

# THE GENUS: POLYTELIS

The genus *Polytelis* is characterized by medium sized parrots with long tails and a graceful flight. The genus was established by Wagler in 1832. At the time it consisted of two species: the Barraband (Superb) and the Regent. The Barraband was discovered in the Murrumbidgee area of New South Wales in 1826, the Regent by Captain John Sturt on his Murray River expedition in 1830-1831. The third member of the genus, the Princess was discovered in 1862 by ornithologist Frederick G. Waterhouse, who shot two birds at Howell's Pond, central Australia, while a member of the Stuart Exploratory Expedition.

The word *Polytelis* roughly translated into English means 'magnificent'. The genus contains 3 species, all of which are represented to differing degrees in South Australian aviculture. The Princess Parrot is the most commonly kept, despite being the rarest in the wild. The Regent Parrot is also the subject of a Species Recovery Plan in the wild, but has never been a popular aviary bird, prompting the ASSA to produce a booklet encompassing all available information on the aviculture of the species. The *Regent Parrot Booklet* is still available to members interested in this bird.

This issue of *Bird Keeping in Australia* features articles on each of the three *Polytelis* species.

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## THE PRINCESS PARROT

### *Polytelis alexandrae*

#### Other names

Princess of Wales Parrot, Queen Alexandra Parrot, Spinifex Parrot and Rose-Throated Parrot.

#### Introduction

The Princess Parrot was named after Princess Alexandra of Denmark, who later married the Prince of Wales Edward the VII and she eventually became the Queen of England. They have been bred in captivity for a long time, and the earliest written record dates back to 1899.

#### Description

Princess Parrots are sexually dimorphic: birds may be sexed by differences in feather colouration. Males tend to have a more pronounced blue patch on

the nape of the head, and darker pink on the throat. A different shade of blue feathers above the rump can also help determine sex. The rump in males tends to be a darker blue, while the females tend to have a lighter sky blue colour. Mature males tend to have a small lobe that



extends off the primary flight feathers. The iris on mature males has more of an orange colour and hens have a slightly browner appearance. However the most striking difference is the tail of males is much longer and with elongated central feathers. In addition the hen's beak is usually slightly paler colour and she has a brown rather than bright orange iris.

### **Immatures**

Young Princess Parrots look very similar to hens, although they have a black eye iris, which changes once the bird matures. At the age of 18 to 24 months males will be sexually mature, with full feather plumage and ready to breed. At this age cocks will show extra plumage colouration, especially blue on the nape of the head, a darker blue on the back of the rump and orange iris colouring.

### **Distribution**

The Princess Parrot is native to Central and Western Australia and is most common in relatively dry areas, grass savannahs, and scrublands. They seem partial to areas with eucalyptus, casuarinas, and acacia trees. The species is rarely seen in the wild but there is some controversy as to whether their numbers are reducing or have always been low.

### **Aviary Notes**

The Princess Parrot is an absolute delight to have in any avian setting. They are easily adaptive, very friendly and highly curious birds. This species is compatible in a mixed aviary setting with other non-aggressive species and have been successfully bred in a colony situation.

The Princess Parrot enjoys spending time on the ground, and for this reason it is particularly prone to worm infestation. Birds should be wormed every 6 months at least and regular cleaning of the cage or aviary is advisable.

### **Feeding and Diet**

Princess Parrots in the wild are Spinifex grazers, so it stands to good reason they require small seeds within their diet. In an aviary setting, a diet consisting of a Lovebird/Cockatiel mix with fresh fruit and vegetables is excellent to maintain great health for your birds. Parrot pellets are usually readily taken as Princess Parrots are very inquisitive birds, and it will not take long for them to accept new foods.

### **Breeding**

The male's courtship display involves him facing the hen and calling while moving his head from side to side, expanding his orange iris and raising his small crest.

The average clutch size is between 4-6 eggs, which are incubated for 21 days.

### **Nest box size**

There are a couple of different types and sizes of nest boxes breeders may use for princess parrots. Boxes should incorporate a ladder or other means for the hen to climb, rather than drop down onto the eggs. Height - 600cm, width - 40cm, depth - 40 cm.

