

THE PLAINS WANDERER



The Plains Wanderer, *Pedionomus torquatus*, is endemic to Australia, and is a unique bird placed in a family of its own.

It is a ground bird with quail-like features, and is 15-19cm in length. The male is lightish brown above, with a whitish-fawn abdomen overlaid with black half-moon scalloping. The hen is the more colourful of the two with a distinctive black and white speckled collar. They can fly, but prefer to run when flushed. The females lay four eggs, but it is the male who carries out incubation.

The Plains Wanderer has had a chequered taxonomical history, originally it was believed to be related to the buttonquails and was therefore placed in the game-bird order *Galliformes*, and sometimes with the Rails and Cranes in *Gruiformes*. However, modern DNA sequencing techniques show it is actually a wader related to the Jacanas, *Charadriiformes*. It thus represents a remarkable case of convergent evolution*.



Comb-crested Jacana
Irediparra gallinacea
Photo: the Late Ted Hill

Due to its relative scarcity and elusive habits the Plains Wanderer has not often been an avicultural subject, but it has been occasionally an aviary inhabitant. The late Bob McKechnie (of Gorge Wildlife Park fame) once related a story about his procurement of some of these birds for his collection. Bob had a contact in Port Pirie who occasionally supplied him with a single specimen of the species, the birds supplied were being brought in by the supplier's English Setter in an unharmed condition. When this occurred the bird would be railed to Adelaide for Bob to collect. Each bird supplied was identical in appearance and much time was spent comparing the depth of colour and the size of the chequered neck band in an effort to find a pair. It was only later that Bob found that the species was sexually dimorphic and that all the birds received were in fact hens! It would appear that either the dog was very selective in the birds it caught, or hens are much less wary than cocks. Naturally, this was one first breeding medal Bob didn't gain.

*In evolutionary biology, convergent evolution is the process whereby organisms that are not closely related independently evolve similar forms as a result of having to adapt to similar ecological niches or environments.



Eric Ridley

In the late 1970s and early 80s the late Eric Ridley of Naracoorte was vigorously lobbying the South Australian National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS) to allow aviculture to play a larger role in the conservation of rare and endangered species. One of Eric's main concerns was the Plains Wanderer, and by constant lobbying he eventually gained permission to acquire some of these birds for a captive breeding programme.

Under Eric's husbandry the birds bred, this outstanding achievement gained him the Society's *R.W. McKechnie Memorial Medal* for the first breeding of the species in South Australia. In fact, Eric found them relatively easy to breed, but soon after his untimely demise the birds were taken by the NPWS and the species is unfortunately no longer available to aviculturists.



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THE WISE OWL SAYS...now that the breeding season is upon us it is imperative that the birds receive their most nutritious food of the year; plenty of fruit, greens and soaked seed for the parrot species, and soaked seed, seeding-grasses and a high protein addition to the finch diet is the order of the day.

White ants, fly pupae and Passwell Finch Soft Food are all excellent sources of protein for finches. In the wild most parrots eat insects and grubs for protein, so the protein items mentioned for finches can also be eat by parrots. If at first parrots are reluctant to take such items, mix them with the soaked seed, and they will soon get a taste for them.

Remember it is important to keep up a regular supply of greens and live-food to your birds when they have young. If they are used to receiving these items every day, a day missed could cause them to abandon their young. Try and give a varied diet based on what the birds are likely to get in the wild, it is Mother Nature who looks after the food requirements of the wild birds, but it is up to you to play her role with the birds in your care.