

ROSELLAS;  
A U.S. VIEWPOINT

by Dale R. Thompson,  
Lemon Cove, CA



## the History of Rosellas in U.S. Aviculture

### Introduction

The rosella group of parrots originates from Australia and they comprise one of the largest of the Australian parrot families.<sup>1</sup> There are eight representatives in the genus *Platycercus* one or the other of which are found throughout much of Australia including the island of Tasmania.

The rosellas are truly among the most colorful and beautifully marked parrots found throughout the world. It is due to this great beauty that the rosella group has always been popular in aviculture everywhere.

Since Europeans first discovered Australia, the demand for all of Australia's parrots has been great. Australian cockatoos, parrots and parakeets have now been held in aviculture for over 150 years. Obviously, the Budgie or Shell Parakeet was one of the very first to be reproduced in captivity and developed into many color

varieties and sizes. The rosellas were not too far behind.

### Early History

#### 1920s, '30s, and '40s

The history of rosellas in American aviculture first began in the late 1920s. It was during the decade of the 1930s when most of the rosellas were first reproduced in America. Records are scarce but *Aviculture Magazine* is the best reference. One must remember that all rosellas in this era were wild-caught and imported directly from Australia or imported via Europe. The wild-caught rosella is a far different bird from the rosella of today. The wild-caught rosella is a very high-strung, nervous bird. Those birds that made it to America in the 1930s were transported by ship and usually these trips were very arduous and difficult for them. Many birds were lost and the survivors often developed health problems. It was not easy to house high-strung rosellas in small cages aboard a ship that did not have adequate bird food and water.

Those that made it to America were tough birds and, when acclimatized, did quite well in captivity. All species of the rosellas arrived in America during these early years but some were in very limited quantities. This is why there are many records of hybrid breedings between different rosella species. The two most colorful rosellas, the Eastern and Pennant's Rosellas were the most popular and obviously the most effort was given to these two species.

In these years the Eastern Rosella,

*Platycercus eximius*, was known as the Rosella Parakeet. Lee Crandall's List (1926-29) gives W. H. Browning as the first breeder of the Eastern Rosella around 1929. (The date was not recorded exactly.) Many other breeders reproduced this rosella but F. H. Rudkin had the most recorded successes.

The Pennant's Rosella, *Platycercus elegans*, was first reproduced (recorded) in 1930 by Dr. Leon Patrick and San Diego Zoo (handfed from ten days). Dr. Patrick related, "They adapt themselves so thoroughly to Southern California climate that young produced here are larger and more brilliantly colored." I personally do not know if it was the climate that intensified the babies' colors, but southern California certainly has a climate that matches the climate where the Pennant's Rosella originates in Australia.

F. H. Rudkin was probably the most consistent breeder of Pennant's Rosellas in those early years as he successfully reared them almost on an annual basis from 1932 to 1941.

During the 1930s and '40s, several breeders have been recorded as reproducing the Pennant's Rosella including F. A. Vanderlip, A. G. Orean, W. J. Sheffler, Mrs. Gilbert Lee, and Mrs. Olive Gilmer. Dr. R. Woods in 1943 referred to his "prolific" pair double clutching. He stated, "...has a second brood of three Pennant's in one season, the hen laid her second clutch of three eggs long before they (the pair) quit feeding the first young."

Dr. and Mrs. Patrick first reproduced the Yellow Rosella, *Platycercus elegans flaveolus*, in 1929. At that time the bird was known as the Yellow-rumped Parakeet. At an Avicultural Society meeting he stated, "Yellow-rumped Parakeets have young flying in the aviary and are incubating their second clutch of eggs this season."

The Mealy Rosella, *Platycercus elegans flaveolus*, is also called the Pale-headed or Blue Rosella and was probably first reproduced by W. J. Sheffler in 1931 but he was not given the award (no reason given). In the 1940s the Mealy Rosella was reproduced quite well though there were not a lot of breeders. A very good breeder of Mealy Rosellas, Mrs. Olive Gilmer

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writes in 1945, "I know of several fanciers who breed them as readily as Zebra Finches." In the same year, Dave West, another prolific rosella breeder writes, "During the past two years two pairs of Mealy Rosellas in my modest collection have produced and successfully reared a total of thirty-two young, and both pairs are on eggs at this time. In the spring of 1944 both pairs nested quite early, the first week in February, and continued until the end of July. Over this rather extended breeding period (six months) seventeen young were reared, but one, unfortunately, died, evidently from a broken neck. Each pair nested twice with one pair rearing nine and the other eight young. There were two nests of five young, one of four and one of three. They began breeding even earlier this season—one pair hatched young on Christmas Day. This same pair already has reared twelve young from three nests and as yet they have shown no signs of wanting to quit. . . . My other pair have reared four young so far this season and are again sitting as this is written (June, 20)."

