



GRASS-PARROTS

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(Upper): ♂ Bourke Parrot, *Neophema bourkii*.

(Lower): ♂ Turquoise Parrot, *Neophema pulchella*.

The Emu

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF THE
ROYAL AUSTRALASIAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION

"Birds of a Feather."

VOL. XXVII]

OCTOBER, 1927.

[PART 2

The Charming Bourke Parrot.

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(See Coloured Plate.)

THE Bourke Parrot (*Neophema bourki*) was first discovered in 1835 on the Bogan River by Sir Thomas L. Mitchell and named by him *Euphema bourkii*. This was in honour of Sir Richard Bourke, at that time Governor of New South Wales, and who had afforded Sir Thomas every encouragement and assistance in connection with his exploring expeditions. Sir Thomas published the bare name and locality only in the "List of Birds Deposited in the Australian Museum at Sydney," contained in Vol. 1 of Mitchell's *Australian Expeditions*, published in 1838. He published no description, nor is any note made of when or how the specimens were obtained. It was left for Gould to publish a full description of the bird, and to illustrate it, in his great work of 1841.

In 1845 Sturt, during his enforced stay at the Dépôt in north-western New South Wales, makes reference to the Bourke Parrot as one of the species that remained with them throughout the dry winter, when all other birds had vanished. He also alludes to the crepuscular habits of this species:—"Keeping in the daytime in the barren bushes behind the camp and coming only to water. The approach of this little bird was intimated by a sharp, cutting noise in passing rapidly through the air, when it was so dark that no object could be seen distinctly, and they frequently struck against the tent-cords in consequence." Further, in his notes on *Falco subniger*, Sturt says:—"He was shot in some bushes behind the Dépôt, where he had been spreading alarm amongst a flight of parroquets (*Euphema bourkii*)."

Specimens of this Parrot were collected by the explorer Gregory and deposited in the British Museum. No definite locality was specified, but they were probably taken in the north-west. Specimens have also been obtained in the Murchison district of Western Australia by C. G. Gibson and

in Central Australia by S. A. White. K. H. Bennett found them in the scrub country east of the Darling River system.

West of the Darling, in New South Wales, I know of only one restricted locality where they are still to be found. Where Sturt noted so many there is none to-day. Between the Dépôt Glen and Wilcannia they were trapped thirty years ago, but none is to be found now.

Unlike some other species of this genus, the Bourke Parrots are not migratory, so that any considerable alteration in their environment spelt their extermination. This alteration was brought about by the over-stocking of the country with sheep and cattle, followed by hordes of rabbits eating out all under-scrub, thinning out the scrub, and denuding the ground of its natural cover of dry grasses and herbage. Then cats were let lose all over the country to help kill the rabbits, and now the fox follows on to complete the work of destruction.

This charming Parrot is now only to be found in one limited locality. It was being trapped there to the point of extinction within the last few years, and was saved only by the timely death of the two bird-catchers best acquainted with its haunts and habits, and by the area in question being declared, at the request of the Barrier Field Naturalists' Club, as a sanctuary.

"Bourkes" are quiet, unobtrusive, and gentle little creatures who find their living in more or less open scrubs of the associated acacias—mulga (*Acacia aneura*), neelia (*Acacia loderi*) and dead finish (*Acacia tetragonophylla*), with an under-scrub of *Cassias* and *Eremophilas*. They are usually to be seen in family parties of from four to six, feeding on the ground on the fallen seeds of the *Acacias*, *Cassias* and those of grasses and other herbage. Larger flocks come to water in a dry season. When on the ground the brown upper-surface of the birds harmonizes with the fallen leaves of the scrub trees and the dry herbage and is eminently protective. They go to water before dawn and after dark, often as late as 9 p.m., when they are hardly discernible. Bird-catchers have told me that in pulling their nets they have to be guided by the chirruping call-notes of the birds, rather than by sight. This habit (which was noted by Sturt) has earned for them the name of Night Parrots, by which they are known to all trappers and dealers in live birds.

They nest in a hollow in a scrub tree, at from three to ten feet from the ground, and rarely in a box tree at the edge of scrub. The eggs, from four to five in number, are deposited on the decayed woody material at the bottom of the hollow. The eggs are laid on successive days and incubation starts with the first egg laid, the female alone attending to this task. The male feeds the female during courtship and whilst she is incubating by regurgitation. She usually sits very closely, leaving the nest but once a day and only for a short period. The incubation lasts for seventeen days. The male is in close

attendance upon the nest during this time and in an aviary endeavours to keep all other birds away from it; he is then a very excitable little being, flying about and calling in an alarmed manner.

These birds are easily bred in captivity, but each pair should be kept by themselves, and the fledged young should be separated as soon as the female shows signs of nesting again, as the male is apt to persecute the young birds and cause them serious injury. One pair that I have in an aviary reared five broods in the one season, extending from August until the middle of March.

When first hatched the young are covered with smoky-grey down. In fourteen days' time the primaries and rectrices are showing well, with feathers sprouting on all other tracts. Ten days later they are fully feathered and peeping out of the nesting-hole. Three days after this the earlier ones leave the hollow, one perhaps returning towards dark. Two or three days later all the clutch will be out. They are fed by the parent birds for a week or ten days after leaving the nest, and then have to fend for themselves.

Male and female are alike in plumage on leaving the nest and are garbed as follows:—Head and upper-surface uniform olive-brown; wing-primaries brown, outer web greenish-grey, gradually becoming more blue towards the bases after the fifth; secondaries brown, with bluish tinge to outer webs; tertiaries brown, with blue outer webbing and white edgings; spurious wing brown, with blue outer webbing and coverts brown, edged with blue; other coverts brown, edged whitish; upper tail-coverts brown; rectrices brown, with bluish tinge, especially in outer webbing in central six; outer three white on either side, with large brown patch on base of inner web proceeding from the outer; under tail-coverts brown, tinged with bluish-white; under-surface of wing brown, the secondaries showing a white band across the base; tertiary under-coverts blue; lores and space around the eyes whitish; ear-coverts brown; each feather of cheeks whitish, edged with brown; foreneck and chest brown, with edging of pink increasing towards the abdomen, where the feathers are wholly pink; flanks bright blue; legs and feet pale brown; bill brown; nostrils yellowish; tip of bill yellow, lower mandible yellow.

Average measurements of adult male and female and of a young bird that has just left the nest are as follow:—

Adult male, length 220 mm.; wing 120; tarsus 12; culmen 12.

Adult female, length 195 mm.; wing 118; tarsus 12; culmen 12.

Young bird, length 165 mm.; wing 108; tarsus 12; culmen 12.

It will be seen from these notes that the continuance of this very desirable species in its natural haunts depends upon strictly guarded sanctuaries and the absolute prohibition of its sale or export by dealers.