

BLUEBONNET PARROTS

by Daniel Patterson



YELLOW-VENTED PAIR
Photo: Daniel Patterson

As result of a few recent conversations where the topic of Bluebonnets came up, and a request from the editor for magazine contributions, I was prompted to put pen to paper, in the hope of sparking some interest in this long neglected and 'avoided' species. I would like to write about my experiences with Yellow-vented Bluebonnets in particular, so here goes.

I'll start by saying a few words about identifying the different subspecies. For this article I'll stick with the more familiar subspecies, the nominate race, the Yellow-vented *Northiella haematogaster* and the Red-vented *N.h.haematorrhous*. The Yellow-vented should be fairly self explanatory, we want a bird with a clear lemon-yellow under-tail, but also showing an olive-yellow wing bar, with no hint of red or orange.



Yellow-vented showing the clear lemon-yellow vent of a pure bird. A male would show much more red on the abdomen.



RED-VENTED BLUE BONNET
Photo: Greg Wurst

In the Red-vented, we want just that, a full red vent! This subspecies must also carry a broad flash of dark red in the wing, fading to orange on the secondary flight coverts. Red-vented cocks, in particular, will show pale green on the point of the shoulder, whereas the Yellow-vented will be a light blue. The Red-vented is generally a bigger, more colourful bird.

Recognising these differences is very important, as I feel that far too much hybridisation has occurred over the years, either through ignorance or carelessness. Having said this, I realise that across their natural distribution there is a huge zone of integration, with birds showing much variation, but as aviculturists I believe we should aim to breed only from those birds which are as true to type as possible and leave the sub-special hybrids to the wild.

I took this species on in 2001 as a bit of a conservation project. At the time native parrots were going through a big decline and some species could hardly be given away! I searched high and low for Yellow-vented before finally finding birds that I felt truly represented the subspecies. The majority of the Bluebonnets I looked at back then were hybrids between the two races. I would have to say that the Red-vented was definitely more popular than the Yellow-vented. I suspect that a lot of hybrid birds just got lumped into the Yellow-vented category.



YELLOW-VENTED PAIR
Photo: Daniel Patterson

In captivity, the Bluebonnet's popularity has always suffered and they are usually kept only by aviculturists specialising in natives. They can be a bit shy and flighty, and I admit they deserve their aggressive reputation, but are generally no problem to manage if one follows a few basic bird-keeping rules.

Firstly, these birds must definitely be the sole occupants of their aviary, their willingness to confront and kill other birds in their territory is well known. An aviary about 3-4 metres long and a metre wide is ideal, with at least half of this being shelter. I wouldn't recommend they be kept in suspended aviaries, as they are such strong flyers and active foragers. Because of their territorial nature, double wiring between adjoining flights is an absolute must, with at least 20mm separating the two layers. Some aviculturists opt for solid partitions, but my birds live and breed happily with a more docile species housed alongside them.

Feeding is no problem. They aren't fussy eaters. A basic small parrot mix will suffice, but mine always leave the white millet until last. Plenty of fruit, vegies and sprouted seed are relished, especially when rearing young. They also love to tear apart any green branches that are provided.

Sexing Bluebonnets shouldn't be too hard for those with a keen eye, the cock being larger than the hen and having brighter, more extensive colouring. I have always been able to sex mine going by the underwing stripe being present in the females, even as fledglings, but have heard from some breeders that they have found this unreliable.



RED-VENTED PAIR
Photo: Greg Wurst



YELLOW-VENTED PAIR
Photo: Daniel Patterson

A compatible pair are usually keen to breed if given a chance to settle down to it. Having compatible pairs is of the utmost importance. As with most of our native broad-tailed parrots, it's best to pair them up young. Pairs formed from adult birds may take some time to accept one another, and even then watch closely for any aggression from the male. Males can become very nasty at the onset of the breeding season, vigorously driving the hen to nest. I always wing-

clip my males severely when the nesting logs go up in late June. Once mating has taken place and the hen has gone to nest, the aggression should stop, however my original hen was just as bad as her mate, constantly chasing him away from the nest.

My birds prefer a log to a box, their favourite being about 90cm long and 15cm in diameter, with a small entrance hole near the top and hung at a slight angle in the rear of the shelter. I find the usual clutch is 4-5 eggs, laid early in the season. Females are secretive and sit very tightly, even when the chicks hatch my hens are reluctant to leave the nest. My birds are tolerant of nest inspection, but this varies with individual birds and it is sometimes best to just stay out of it.

If plenty of extra greens and soft-foods are provided, the chicks should fledge about five weeks after hatching. They are very nervous at first, so I provide plenty of brush stacked in the corners and attached to the back wall for them to camp in. A close eye must be kept on dad to ensure he doesn't become aggressive towards the newly fledged chicks, but, again, this varies with individual birds. If he starts to get nasty, separate him immediately and leave mum to hopefully rear the youngsters to independence. I have found Bluebonnets to be attentive, protective parents and have even fostered Mulgas under them with no dramas. Ideally, once independent, the young should be removed to their own quarters, but mine like to stay within sight and sound of mum and dad!

Overall, I have found the Bluebonnet to be very hardy, intelligent and full of character, always keen to show off and have a chatter and a whistle. It doesn't take much to set them off with lots of head bobbing and tail wagging. Mine just love trying to out-compete the local Adelaide Rosellas and are excellent mimics of the Rosellas' calls. If housed sensibly and with a bit of attention paid at nesting time, these birds should breed successfully. I am sure that anyone who has kept and bred Bluebonnets will agree that they are a worthy challenge to keep, and well worth preserving in their pure form.

