

# A WORLD FIRST BREEDING

Was the headline on the July, 1973 issue of our magazine.

It then went on to say: "It is with pleasure we announce that the Society's [first breeding bronze] medal has been awarded to Mr. Fred Lewitzka for the 'First Official Breeding' of the Orange Bellied Parrot, *Neophema Chrysogaster*...." .

Over the last few years there has been a persistent rumour that because the late Fred Lewitzka was in charge of the Adelaide Zoo Bird Department at the time, the first breeding of the Orange-bellied Parrot occurred at the Zoo. In fact, Mr. Lewitzka bred the species as a private aviculturist at his home in Broadview.

Unfortunately, a few years after the first breeding the then hierarchy of the National Parks & Wildlife Service forced Mr. Lewitzka to surrender his Orange-bellied stock, the birds were then released in the Coorong area. Thus, Orange-bellied Parrots were lost to private aviculture. The attitude of the fauna authorities were at that time not as enlightened as they were later to become.

Given the interest in the success the Zoo is now having in breeding the Orange-bellied Parrot as part of the Recovery Programme, I am reprinting the article Fred wrote outlining his breeding of the species.

Square brackets in the following text denotes an insertion by the editor.

Ed.

## BREEDING OF THE ORANGE-BELLIED PARROT

*Neophema chrysogaster*

By Fred Lewitzka

The name Orange-breasted Parrot which in the past was applied to this species does not really suit the general description of the bird.; it is now generally known as the Orange-bellied Parrot , *Neophema Chrysogaster*, which is certainly more suitable.

**Distribution:** Referring first to Tasmania, it is my opinion that probably during December and January this is the place where they do their breeding, and from there it appears they migrate to the mainland during the winter months (records of sightings of these birds on King Island, which is off the coast of Victoria in Bass Strait have been made). In Victoria from Port Phillip Bay they appear to move westward along the coast into South Australia, and never seem to venture very far inland from their feeding grounds. Having lived in the suburbs of Adelaide all my life, it was interesting to read in the records that in the late 1800 [*sic*] these birds were seen in large numbers at Holdfast Bay (now the popular seaside suburb of Glenelg), and this in all probability would have been the furthestmost point in their movement westward. As man progressed with development, clearing land, building houses, etc., so the natural feeding grounds diminished, and of course the westward movement of this species would have fallen back. The last known sighting was 10 years ago [c. 1964], and this was 130 miles [209km] from Adelaide. This parrot would be the rarest of the *neophema* species, and if the records over the last 55 years are correct there have been no sightings of these birds in large numbers.

**Housing.** The Orange-bellied Parrot has been kept in captivity at various times, not in large numbers, but enough to think that sometime someone would have been successful breeding them. I obtained my birds six years ago, and as is the case with all species of birds I have kept, it was my aim to breed them in captivity. As there were no records of this species having been bred before, I thought it was an interesting challenge to try to do so. The size of my breeding compartment aviaries for the smaller species of parrots is 3'6" wide, 7' high and 12' deep [1.02m X 2.13m X 3.66m], with green Perspex 2' [61cm] wide along the front of the shelter to prevent driving rain from penetrating the shelter. It is generally thought that better results are obtained by housing one pair per compartment.

I housed these birds in one of the compartment aviaries for six months, and noticed that they were slow in their flight movement and not so active as some of the other of the *Neophema* group. I decided to move them to a larger aviary, as one of the beliefs is that birds that are slow in flight and not active tend to get too fat for breeding, and this can be correct in some cases. They were then housed in an aviary 30' wide, 7' high and 29' deep [9.1m X 2.13m X 8.8m], [with] a division in the middle which made two compartments with a shelter at the back 8' [2.4m] deep with the roof extended another 3' [91cm] over the flight to prevent the rain pelting into the shelter.

In 1971 this aviary was divided into four compartments each 7'6" [2.3m] wide, and at various positions in the aviary were clumps of needle bush making plenty of natural perches available. Growing in the aviary were several shrubs and also clumps of phalaris, milo and Guinea palm grass. At different times of the year these grasses have seeding heads. In the same aviary were a few finches and 1 to 2 pair of Scarlet-chested Parrots—all birds agreed quite well, and at no time did I see any fighting or interference that would upset breeding results. Hollow logs were hung in various

positions approximately 6' [1.8m] and at an angle of 45 degrees. The size of the logs varies from 16" [40.6cm] to 24" [61cm] in length and approximately 4" [10cm] to 5" [12.5cm] in diameter. Both ends were closed with the top end movable for inspections. Some had natural entrance holes and some had 2" [5cm] man-made holes. Into each log I put about three double handfuls of a mixture of rotten leaf mould, dirt, sawdust and fine peat moss. This I used to put through a quarter inch [6mm] sieve to make sure no stones or other hard matter were in the nesting material which could cause the eggs being damaged.

