

## SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

### THE NIGHT PARROT *GEOPSITTACUS OCCIDENTALIS*: EVIDENCE OF ITS OCCURRENCE IN NORTH-WESTERN VICTORIA DURING THE 1950s.

Early records of the Night Parrot *Geopsittacus occidentalis* having been seen in Victoria were accepted by some authorities but not by others. The vague reports of sightings in the mallee (Campbell 1897) and of a nest with five eggs in the Wimmera (Campbell 1901) and reported sightings by Aborigines in the Wonga Lake area (Mattingley 1909) were accepted by Leach (1911) but not by Barrett or Crosbie Morrison in their subsequent revisions of Leach's book nor by Wheeler (1967). These later authors also rejected the observations of Scarce (cited by Howe and Tregallas 1914). However Forshaw (1970) points out that Night Parrots were reported from adjacent parts of South Australia and New South Wales at about the same time and sees no reason to reject the Victorian records. Here we present evidence that Night Parrots occurred in the Big Desert of North-western Victoria during the 1950s.

A magazine article about W.H. Butler's search for the Night Parrot (Eusson 1978) prompted Evan Walton of Walpeup, Victoria, to write of his experiences with a strange parrot at Ross's Spring (35° 21'S; 141° 32'E) (letter to WHB 28 September 1978; copy since forwarded by WHB to Fisheries and Wildlife Division, Victoria).

In the summer of 1954, while Mr Walton was hunting near Ross's Spring, his dog flushed several 'strange parrots' from beneath clumps of *Triodia irritans*. He took an interest in the birds and, during repeated visits to the area between 1954 and 1959, flushed the parrots on about twenty occasions. He saw the birds on most but not all visits. In November 1959 a fierce bushfire swept through the area; since then, Mr Walton's visits become less frequent and he did not see the parrots again.

In his letter Mr Walton gives the following description of the birds: 'slightly larger than a Grass Parrot (*Psephotus haematonotus*) but heavier at the top end . . . green with yellow markings not unlike a budgie, short legs and tail slightly on the long side. They lived in small holes under the spinifex (like tunnels or burrows). When you walked through the spinifex these birds would run out and scatter like quail. They showed a marked preference for running although they could fly quite well. When approached closely they would fly a short distance and land on the ground and run although I've seen them land in trees. I've never seen these birds about during the

daytime without having to walk through the spinifex and stir them out. If you walked up to them with a great deal of caution they were fairly quiet and often I got to within 30 or 40 feet [ $\pm 10\text{m}$ ] from them'.

Subsequently, when questioned, he provided further details: the colour was green, not as bright as a Mallee Ringneck *Barnardius barnardi*, with the appearance of yellow centres to the feathers. The head and neck were brownish. The ventral surface was not seen because the birds were always moving away. In shape they were like a compressed Red-rumped Parrot *Psephotus haematonotus* with a heavy body, short tail and rather heavy legs and feet. (Compare his comment in letter to WHB where he states that the tail is 'slightly on the long side'). Approximately three weeks before the 1959 fire, five parrots were flushed by his dog and some then perched on the lower branches (less than 1 m above ground) of a mallee tree. This is the largest group he recorded.

Mr Walton has lived in the area all his life and is an experienced bushman. He is familiar with local fauna, including the mallee parrots, Regent Parrot *Polytelis anthoepus*, Budgerigar *Melopsittacus undulatus*, *Barnardius barnardi*, *Psephotus haematonotus*, Mulga Parrot *P. varius* and Blue Bonnet *Northiella haematogaster* but not with *Neophema* spp. He is not a member of any natural history society and is unfamiliar with ornithological literature. Thus his observations and recollections have not been biased by preconceived ideas or published accounts (the magazine article [Eusson 1978] gives very little information on plumage or behaviour). His memory of the strange parrots and the area they occupied is clear and precise. The plumage and gross morphology that he describes are similar to those of Night Parrots that we have examined at the National Museum of Victoria (NMV 36256, H.L. White coll. 54,55) and, except for perching in mallee trees, his observations on habitat, flight, terrestrial habits and daytime refuge in tunnels beneath *Triodia* agree with other published observations (e.g. Andrews 1883; Kearthland in North 1898; McDonald in McGilp 1931; Bourgoin in Wilson 1937; and Scarce in Howe and Tregallas 1914). Forshaw (*pers. comm.*) doubts whether Night Parrots can perch because their feet are not suitably adapted; however the terrestrial Ground Parrot *Pezoporus wallicus* can perch on horizontal or sloping branches (*pers. obs.*).

Between 12 and 14 May 1979 we visited Ross's Spring with Mr Walton and searched clumps of *T. irritans* by day and watched the waterhole at night but found no evidence of the occurrence of Night Parrots. Ross's Spring is a small permanent freshwater spring fed by groundwater and run-off from the surrounding dunes. It is surrounded by an open herbaceous flat and to the south-west there is a flat area carrying mallee (*Eucalyptus oleosa*, *E. viridis* and *E. dumosa*) with an understorey dominated by *T. irritans*, *Brachyloma ericoides*, *Caelitris verrucosa* and *Acacia* spp. This flat is surrounded by dunes where *Leptospermum-Banksia* heath grow. All of Mr Walton's observations were made in mallee scrub with *T. irritans* in the understorey.

Scarce (Howe and Tregellas 1914) reported Night Parrots at two places, one about forty-two miles (65 km) north of Murrayville near the South Australian border and the other twelve miles (19 km) south of Kow Plains. If Scarce meant south of Kow Plains homestead, which was at Cowangie, his location is some ten kilometres south-west of Ross's Spring and very close to a similar spring known as Burrels Soak (35° 25'S; 141° 26'E). Scarce's notes suggest that the habitat at his two sites was similar to that at Ross's Spring and Burrels Soak: 'in both instances the birds were in thick and large porcupine grass and were seen feeding out on the edges of the grass, in each case where the grass spreads out onto small plains. There were round tunnels through each clump . . .'

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### BREEDING AND MORTALITY OF BUDGERIGARS *MELOPSITTACUS UNDULATUS*

Studies of domesticated Budgerigars and a few field observations suggest that Budgerigars may have a short breeding cycle, rapidly increase numbers when seasonal conditions are good and suffer high mortality during climatic extremes. Domesticated Budgerigars are physiologically capable of breeding at three and a half to four months old (von Pohl-Apel and Sossinka 1975) and domesticated birds pair and breed at about five months old (von Engesser 1977). Domesticated Budgerigars will produce several successive clutches (Pratley 1957; Rutgers 1967) and males maintain enlarged testes and do not have seasonal cycles of gonadal recrudescence and regression (Brockway 1964b; van Tienhoven *et al.* 1966). Pairs

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of wild Budgerigars nest in close proximity (McGilp 1923; Keast 1966; Robinson 1939) and pairs of domesticated birds need to hear other breeding pairs for rapid and full gonadal development (Ficken *et al.* 1960; Brockway 1964b); such 'colonial nesting' and 'social facilitation' have been interpreted as adaptations in desert birds to synchronize breeding and accelerate ovulation (Immelmann 1963; Serventy 1971). Finlayson *et al.* (1932) report deaths of many Budgerigars during a heat wave, estimating a loss of 60,000 birds at one dam.

In this communication I present further information on breeding and mortality in Budgerigars and