### **Noise level**

Quite a pleasant chortle, while not being excessively loud, they can still be heard for some distances.

The Princess Parrot is often described as relatively quiet and passive, but they are by no means shy. They have a reputation for hardiness and are a good choice for the beginner to aviculture.

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## **THE SUPERB PARROT**

### ***Polytelis swainsonii***

By John Grant

### **Introduction**

In my opinion, the Superb is the most appealing of the genus *Polytelis* with its striking combination and placement of colours.

### **Housing**

I house these parrots in both 4.9 metre and 3.7 metre long aviaries by 0.9 metre wide and 2.2 metres high, with a 1.2 metre long shelter. The shelter has a floor covering of 200mm of beach sand and the flight is of natural earth. I place one perch inside the shelter, another outside with the third at the opposite end of the flight. I do not house these parrots side by side but place birds of another genus between them. This family is perfect to place between Rosellas, Ringnecks and Hoodeds because of its placid nature.

### **Feeding**

I feed a mixture of seeds which consists of the following: Sunflower 20%, Safflower 20%, Hulled Oats 20%, Canary Seed 20%, Jap Millet 10%, and White Millet 10%.

I have this mixture made up in 200kg lots at a time by one of the local seed merchants. During the non-breeding part of the year the birds also receive any green feed which is available at the time. The green feed not only consists of grasses and silver beet but also any and all vegetables that my family eats. The greater cross section the better.

In the breeding season I feed seasonal grasses and silver beet, which I grow, and these are supplemented with apple and sweet corn on a daily basis. I have found that these parrots have a particular liking for oranges and broccoli. The feed bowl is placed on a stand inside the shelter, while the water container is placed in the flight with a cover to prevent contamination and to keep the water cool.

### **Sexing**

In adult birds there is no problem. The hen does not have any of the red or yellow face and throat colouring of the cock. The hen is basically a green bird with only a faint wash of grey and light blue around the cheeks. She retains the pink edging to the under tail feathers.



In some of my pairs I can tell which birds will be cocks and hens when they are fully feathered but still in the nest. The young cocks are an all over apple green and stand out very strongly when all the young are held together

in the sunlight. Other pairs' young are very difficult to tell and on some individual young I must wait until the first moult at seven months old.

I ring all my young and record colour, number and leg, hoping these factors and observations will assist me in working out their sex.

Hen birds always appear to be in great demand and I receive telephone calls throughout the year in search of them. I would strongly advise people not to purchase a cock and then go looking for a hen. If you are fortunate enough to find one, it will undoubtedly be an expensive item. When purchasing a young pair always ask their age, remembering that all young birds look virtually the same as hens until they go through the first moult. I have heard many people say that the orange feathers around the legs are a good indication that the bird is a hen. I would totally disagree with this statement as all young birds have these orange feathers. It is true that the hen retains these feathers after the first and subsequent moult but I also have mature cocks which have retained a few orange feathers around their legs.

### **Suitable breeding age**

These parrots are what I would describe as a 'long term' proposition. Nowadays people appear to be more interested in purchasing mature birds in the hope that they will go straight to nest in the coming season. Personally, I feel that this is totally the wrong approach and the purchasing of young stock is the correct way. I do not doubt at times that genuine mature pairs become available for sale but they are few and far between. These parrots usually do not breed until two or three years old and they are still producing many years after that.

### **Breeding**

These parrots are seasonal breeders from September to December. I have kept them on a continuous basis for the past 13 years and until 1987 my records show that they have always gone to nest by the second or third week of September. Last year (1987) none went down until the first and second week of November; one could attribute this to the changing weather cycles we have had, although my Regents, as usual, commenced laying in the second and third week of September.

The incubation period commences upon the laying of the second egg and varies between 21 and 23 days depending upon the ambient temperature. The chicks leave the nest after approximately 35 days, this time period again can vary depending on the temperature experienced during this time. They are independent after one month. While they are young it is important to expose them to as wide array of food as possible as this will determine their

eating habits in later life. The number of chicks in a clutch varies from 3 - 7 with the average clutch in my experience being four. I find that if there is more than 4 there is a chance of losing the youngest chick or having to supplementary feed or hand feed. I do not like hand feeding as it is very time consuming and I feel the young are never as good as those raised naturally.