J. D. Putnam recorded the only reproduction of the Brown's Rosella, *Platycercus venustus*, prior to 1940. Of interest, Dr. Patrick writes in 1939 that, "This species is possessed by but few of our members, neither do they breed as freely as the other *Platycerci*, but those who have reared young are to be sincerely congratulated on their success." According to the records of *Aviculture*, I. D. Putnam imported a pair from the Keston Foreign Bird Farm in England. In 1940 Mr. Putnam writes, "They arrived the latter part of November in wonderful condition . . . and in two weeks they had gone to nest." Five young were hatched, but lost at about two weeks through becoming chilled at night due to the parents having been unsettled by bees. Putnam was successful later and writes "Up to now I have raised a dozen or so Brown's." He gave no dates for these successes.

First breeding records for the other rosellas such as the Stanley or Western, *Platycercus icterotis*, Adelaide, *Platycercus adelaide*, and the Green or Tasmanian Rosella, *Platycercus caledoniensis*, sometimes called the Yellow-bel-

lied, were not recorded in *Aviculture* except for hybridization with other rosellas and non-rosellas. The Stanley Rosella was crossed with a Pileated Parakeet, *Purpureicephalus spurius*, in 1929 and the Barnard's Parakeet, *Barnardius barnardii*, with a Pennant's Rosella in 1947. There is absolutely no need for hybridizing these now very common Australian parakeets and it should be avoided at all costs.

On January 24, 1930, President Herbert Hoover issued a proclamation prohibiting the importation of all psittacines from foreign ports into the U.S. due to the excitement stirred up by the media publicity as to the danger to humans of Psittacosis. Budgies just happened to be the most widely and commonly kept species of psittacine at that time hence the "Budgie Ban" as it was called. A similar ban was imposed in England, Germany, Switzerland and Canada about the same time. California imposed a law requiring that all Budgies be banded and this still holds to the present day.

Australia banned the export of all its wildlife in the middle 1950s. This, however, did not stop the smuggling out of Australia.

### Increased Interest in Rosellas During the 1960s and 1970s

There was no such thing as federal quarantine before the mid-sixties. Prior to this, if one wanted to do a self-quarantine, it was a personal choice. Any new arrivals that were injured (eye and beak problems) or looked ill in any way were usually set apart from the other breeding birds until they improved. Almost no modern medications were used during those early years. Mostly homeopathic medicine with herbs and plants were used if anything. No one had ever heard of *E. coli* and *Candida* in those days.

On October 10, 1967, a foreign quarantine law became effective. Several foreign quarantine stations were set up for importing exotic birds into the U.S. Two that were very commonly used were McCubbins' station just across the California border in Mexico and Udo Wostendiek's station in Frankfurt, Germany. David Mohilef had a quarantine station in Singapore.

Obviously these stations were not monitored and they lacked any international authority to make sure any and all birds actually did go through the 30 to 60 day quarantine period.

But this quarantine did have an effect on the number of exotic birds coming into the U. S. The late 1960s and early 1970s brought an increased interest in aviculture in the United States and many more people were now acquiring exotic birds to put in their back yards.

Smuggling of parrots from Australia was still going on during the 1960s and 1970s. Many a stevedore would come ashore with birds attached to his body and there was a ready market. Using two long woman's stockings, one bird would be placed into one toe and another bird in the other toe. The upper ends of the stocking would be tied together at the top and one bird slipped through one armhole of a long overcoat and the other through the other armhole. With the overcoat over his shoulders, two birds, be they a cockatoos or rosellas, could thus be taken down the gangplank without being noticed. A transaction would take place in a nearby bar and the stevedore would instantly double his pay.

### Quarantine in the 1970s

Due to the now famous and disastrous Newcastle Disease problem in 1973, a strict quarantine was placed on all exotic birds coming into the U. S. Many U. S. Fish & Wildlife approved quarantine stations sprang up throughout the U. S. All birds were required to stay a minimum of 30 days in quarantine and be tested for VVND, the exotic form of Newcastle Disease that seri-

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ously affected the poultry industry. Not only did active VVND kill any kind of poultry but it was also very deadly to exotic birds, especially psittacines.

