, it is very advisable to keep away from the aviary and especially the log at or near the expected time of hatching. Both birds, in particular the cock, become very nervous and aggressive and may kill the young if they feel threatened. I found that I even had difficulty opening the cage door to take out the food and water bowls - the cock bird would fly from the log onto the front perch just above my head and watch my every move with great concern.

I had been told that you would know when the eggs had hatched, as the young birds could soon be heard calling loudly for food. Unfortunately, the estimated dates of hatching came and went without any squeaking being audible from the log. The cock bird was now spending much more time than the hen in the log. Ten days after the second egg was due to hatch, the birds let me into their aviary for the first time in three weeks. As suspected, two white eggs were still sitting in the log.

For completeness, I will briefly describe what should have happened had the eggs hatched. There seems to be conflict concerning the average number of chicks which are raised per average clutch of four eggs. I have read three different books and each gives a different answer: one says one, one says two and the other says three - so I am not sure what to believe! The cock bird completely takes over the feeding and rearing of the young. The young leave the nest 50-56 days after hatching and for the first few weeks sit at the extremities of the aviary. (It has been suggested that this behaviour may be mimicking what happens in the wild, where the young fledglings fly as far away from the parent's nest as possible). The young birds are completely independent eight weeks after leaving the nest and are usually removed from the parent's aviary before April of the following year.

Despite the fact that my Major Mitchell's did not raise any young this season, I am not at all disappointed because the birds have given me much pleasure and enjoyment and I am looking forward to next year with great expectations.

References:

(1) Lendon A.H. (1973). Neville W. Cayley's Australian Parrots in Field and Aviary. Publisher Angus and Robertson

(2) Nothaft A. (1979). Breeding Cockatoos Publisher T.F.H. Publications

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