# THE BLUE BONNETS
# by Mark Schmidt

## Introduction

*Psephotus* is a Greek word meaning "inlaid with pebbles".

This group of birds ranges in size somewhere between the Rosella and the Neophemas and are sometimes referred to as the lesser broad-tailed parrots.

There are 8 main species and/or sub-species which can be separated into 3 groups.

The first group are the blue bonnets. Most ornithologists place these birds in a separate genus, *Northiella*. I don't want to debate whether this is correct or not, but for the sake of this article I have included them in the *Psephotus* genus. The blue bonnet group consists of the Naretha, yellow-vented and the red-vented.

The second group are probably what is classed as the real *Psephotus* parrots and they are the mulga and the red rump.

The third group are called the ant-hill parrots because they nest in termite mounds. These birds consist of the golden-shoulder, the hooded and paradise parrots.

The flight of the *Psephotus* parrots is generally much swifter than the Rosellas and with less undulation.

## Description

Naretha Blue Bonnet, *Psephotus (Northiella) narethae*.

This species was named after the township Naretha, found within their distribution area of Western Australia.

They are the smallest of the blue bonnets measuring between 10 - 11" or 250-275mm.

**Male:** The head, neck, back and chest is a brownish grey; the upper breast is mottled with a buff colour; forehead pale blue; cheeks dark blue, tinged with purple; abdomen yellow; under tail coverts red; when the wing is folded, the outer line from the bend in the wing, through to the primary wing coverts is bright bluish-purple; outer median wing coverts are scarlet red, the inner median, secondary, primary wing coverts and rump are an olive-yellow.

**Female:** Smaller in size; the blue area on the forehead and cheeks are smaller and slightly paler; the scarlet red on the outer median wing coverts extends further forward to the lesser wings, in other words, a larger red area which I would like to point out that this is by no means a complete description of the Naretha blue bonnet but it is one that will enable the novice to be able to identify this bird from the other blue bonnets. I feel this is fairly important because many people know what a blue bonnet looks like but can't tell which

one they are looking at. The easiest and best distinguishing factor for the Naretha is that there is no red on the abdomen. It is completely yellow.

**Yellow-vented Blue Bonnet**

*Psephotus (Northiella) haematogaster haematogaster*.

11 - 13" or 275-325mm in length.

**Male:** General colour, a brownish grey; which includes the head, neck and back. The breast area is the same only it is mottled with buff; forehead and cheek area, light purplish blue; from the bend of wing along the edge of the wing bright blue; outer median and secondary wing coverts comprise a mixture of olive, yellow and browny red. Outer area of abdomen yellow; abdomen red; vent and under tail coverts yellow. The distinguishing feature of this bird is that there is no red, only yellow in the vent area, hence the name.

**Female:** Similar to male but smaller in size; blue facial area, paler and reduced in size; red on abdomen not as pronounced, giving way to a bit more yellow.

**Red-vented Blue Bonnet**

*Psephotus (Northiella) haematogaster haematorrhous*.

A sub-species of the yellow-vented, size 11-13" or 275-325mm. General colour similar to the yellow-vented; bend of wing an iridescent greeny blue; deep red patch on wing, more pronounced on female; outer abdominal area yellow with red extending from and including the abdomen, thighs, vent and under tail coverts.

This bird differs from the yellow-vented in that the vent and under tail coverts are red, not yellow, and it differs from the Naretha in that the abdomen is red not yellow.

There is another sub-species of yellow-vented, namely *pallescens*. This bird is found around the Lake Eyre region and is basically a paler version of the yellow - vented.

**Distribution**

The Naretha is found in the desert area of south-east Western Australia. This bird is restricted to a small pocket extending from approximately 250km east of Kalgoorlie to about the S.A. and W.A. border. The Naretha has never been considered to be common in its natural habitat and along with several other species in *Psephotus* genus, must be in grave danger of becoming extinct. I have always believed that to save a species from extinction, whether it be animal or bird, the time to initiate a program is while there is still a reasonable number of them left, not when there are only a few to work with. We all would agree that a system of protecting these birds in the wild is essential. However, I believe true conservation must have more than one avenue to ensure survival, so that if one fails you always have a back-up; after all, most people wouldn't drive their car without a spare tyre. Breeding birds in captivity should be one of those avenues of back-up. It would be appropriate if the authorities were to realise the danger that these birds face and consider the taking of a few pairs from the wild to augment the dwindling number of captive birds, which at the moment stands at only 12 in South Australia. But I must stress

at this point that these birds be taken only if a genuine and well documented programme is instigated. It should not be done for the whim of the aviculturist who wants them in his collection. Already it has been proved that birds uncommon in the wild can be bred in numbers in captivity. If a concerted effort was made by several genuine breeders to learn something about breeding the Naretha, then, as the numbers increase, birds could be passed on to other genuine breeders. I emphasise the word genuine because it is important that these birds are saved, not sold.

Distribution of the Yellow-vented Blue Bonnet is in the lower rainfall country of southern Queensland, western New South Wales, north-western Victoria and covering quite a large area of the eastern half of South Australia, excluding the lower south east. The Red-vented sub-species can be found in the central part of southern Queensland, down through to mid northern New South Wales. A considerable amount of cross breeding takes place between the yellow and red- vent in the wild. Because of this, the range of the true red-vent is decreasing. These two blue bonnets are reasonably common, although not normally found in large numbers, usually pairs or small parties. Blue bonnets are basically ground feeders and this is where one normally encounters them. These birds typify nature's art of camouflage, as while they feed, their colours blend in with the normally arid type of terrain. Yet when in flight the backdrop of light and shade from mallee trees enables one to appreciate the real beauty of these birds, as their iridescent colours glisten in the sunlight.