**Breeding.** Most parts of South Australia and districts surrounding Adelaide have a suitable climate for breeding most parrots, but then there are exceptions for some species and this may be one of the reasons why the Orange-bellied did not seem to do as well as it should — our Adelaide weather can be fairly hot during December and January. Even some of the species that are used to hot weather do not do so well if they have eggs or young during these two months of the year. By October and November all moulting is finished and they look to be in excellent breeding condition. All feathering has a bright, glossy look, the orange on the belly is a dark rich colour and at its best, and when at this stage the term “in breeding condition” is often used.

Approximately 10 to 14 days before the first egg is laid they become more active, and any flight movements by the hen are generally followed by the male (at the same time calling “chuc-chuc-chuc”) and then he sits on the perch next to the hen and goes through the action of trying to regurgitate food to feed the hen, but at first she is not interested and will often fly away. Several days after observing the first half-hearted efforts, the hen settled down to being fed, quite contented and on several occasions even seen begging to the male to be fed.

When the feeding starts this is also the time they start looking for a nesting site, and the male does the first inspections. He will fly to various hollow logs calling “chuc-chuc”, enter some for inspection and sometimes the hen will follow and sit on top of the log or usually not far away. Once a particular log has been selected the hen will also enter it and inspect: only on a couple of occasions have I seen the hen enter and inspect a log in which she did not lay eggs. Whether both birds work the log before laying commences I am not sure, but generally it is the hen that does most of this. When the hen was inspecting the log the cock would give warning calls and she would appear and on occasions fly away. At other times she would just put her head out of the entrance hole, note what was going on, and go back.

The first indication that the hen was about to lay was when she was in the log first thing in the morning, before 8 a.m. When one went into the aviary there was no warning call from the cock and she would sit tight. After the hen settled down to incubate I have seen her out of the log in the morning, but usually it was late afternoon. Sometimes she would come out of her own accord, other times the cock would sit near the entrance hole and call her out, but I never saw the cock go into the log to feed the hen whilst she was on the eggs.

The behaviour of the birds each season when in breeding condition was just about perfect, but for one thing: I never at any time saw copulation take place (this action normally takes place after the cock has fed the hen). I have seen the hen in a sitting position waiting for the cock [who was] walking all over the top of her, but never copulating properly. After the second or third egg has been laid the hen starts to sit tightly, and generally comes off the eggs late afternoon to be fed by the cock. If the full clutch has not been laid signs of mating take place, but not for me to see. If this was a problem to rectify I did not have the answer, although I gave thought to two things — either I was not around when mating took place, or the hot weather (which at this time of the year can quite frequently be 90 to 100 degrees [32C to 38C]) had something to do with it. This may have prevented them coming into perfect breeding condition. The fact that they had infertile eggs for five seasons indicated that there was something going wrong. It does appear that the Orange-bellied would be the last of the *Neophema* group to start breeding in its natural habitat. My records in relation to the breeding activities of three hens (A,B and C) show that they commenced nesting as follows:

- A: December 29th, 1968; December 23rd, 1969; died in 1971.
- B: December 28th, 1970; January 14th, 1973; did not lay 1971.
- C: December 25th, 1971.

The other two species that could come into this category are the Rock Parrot and the Blue-winged Parrot, this depending on seasonal conditions. However, it is generally found that breeding seasons in captivity correspond with those in the wild, and that is the reason why I am of the opinion that the breeding season of the Orange-bellied is December and January.

In January the Orange-bellied Parrots selected a mallee log which was in the flight portion of the aviary. This was hung six feet [1.8m] from ground level and at an angle of 45 degrees. The size was 17" [43cm] long, 4" [10cm] diameter and both ends closed, and a hole on the side [of] 2 inch [5cm] diameter near the top. The first egg was laid on 14th January, 1973, and then every second day, and in all four eggs were laid. Late one afternoon when the hen was off the eggs and was being fed by the cock I inspected the eggs and noticed that at least three looked to be fertile. I thought, well, at least things look hopeful this time, as she had been sitting for 12 days. While the hen was incubating she was generally seen leaving the log late afternoon and only on odd occasions in the morning. The cock would then feed her and sometimes she would go to the feed dishes, take more herself, and then have a drink before returning. Sometimes I noticed the hen with her head out of the entrance hole being fed, and other times the cock would sit on

the log and call her, but mostly she would come out for food of her own accord.

The first young was hatched on 9th February, the second on the 11th, and the third on the 12th February (but died the same day), and one egg was infertile. The incubation period was 21 days. Most of the feeding of the young in the log was done by the hen, and only on odd occasions did I see the cock enter the log, the first time being 10 days after hatching. Like all other *Neophemas*, except Bourkes [Bourkes were still included in the *Neophema* genus then; they are now *Neopsephotus*. Ed.], their favourite food when feeding young is any of the seeding grasses in head, which one can understand is a more natural diet. Besides what was growing in the aviary and available to them, extra was given to them each morning and late afternoon. Other food available was panicum, white millet, Japanese millet, canary seed, crushed sunflower and niger seed. With finches and a pair of Scarlets sharing the aviary it would be hard to say for what food they showed preference.

To be continued

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