After the regulated quarantine period became law in the U. S., smuggling did slow down a great deal as it was not as easy to do and there were stiff penalties to be paid if one were caught.

Smuggling from Australia, a country halfway around the world did occur in the 1970s. I personally can well remember in 1976 when, as a bird keeper at the Los Angeles Zoo, I cared for a confiscated group of Australian parakeets that had been smuggled into the Los Angeles area. Among this group were the Red-vented Blue-bonnet, *Psephotus b. haematorrhous*, and the Northern (Brown's) Rosella, *Platycercus venustus*. I had only seen these two rare parakeets in Joseph Forshaw's *Parrots of the World*. Though William Cooper, the fabulous artist of this book, created a beautiful rendition of these two species, the actual live specimens were truly spectacular.

The Los Angeles Zoo even reproduced parent-reared Northern Rosellas in early 1977. The 1970s were just a beginning of an era when I was introduced to many new (to me) avian species. This was a very unique learning time for an avian enthusiast.

### Peaking in the early 1980s

The very late 1970s (1978 and 1979) and early 1980s were times when importation of Australian parakeets from Europe was done in earnest. In 1979 and 1980, I had the privilege to travel to Holland, Belgium and Germany to observe and purchase a large collection (160 pairs) of Australian parakeets. Over 45 pairs were in the rosella family. During these years the prices of the large Australian parakeets were very high. Prices of \$1800 to \$3000 (US) a pair were not unreasonable. Even the common rosellas (Eastern and Pennant's) were \$200 and \$600 each. The Northern Rosella was over the \$2000 mark. Even though prices were quite high, the demand for the Australian parakeet group by American aviculturists was very strong.

The European aviculturists rearing these many parakeet species were, in my opinion, the very best in the world. The expertise of these breeders was (and is) even more impressive when one realizes that the European breeder must deal with freezing temperatures during most of the winter months. Most of these breeders housed their Australian parakeets outdoors. Even though the aviaries were well sheltered from the wind, the birds preferred to stay in the open part of the aviary.

The winter of 1979/1980 was an especially severe one and during my visit to Germany and Holland in January 1980, the daytime temperatures hovered around -14 degrees F. Hard and soft snow could be observed on the roofs and aviary floors. The snow and ice were the birds' only source of water. Any fresh water would freeze immediately. Budgies and rosellas would tunnel under the soft snow. Most American aviculturists during this era were too fearful of colds and drafts. It does strengthen some birds and it was surmised that the cold winter temperatures of Europe that turned sharply into a warmer spring were what triggered the rosellas to reproduce well.

In some parts of the U.S., climates are often quite variable. Temperatures may go up and down during the spring which causes many rosellas to lay infertile eggs. They do not feel that there was a definite spring.

The importation of Australian parakeets increased so rapidly during the 1980s that prices began to drop and suddenly they crashed in the late 1980s. Literally hundreds upon hundreds of rosellas and other common Australian parakeets had been imported into the U. S. The stock imported generally was not the best (color and size) found in Europe. Any smart breeder (including the Europeans) would keep back the best of the brood and sell the remainder. I remember observing Green Rosellas in Germany larger than any I had ever seen in America. The rarer the rosella, the poorer the quality of the species that was sent to America. These included the Green, Northern and Yellow Rosellas.

The reproduction of many of the Australian parakeets, including the more common rosellas, in Europe increased to such a degree that it soon became almost impossible for many breeders in Europe to make a profit. Eastern Rosellas were below \$30 (US) and Red-rumped Parakeets (*Psephotus haematonotus*) could be purchased in quantities for \$12 apiece. Though prices generally dropped for the majority of the species, several still commanded good prices. Among these were several large species such as the Australian King (*Alisterus scapularis*), the Port Lincoln Parakeet, (*Barnardius zonarius*), and the Cloncurry Parakeet (*Barnardius z. magillivrayi*), and several of the smaller species such as the Hooded, *Psephotus dissimilis*, and Golden-shouldered, *Psephotus chrysopterygius*, Parakeets. Most of the mutations of any species, however, were still quite expensive.

### Late 1980s and early 1990s

The interest in rosellas and many of the other Australian parakeets waned in the late 1980s and early 1990s. A change in focus began in the industry. Certainly there were those American aviculturists who were specialists in rosellas and other Australian parakeets. But due to the great reduction of price of most rosellas, etc., the market fluctuated radically and often times it was hard to move the birds. But rosella breeders were always around. Due to their wonderful color and behavior, the rosellas could still be found in many U.S. breeding facilities. They were kept because they were enjoyed and not for the huge profits of previous years. Some breeders specialized in the Australian parakeets while others had them as a supplement to their larger parrots as Amazons, Greys, and macaws.