**Blue Bonnets in Captivity**

**Aviary Design**

The blue bonnets, along with the larger lorikeets, I feel have the most character, as they always seem to be up to one antic or another. These birds are very aggressive to other birds if given a chance and don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise; but if precautions are taken when housing them, then these problems can be overcome. The size of the aviary is purely up to the individual's choice. My aviaries are 5.4 metres (18ft) long, 1.2 metres (4ft) wide and 2.4 metres (8ft) high as I like my birds to be able to have room to fly. Being able to fly keeps birds fitter and a fitter bird generally means a healthier bird and with a good diet these ingredients should make for a better breeder. However, I realise that people have to try and make best use of the room that is available to them. The most important thing in a blue bonnet aviary is not to allow them any contact with other birds. This can either be through having them in a single aviary as opposed to in a block of aviaries. If the latter is the only option available, then double wire should be used in the division wall and even then a non aggressive species should be housed next door. If these criteria are not met, then one has to be prepared for what might happen. There are many people who have lost birds when blue bonnets get through a hole into the adjoining aviary or when a bird has inadvertently got in with them. When one has not got double wire between aviaries, it is not uncommon for a multitude of toes to be lost or beaks ripped off. The most common recipients of this carnage are the neighbouring young. On leaving the nest they hang on the wire and are easy prey for the blue bonnets. I would never put another bird in with a pair of blue bonnets, even for a short time only.

I am a great believer in an open flight as compared with aviaries with a totally enclosed roof. There are reasons for and against open or closed flights but I feel that it is important that birds be given direct access to rain and sun. The fact that we keep birds in a captive state is bad enough without closing them off from contact with the natural elements. The

reasons for fully roofing in flights is to protect birds from hawks and cats. However, deterrents can be used (permanent or otherwise) which are very effective. People who are troubled by these predators will find an electrified wire around the top of the aviary is probably the most efficient.

When decking out an aviary with perches, a mistake that many people make is to have too many of them. So many times I have seen aviaries so cluttered up with perches that the birds cannot fly any distance without having to negotiate these useless pieces of wood. After all, flight is more important to them than sitting on perches all of their life. Wouldn't you like to be able to fly?

Blue bonnets like to bathe in their water dishes, so it is important to supply them with one that is not too deep.

These birds spend considerable time on the ground in the wild searching for food. This habit also occurs in captivity and can be assisted if an area of soil can be afforded them. This can be planted with seeds; wheat and peas are what I use.

If a strip is planted every few weeks it will grow for seven or eight months of the year without any assistance, except for the natural rainfall coming through the open flight.

Ground feeding birds are prone to intestinal worms, so this problem should always be closely monitored.

**Diet**

Blue bonnets prefer the smaller seeds, canary, pannicum, white and Jap millet. Other seeds that should be supplied are sunflower, hulled oats and linseed. These birds also will eat fruit and vegetables more than any other birds in the *Psephotus* genus. Cuttlefish should always be available to them. Greenfood should always be provided, especially just prior to and during the breeding season. Young birds relish this type of food, especially for their first 4-6 months on the wing. The type of greenfood can be varied; the main one I use is silver beet, plus seeding grasses when in season. A small oat similar to veldt grass but much more palatable is the seeding grass that I grow plenty of. It unfortunately has a very short time from when the seeding head forms to when the seed falls, more so with hot weather.

**Selection of Birds**

I must point out at this stage that cross breeding between the different blue bonnets should be avoided at all costs. Aviculture does not need these cross-breds (which are certainly capable of breeding) being traded around. It is hard enough now buying good birds that are true to type, without having extra nondescript birds to sift through.

When selecting your birds always remember to buy young ones. This should be number one priority, a point which a lot of people fail to heed. I have never had a pair of birds reject each other if paired up as youngsters, something that certainly can happen when trying to pair up odd adult birds. Buying young birds is paramount, no matter what species of birds that you are dealing with. Young birds usually settle down well, therefore breeding is more likely to follow.

**Breeding**

The breeding season for the blue bonnets is much earlier than for most of our Australian parrots. Egg laying can take place anywhere from July to October. When courting (or when excited) these birds have the ability to erect their head feathers as in a crest. Courtship feeding does occur prior to breeding and the cock will usually feed the hen until the young have vacated the nest. In selecting a nest, my birds have always selected an upright log with a side entrance, even though logs of different angles were provided. It is generally agreed that preference is given to small diameter logs about 10-12cm (4-5") with an entrance hole just big enough for them to squeeze through.

4 - 7 eggs can be laid with approximately 48 hours between each egg. Incubation, carried out only by the hen, usually begins with the laying of the second or third egg. I have not been able to accurately determine the time of incubation but my thoughts are that it may be less than the 21-22 days normally stated; still unproven but I feel it could be somewhere around 18-20 days.

Some blue bonnets sit very tightly, whereas others don't. A pair of my birds had eggs just about ready to hatch before I even knew they were nesting. When the aviary was approached, the hen was always out sitting on the perch.

The young leave the nest after 30-35 days. They resemble the parents, only duller and with shorter tails. The young of some pairs can be sexed on leaving the nest, whereas others take several months before they can be sexed with any degree of accuracy. I have not heard of these birds double brooding, except where the first nest was a failure.

Youngsters become independent very quickly on leaving the nest, sometimes in less than two weeks. If able, it pays to remove the young as soon as possible because some cocks can harass their young to the point of killing them.

The breeding of blue bonnets is not always easy; some pairs breed with little trouble, whereas others show no interest at all. A problem associated with the Naretha blue bonnet has been the number of infertile eggs laid. This seems to be the case with most birds held by breeders in Australia.

The blue bonnets have become highly sought after in recent years, to the point where demand far outweighs supply. When people are finally able to procure their birds I hope this article will have been of help to them.