

BREEDING OF THE ORANGE-BELLIED PARROT

By Fred Lewitzka

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On the afternoon of March 16th I noticed that when the hen went back to the log to feed the young she did not enter the log, but perched at the entrance hole, and was either calling or trying to get the young to come up to the hole to be fed. One crawled half out, and then the other, to take food from her, but it was a pretty shy attempt, and the young went back into the log and the hen followed to finish the job. After having observed this it was a sure sign that the young would not be long leaving the log.

The following day, March 17th, one young left and the next day the other left the log. At first they were clumsy, but after three or four days they became more familiar with the surroundings and improved in their flight. After a week or so the young birds were noticed pecking at seed heads of grass and picking at seed on the ground. This was the start of becoming independent, and after about four weeks I did not see the hen or cock feed the young again. Even at this age I thought the young to be male and female, but time will tell for sure. As most of my observations were made before 8 a.m. and after 5 p.m. On week days, and only some weekends when I was at home, there could have been some incidents of interest that I may have missed.

In the field these birds would not be easily recognised without field glasses, and even then one would have to see them in the right light and position not to mistake them for any of the other three [similar] species of Neophemas. I once tried to take photos with a telephoto lens, but could not get close enough to get results that would make it possible to recognise the birds. Other debatable points relevant to this species in the wild are their nesting habits. What do they use for nesting sites – do they use hollow logs or follow the same nesting habits as the Rock Parrot, where do they breed? The Rock Parrot, Hooded Parrot and Golden-winged [shouldered] Parrot will quite readily use hollow logs or boxes made up for nesting sites, and because the Orange-bellied uses a log in captivity does not necessarily mean that it uses the same in the wild state. A keen bird watcher or someone who is interested in studying these birds in their natural habitat may one day give us the answer, and I would suggest Tasmania or one of the off-shore islands as a probable area for nesting sites during December and January.

Description of birds. Male. When in an upright perching position the length from the front of the forehead to tip of tail is approximately 8½ inches [216mm]. From the crown to the rump it is a dark green, dark blue frontal band edging at back light blue, the breast is a light green with yellowish-looking tinge. The wing flights are a dark blue (looks more like black when in



the shade), and the first four or five secondaries are blue. The bright orange colour on the lower belly extends to the vent, being 1½ inches [38mm] long. Looking from above the tail is a bluish green, more blue than green, and underneath it is yellow (not bright yellow). The toes and toenails of both sexes are longer than those of the other Neophemas, with one exception, the Rock Parrot, which is similar.

Female. Slightly smaller, the length is 8 inches [203mm] and the colouring from crown to rump is slightly duller. The frontal band is lighter in colour and it has yellowish lores with a greenish tinge, and the breast colouring is slightly more of a yellowish colour. The wing flights are similar but a lighter colour, and the orange on the belly is lighter, ranging in colour and size, being a lot shorter in length on some birds. The top side of the tail is a greenish blue (more green than blue) and the underneath colour is yellow, this lighter than that of the male.

The young birds are much duller in colour than the above descriptions, added to which the frontal band and orange patch are not very pronounced. A noticeable feature during the early period of growth was the colour of the down; this definitely was [an] off-white colour.

The then Editor, Mr. Eric Baxter, added:

(Previously the breeding of this species was announced in [the] July 1973 issue as a "World First", and the information in this article covers in detail this achievement. As mentioned previously, in the past there have been brief reports which referred to the breeding of this species, but these have never been followed up with a detailed report covering activities associated with the reported breedings, nor has anything further been reported, which leaves much to conjecture. Members will be interested to hear that Mr. Lewitzka has had further success with this species; the 1974 season resulted in another youngster being bred, and here again further observations were made and accordingly will serve to assist with the future breeding of the species. — Editor).

Unfortunately, no more Orange-bellied were reared as the then hierarchy of the South Australian National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS) shortly after forced Mr. Lewitzka to surrender his birds for release in the Coorong.

It has been alleged that this was because the NPWS suspected Mr. Lewitzka's success with these birds might encourage less scrupulous persons to illegally obtain more, and they therefore decreed the Orange-bellied Parrots be surrendered. If this had not happened the species may well have been bred up, and expertise developed well before the wild numbers dwindled to where they were when the faunal authorities in Tasmania finally decide to institute a captive breeding programme.

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