LEADING UK NEOHEMA BREEDER VISITS KEVIN WILLIAMS

Colin O’Hara who writes a regular column entitled *Splendid Diary* for the British publication *Cage & Aviary Birds* in September to visit Glue Pot Reserve in search of Scarlet-chested parrots, he made time to visit our member Kevin Williams, a leading breeder of Neophemas. When Colin returned to the UK he produced the following article for his column.

Barry and Jocelyn Schultz acted as guides for Colin and his wife when they visited Glue Pot. Barry’s article on the trip will appear in next month’s magazine.

“**When Kevin Williams heard through mutual contacts that I was visiting South Australia, he sent me an invitation to spend a day at his home in Mount Barker (a suburb of Adelaide) and see his Neophema collection.**

Kevin is well known and respected in South Australia for his collection of *Neophema*, both for running a pure strain of the wild-colour birds, as well as breeding mutations.

Kevin is also a very keen birdwatcher and volunteer warden at a local wetland park.

Starting the day with a cup of tea in his kitchen, I had no idea what a treat I had in store. Looking through the kitchen window was my first surprise; two cock Adelaide rosellas were chasing each other around the lawn, both trying to drive the other one away from the food that was put out for them. It seemed almost unreal, as the only other birds feeding were English blackbirds and English sparrows. Kevin explained just how much the Adelaide rosella can vary in colour, not just in different regions, but in the same place.

I was surprised at the weather in the Adelaide area; it is currently spring and the temperature on the day we visited was about 9°C (48°F), dropping that night to almost freezing. Bird breeders in the south of Australia have a greater temperature difference to deal with than I do back home in the UK. Kevin explained that in winter it drops to minus 8-9°C (46-48°F) and in the summer more than 40°C (104°F).

All of Kevin’s aviaries have dimensions of about 80cm x 300cm (31½in x 9ft10in), and are constructed of angle iron and metal sheeting. The presence of termites means that it is not practical to use any wood in aviary construction in his environment. All aviaries have covered roofs, backs and halfway along the sides. Also metal sheeting is fitted around the bottoms to about 45cm (18in) to exclude mice. All the roofs have sprinklers fitted over them, which are used in the very hot times to cool the inside of the enclosures.

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*the Scarlet-chested Parrot is commonly called the Splendid Parakeet in the UK.*

HOSTS FOR THE DAY: KEVIN & LYN WILLIAMS
OUTSIDE THEIR AVIARIES
Focus on normals

We started our tour of his collection by looking at a perfectly marked pied elegant housed with some olive turquoises and splendid hens. Kevin explained that most of his birds were already paired up, with only a few changes to be made. He said furthermore that he feels olive turquoises need longer to mature, which is why he does not breed with them until they are two years old.

The bird club that Kevin belongs to is trying to encourage its members to breed pure normal lines in all the birds they keep, as well as mutations. As with breeders in Europe, mutations have been moved from one species to another, so the pure blood is becoming harder to find.

In line with English *Neophema* breeders, only one pair is housed per aviary in this collection. At one time quail were bred on the floor of the avaiaries, but their calls at night brought in the owls with dire consequences for the grass parakeets, so this was stopped. One nest-box per pair is provided with a size of 15cm (6in) square and 25cm (10in) deep. Each nest is fitted with an entry spout cut from an old hollow mallee branch.

As he and Lyn live on a hillside, Kevin explained that they have strong winds and these spouts protect the nest from drafts. The nest fill used was interesting: 95 per cent coarse pine sawdust and the remainder fine and coarse grit. This mixture was dampened and pressed into the bottom of the boxes to about 2.5cm (1in) deep, just deep enough so that the hen could not scratch through to the bottom of the box. Kevin feels that the added grit gives a firmer texture to the nest.

The collection’s basic diet was similar to our budgie 50/50 mix and then the extra seeds are given separately. The cost of birdseed in Australia is about the same as in the UK, which is remarkable as it is home grown. Millet sprays are imported and are at a premium, so not many parakeet breeders in Australia use them.

Halfway around the collection we stopped at an aviary, which at first I thought contained elegants. On closer inspection I could see somehow they were different - they were rock parrots! This was the first time I had seen a living specimen; what a surprise and delight to see these rare and endangered birds. Kevin has five pairs in his collection and last year bred 17 youngsters. There are only a few breeders who have these birds and they work together to maintain their numbers. To own rock parrots you have to be licensed by the Australian Parks and Wildlife Authority. It was interesting to hear that closed-ring is not compulsory for these birds, however records must be kept of all breeding, sales and movements.

My next question was: “How difficult are they to maintain in aviaries?” The answer was that they are not any more difficult than elegants. They will breed at one year old, but they do need a lot of greenfood and they spend much more time foraging on the floor of the aviary than other *Neophemas*. At the bottom of the garden was a large patch of chickweed.
the same variety that grows in the UK in our spring and summer time. What a pity rock parrots were never established in European aviaries!

Bluewings also were well represented in the collection; feather-perfect, large, strong specimens. Kevin told me that these are much sought after now and the price had increased because breeders had not maintained numbers in recent years.

**First view of the dilute**

The Australian dilute splendid is a mutation that we do not have in the UK. My greatest surprise of the day was when I was shown an aviary that contained a mutation splendid that I had never seen before. It resembled in some way the Isabel that we have in Europe, but has a more lime-green body, a paler-blue face, and pronounced spangled wing coverts (like the cherry peach-faced mutation.)

Kevin said that the bird was bred from a normal-looking cock paired to a par blue hen (pastel blue). This pair had produced three young birds: one cock and two hens, all of this colour. The bird is definitely of the green series, and as a cock was produced this suggests it is not a sex-linked mutation, but a recessive. If this is the case it will be the first recessive dilute mutation in the splendid. (Recessive dilute mutations are already known in the parrot family; one is in the celestial parrotlets.)

A recessive dilute would open up a whole new range of colours in the splendid and because it is recessive would be much easier to work with as it could combine into other colours without any crossover having to take place.”

Colin O’Hara is one of Britain’s most respected parrot breeders. He is a specialist in the Neophemas, and their mutations, in which his bloodlines go back more than thirty years. For more information and photos of Colin’s birds, see his website: [www.splendids.co.uk](http://www.splendids.co.uk). You can contact Colin directly via the website.