



Red-capped Parrot feeding on apples.

Photo. by John Warham.

The Emu

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF THE
ROYAL AUSTRALASIAN ORNITHOLOGISTS UNION

'Birds of a Feather'

VOL. 57

MARCH, 1957

PART 1

Notes on the Red-capped Parrot

By JOHN WARHAM, Perth, W.A.

The Red-capped Parrot (*Purpureicephalus spurius*) is restricted to the south-west of Western Australia where it is universally known as the King Parrot. The bird is interesting in being the sole representative of its genus, and is regarded by Serventy and Whittell (1948) as a relict species which has been isolated in the wetter south-west forests as a result of the deterioration of the climate, and these authors consider the bird to be descended from the common ancestor of *Barnardius* and *Platycercus*. A. J. Cain, in a recent revision of the 'Platycercine' parrots (Cain, 1955) considers the Red-capped Parrot's nearest relative to be *Eunymphicus cornutus* of New Caledonia and the Loyalty Islands, and says that "in almost all respects this bird is to *Purpureicephalus spurius* what *Platycercus caledonicus* is to *P. elegans*". He believes that both *P. spurius* and *E. cornutus* are relicts and that *Eunymphicus* should be treated as a synonym of *Purpureicephalus*.

Within the south-west corner of the continent, the species is not restricted to the marri (*Eucalyptus calophylla*) and jarrah (*E. marginata*) forests which cover so much of this area. It is also common in the wandoo (*E. redunca*) belt, and Alexander (1930) found the species present along the south coast around Bremer Bay where yates (*E. cornuta*) and peppermints (*Agonis flexuosa*) are the only trees. The bird is also plentiful among the peppermints and tuarts (*E. gomphocephala*) along the coastline of the lower 'west'.

Some early writers considered that the unusually-elongated upper mandible of the Red-capped Parrot was a specialization developed to enable the bird to open the large nuts of the marri trees, and it undoubtedly does open those nuts. However, subsequent observations revealed that other foods are taken and those birds living outside the marri and jarrah forest regions seem to manage very well on other

fare. Alexander refers to *Casuarina* cones as being taken, and the present writer has found that during the autumn, by way of a change from eating apples, Red-capped Parrots attack the dead cones of the bull banksia (*Banksia grandis*) apparently to extract the kernels from them. They also tackle the slender spikes of the candle hakea (*Hakea rutifolia*) which flowers at that season. The birds eat the blooms of this shrub and perhaps the seeds as well, and they show considerable dexterity in hanging on to the thin stems to reach the flowers even when a breeze swings them from side to side pendulum-wise. On the coastal dunes Red-capped Parrots eat the white blooms of the *Dryandra* bushes, thrusting their beaks into the mass of petals and tearing out great mouthfuls which protrude untidily from between the mandibles as they are devoured. The colourful candles of *Banksia menziesii* also provide food for these birds.

It seems, therefore, that, far from being restricted in its diet, this parrot exploits a wide range of natural foods; it feeds on the ground, in low bushes and in the tree-tops, and it also appreciates the additional fare provided in abundance in apple orchards where the birds are at times very destructive. Since 1943 the bird has been declared vermin in the Collie and West Arthur districts, although few claims for bonuses on beaks have been made in respect of this species in recent years.

These parrots—the 'Pileated Parrots' of the aviculturist—seem to be coming into favour as cage birds and between 200 and 300 birds are exported each year by operators in the bird trade.

The accompanying photograph was taken in an orchard at Metricup, 16 miles south of Busselton and a few miles in from the coast. The local band of Red-capped Parrots had at first confined their attentions to apples of the 'delicious' variety, but when they were all picked for marketing two trees only remained which bore ripe fruit. These were 'yates' and it was on them that the birds were forced to feed. They were photographed from a hide using a 14-inch lens mounted on a 3½ x 2½ T.P. reflex camera.

The parrots were very deliberate feeders, working steadily at one fruit before moving to another. They took about fifteen minutes to dispose of a small apple. Some stood above the fruit and bit pieces from it, others transferred the beakful to a claw which then acted as a vice until the piece was completely devoured.

None of the six or seven birds observed was in fully adult plumage. Most had only a narrow red band across the forehead instead of the bright cap of the mature birds, and the pea-green cheek patches were also poorly defined. Despite this apparent immaturity, however, the birds were mostly in two-s and appeared paired. Mr. R. Dear of Darlington advises

me that captive birds take three years to reach full plumage, at the end of which period males and females are almost identical in coloration.

Friction sometimes marred these feeding parties. Mild aggressiveness was shown by the raising of the feathers of the crown and by a flood of harsh chattering cries. When a third bird attempted to feed close to another pair, one of the latter threatened the intruder with snapping bill; its adversary, hovering uncertainly a few inches above, snapped back in reply before moving elsewhere. The birds were frequently annoyed by honey-bees which were themselves feeding on fruit already damaged by the parrots; the latter shook their heads as the insects buzzed around them, but the bees did not prevent the birds continuing to feed.

Occasionally feasting would be interrupted by 'comfort movements'—the wings and tail being stretched simultaneously with the primaries separated and fanned out over the tail. The long beak seemed very effective for preening the breast feathers.

The Red-capped Parrot's voice is harsh and unmusical. The flight note is a grating, staccatto 'skrek, skrek, skrek', which appears to serve also as an alarm. A softer 'chikikik' is also given, but the provenance of this call was not determined.

Nothing was seen of any courtship display between these parrots, but on April 26, 1956, near Harvey, one of a group flushed from the roadside used wide sweeping wing beats moved through deep arcs, as it flew away, the same mode of flight as is employed by Smoker Parrots (*Polytelis anthopeplus*) during what seem to be display flights seen mainly in springtime.

REFERENCES

- Alexander, W. B. (1930). 'The Food of the Red-capped Parrot', *Emu*, 29, 312.
Cain, A. J. (1956). 'A Revision of *Trichoglossus haematodus* and of the Australian Platycercine Parrots', *Ibis*, 97, 432-479.
Serventy, D. L., and Whittell, H. M. (1948). *A Handbook of the Birds of Western Australia*, Perth.

Notes on Birds of the Australian Capital Territory

By J. N. McKELVIE, Canberra, A.C.T.

A list of birds found in the Australian Capital Territory was compiled by Gregory M. Mathews, C.B.E., F.R.S.E., and published by the Commonwealth Forestry Bureau in 1943. Nearly seven years later, Donald W. Lamm and David White published in *The Emu* (vol. 49, p. 199 *et seq.*) their findings on 'The Changing Status of Avifauna in the Australian Capital Territory' and indicated that significant changes in