Rosellas are long-tailed (often referred to as broadtails) parakeets and do well in aviaries. For years they were parent-reared and handfeeding was done only as a remedy when one of the parents died or did not feed the young. The old timers certainly did not handfeed any Australian parakeet unless it was a last resort and many refused to do it altogether. The great

majority of rosellas from European collections (that were imported in the 1980s) were parent-reared.

It was during the waning years of rosella interest that the American aviculturist tried to make a new market for their rosellas. Now that there was a very good market for the finger-tame Cockatiel, Budgie, and conure, many Australian parakeet breeders started to handfeed their rosellas and other larger Australian parakeets for the pet market. This often met with very poor success. In the early 1980s, first the Rock Peblar (*Polytelis anthopepler*) and then the Princess of Wales, *Polytelis alexandrae*, Parakeets were handfed with relatively good success. The biggest problem with the long-tailed parakeets was that while they might be nice and tame while very young, they soon turned skittish and began to bite as soon as they were left alone for a while. The Rock Peblar and Princess were two good examples of Australian parakeet that had a tendency of staying tame.

Hand feeding of rosellas was begun in big numbers and a small percentage remained tame. These were almost always females. Rosella males are noted for being aggressive during the breeding season and will drive a female into the nest at times. It is standard practice to not house pairs of rosellas next to each other as the males will frequently fight vigorously with any males housed next door—often to the dismay of its own mate. Often there are infertile eggs due to a male spending so much time showing aggression to its neighbor. Worse yet, many a male has turned on its own mate in a transferred aggression because it cannot drive its neighbor away.

There are a good number of pet rosellas in the home, but as stated before, those that remain tame are usually females. Occasionally a pet female, for any number of reasons, will be sold to a wholesaler. In general, there always seems to be fewer females around for the aviculturists and breeders so when one of these tame females becomes available, a breeder quickly buys it. These tame females are usually mature and the breeder often puts them with a mature

male.

Many times when this occurs, disaster befalls the female. The tame female has been imprinted to a human being and does not recognize the correct signals from the male during breeding season. Often times the female is not in cycle with their mature mate and the male drives the female around the cage so she will go into the nest box. If the tame female is not ready to nest or does not know how to respond to a pushy male, she will often be attacked. As a result, there are many tame female rosellas that have their upper mandible either missing completely or severely mutilated. This is a new problem in American aviculture that has begun in the 1990s.

The old timers reproduced the rosella group in flights that were often 30 feet long. In the 1970s, Gene Hall, noted for his success in Pennant's Rosellas and others, reproduced them in 30 foot flights that were end to end. The Europeans would generally have rosella flights at least 12 feet long. Though some American breeders now-a-days keep their rosellas in

flights, so many more are cage bred—breeding them in four to six foot suspended cages. Even an eight foot cages does not give a female (with a good instinctual sense of breeding) the chance to get away from an aggressive male. Too many times the weather changes pushing the male into the cycle of breeding while the female is going out of the cycle. This is standard and during these times the female should have enough space to get away from a pushy male until the next breeding cycle occurs and hopefully they both will be in sync.

#### WBCA of 1992

With the enactment of the Wild Bird Conservation Act of 1992, most psittacines were prohibited from being imported into the U. S. There were two ways that parrots could be legally imported. One was if they were placed on the Approved List or if a U. S. Fish & Wildlife approved Breeding Program was established for the species.

The Approved List contained a group of exotic birds with species that did not have a record of wild-caught

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specimens being legally or illegally exported out of the country of origin. Since Australia does not have any of its native wildlife exported outside its country, many of the birds on the Approved List are Australian parakeets. It would seem that the rosellas would be on this List and they are. But lo and behold, two species are not included—the Yellow and the Green Rosellas.

In discussing this aspect with Dr. Susan Lieberman (of USF&WS), she explained that there was an illegal shipment of Australian parrots off the coast of Queensland, Australia and one of the rosella species was in it. For this reason a very cheap bird such as a rosella has not made it on the Approved List. Dr. Lieberman did state that American aviculturists could write letters in a year asking for these two birds to be added to the list. That was during 1995. I highly recommend all rosella enthusiasts write to her in Washington D. C.