I use nest boxes that are 600mm tall and 300mm square with an entrance of 65mm placed 100mm down from the top. I also have an inspection hole near the bottom of the box. For nesting material I use equal parts of peat moss and chain sawdust and this is placed in the boxes to a depth of 75mm.

### **Health problems**

The only major problem that appears to be prevalent in this parrot is a form of paralysis which affects the legs. A quite healthy bird will appear in total good health one day and suffer this problem the next and it affects both cocks and hens. The paralysis appears at any time of the year and appears not to have any relation to handling or sexual activity, in my experience. I have had this problem affect several birds over the years and have never had one recover even with veterinary treatment.

### **Summary**

When I first purchased a pair of these birds they did not breed until they were three years old. Since then they have produced 4 young each year (including 1987) without fail. Their striking colour combination and quiet nature will ensure this. I cannot recommend them too highly to people who are looking for an interesting 'long term' aviary occupant.

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## **THE REGENT PARROT**

### ***Polytelis anthopeplus***

### **Distribution**

Regent Parrots are found throughout the eastern mallee region and breed along the central Murray River and lower Wimmera Rivers. They nest in hollows in large River Red Gums within 5 km of large blocks of diverse mallee, within which they feed, as well as orchards, cereal crops and vineyards

Another race of Regent Parrots inhabits coastal areas of the south eastern parts of Western Australia, extending to parts inland of the south Eastern parts of Western Australia.

### **Sexing**

When mature, Regent Parrots are sexually dimorphic, meaning that both sexes can easily be seen determined by a visual glance.

Male: Length: 42cm Weight: 260g

The male is a light yellowish greenish colour on the head and nape of the neck. The under-parts are a more pronounced yellow. The wings have a red splash on the lower tip of part about three quarters from the shoulders. The rump is yellow. The bill is a dark orange colour. As the genus *Polytelis* suggests, the majority of



their entire length is tail. Males attain their maximum plumage brightness at 2 years of age.

Female: Length: 41cm Weight: 246g

Female Regent Parrots are similar, although not as bright in colour. The red splash on the wings is duller, and the face and under-parts are a light green. The beak is also a lighter colour orange. The head can be smaller slightly than the males head.

Immatures resemble the hen until the approx. age of six to nine months, when some yellowish feathers can be observed starting to emerge. It is here when slight differences can be determined to tell which are young cocks or young hens. Birds become mature between 12-18 months.

### **Sexing Young Birds**

The maxilla will start to change to an orangish colour in young cocks and the iris will also change to an orangish colour; the hen's iris will stay black.

Red brighter feathers will start to appear on the wings on young cocks, as well as developing yellowish feathers on the head, chest, flanks, abdomen and wings.

Young cocks also start to make various murmuring and other variations of whistling noises.

### **Hybrids**

The Regent parrot is capable with interbreeding with other *Polytelis* species such as the Superb Parrot and the Princess Parrot, as well as King Parrots and Crimson winged Parrots.

### **Aviary Notes**

The Regent Parrot is compatible in a mixed with Cockatiels and Budgies, as well as Neophemas and Bourke Parrots. They are not generally aggressive. Because these birds are large they do need a larger type aviary, of at least 3m length x 2m height x 3m depth.

### **Diet**

Regent Parrots may be fed a small parrot mix, or Pellet diet, supplemented with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables.

### **Breeding**

Regent Parrots can be quiet easy to breed if you can achieve a quiet area with out much interruption, a good diet, and have a compatible pair as well as a good breeding box. Some pairs breed readily, although other pairs are less successful.

Eggs per clutch: 4-6 Incubation period: 21 - 24 days.

### **Nest box size**

This species requires a largish nest box, at 60cm high and 30cm wide.

### **Noise Level**

These birds can be slightly noisy in mornings and late afternoons, but not seriously so.

### **Tips for improving success**

- Obtain a young pair of birds so they can grow and bond together.
- For best results give the birds their own aviary.
- Provide several boxes with a variety of sizes, and in different locations.
- Provide a good nutritional diet with plenty of fresh fruit, vegetables.

- Maintain a good worming program to help eliminate further problems to the bird's health.