One of the saddest things in American aviculture is that we are not doing well at keeping common birds such as rosellas long term in our aviaries. Rosellas are relatively easy to reproduce but as soon as the Yellow and Green Rosellas stopped being imported into the U. S. their total numbers began to drop in American aviculture. Are we so dependent on imports that we cannot keep a rosella going for generations in our own aviaries? There are still limited numbers of Yellow Rosellas around, but breeders are always looking for hens. The Green Rosella is almost gone in our aviaries. Why did this happen? Is it the "import always" mentality or "we can always get another from the wild (or Europe)" thinking that has given us this apathy? What if we do not get the Yellow and Green Rosellas on the Approved List where they belong? Will these two species go the way of the Orange-cheeked Brotogeris, *Brotogeris jugularis*, and the Red-vented Cockatoo, *Cacatua haematuropygia*? This would be a sad commentary for American aviculture.

### **A Rosellas Comeback in the 1990s**

The middle 1990s seemed to be the time when the rosellas began a slow

comeback in popularity in American aviculture. It actually started when the WBCA came into effect in October 1993. Though the original rosella enthusiasts were still going strong, other breeders got into the business of reproducing rosellas. Their prices held steady while many of the larger parrot prices were dropping dramatically. Breeders finally appreciated the rosella just for its beauty and this is the true mark of good aviculture. Certainly one must have a market for their birds and hopefully a profit. But when the aviculturists really enjoy their birds, aviculture will have made a complete turn-around. We must go back to having parent raised pairs in our aviaries. Larger flights are now being given to the rosellas and some even have plants in them. Many breeders still reproduce rosellas in cages but then release them in a big flight during the off-season. More and more of this kind of thing must happen in American aviculture. The rosellas are literally among the greatest colored gems of the parrot world and they should always be in our aviaries.

The most common rosella in American aviculture is the Eastern Rosella. On price lists they are almost always called the Golden-mantled Rosella. There are actually very few true Golden-mantled Rosellas in America. Several were imported in the 1980s but they were diluted with the standard Eastern Rosella. Many have a golden-yellow back but not the full color to the nape as the true subspecies has. This rosella is the most popular due to, first, its low price and, secondly, great color.

The second most common rosella is the Pennant's or Crimson Rosella. Again, its popularity is due to its fabulous color. The Mealy or Blue Rosella may take third place but this is hard to determine. The Adelaide and Stanley (Western) Rosellas may take fourth and fifth place in American aviculture. I do not know in which order. I am completely surprised that I do not see more Stanley Rosellas in our aviaries. This is such a beautifully colored bird and 95% of all adults can be visually sexed. The Stanley Rosella is the smallest of all the rosellas and should be in competition with the Eastern

Rosella for first place. Why have the total numbers of Stanley Rosellas dwindled in the past few years? Is it because of disinterest and a lower price return?

The Northern (Brown's) Rosella is next and it still is solidly kept as a breeding bird. All of the above species have been handfed for the pet trade with only partial success. Certainly the Yellow and the Green Rosellas should only be found in aviaries They should not be handfed.

The numerous mutations found in many of the rosellas have been one of the main reasons for the comeback of rosella interest. I should say the mutation breeders of rosellas have always been around but now more and more new breeders are interested in the new and old mutations. Since rosellas are very colorful, some of the mutations have not enhanced their color. But when put with a normal colored rosella, there is a contrasting color between the pair. The most obvious example is the blue Pennant's Rosella where all the red is replaced with a grayish blue. There is no way to get a better colored bird than a normal Pennant's Rosella but when a visual and a split Pennant's are observed in an aviary, they show what a great difference it is being red or blue in color.

Even in the 1990s there are new mutations or double mutations showing up in Europe and these colors can be imported into the U. S. as the normal bird is on the Approved List. Many are simply stunning as the lutino Golden-mantled and the fiery (red) Eastern Rosella. Now the fiery-lutino bird is available in Europe.

I urge all old time breeders, pet breeders and hobby breeders to place a good sized flight (12 feet to 20 feet) that reaches the ground in your back yard and place a pair of rosellas in it. Their beauty and voice (ko-kee) will entertain you forever and every spring they may give you a batch of parent-reared babies. Let's go back to breeding rosellas the 1930s way and allow the parent to feed and rear their young.

### **Acknowledgment**

I wish to thank Rae Anderson and Gene Hall for their assistance with this history lesson. They can still remember it. DRT

