breeding the
Australian Eclectus Parrot

(Eclectus roratus macgillivrayi)

by Graham Taylor
Director, Pearl Coast Zoological Gardens
Broome, Western Australia

My association with this amazing parrot goes back to 1968. I was contracted to an American Television Documentary team who was planning on going to Cape York Peninsula, North Queensland, Australia to film the Great Palm Cockatoos.

In those days, little was known about the Australian Eclectus Parrot. Most species held by Australian aviculturists were Eclectus roratus polychloros or solomanensis which originated from imports the late Sir Edward Halstrom imported into Australia from Papua New Guinea and the Soloman Islands prior to 1954.

It was during the eight weeks I spent in Cape York in July and August 1968 that I first saw these birds. We were setting up to climb a Palm's nest to film, which was located on the edge of thick rainforest. These birds would start to call out their alarm calls and, on many occasions, quite large groups of mostly males would be flying about screeching loudly. It was not until the following year I realized that the reason for mostly males flying around was all the females were nesting.

Over the course of the next 20 years or so, I spent many hours watching these birds, learning all I could about them and their breeding and feeding habits in the wild.

The Australian Eclectus would mainly nest in the large Ficus trees in deep rainforest on the edge of a river or creek. They sometimes nest in colonies. In fact, I have located up to three active nests in the same tree. Small family groups would all fly together when disturbed and it was not uncommon to see up to three males attending one female at nest.

Those nests were all above a height of 80 feet and would require a lot of hard work to inspect the nest at this height, if you were not a climber then you had to take one with you.

In those early days, it would take us up to four hours or so to climb these large trees. These Fig trees would go up 50 feet before there would be a branch to which we could attach a rope. Over the years, I have developed a system by which we could climb most trees in less than an hour.

From 1972 to 1978, I was based in Cairns, North Queensland, where I developed a small bird park that was open to the public. I had on display many species of Australian parrots and in 1974 I was granted a collecting permit for the Australian Eclectus. I made three expeditions to Cape York that year, the first two to refresh my memory and to gather fresh data and to locate new nesting sites.

In November, I collected a number of fledglings, returned to Cairns and handreared the chicks until they were 14 weeks old and placed them in the aviary for the first time. When these birds matured, which took three years, I realized their true beauty and how large they were. I had two breeding pairs of Polychloros on display in the bird park and when they were placed in the same aviary for comparison the size difference was unbelievable - at least six inches larger, due mainly to the longer tail. The Polychloros has a short stocky tail where the Macgillivrayi has a long tail tipped with pale yellow (male) and the male's beak is a deep coral orange color, where Polychloros has a pale yellow-orange colored beak.

On the field trips to Cape York from 1974 to 1984, one could not help but be amazed by these birds. By this time I had an extensive knowledge and I knew with proper housing and diet these birds would breed well in captivity.

In 1978 my family and I moved back to northern New South Wales to concentrate on a breeding facility that was not open to the public. This way I could devote more time to breeding and research of some of the rarer Australian parrots. I only had about 30 breeding aviaries and these were conventional type, 12 feet long, three feet wide and seven feet high and not suspended.

Over the next few years I visited many aviculturists who had Eclectus Parrots, to see if I could locate any Macgillivrayi to add to the number I had. They were very scarce and females were impossible to obtain so I did not have much to work with. In 1985, with three males and two females, I started my breeding program.

All birds were placed in a large flight aviary so they could pair up naturally. Once paired, they were moved into the breeding flights. Their diet consisted of 75% fruit and 25% seed. The fruit was made up of banana, pear, apple, grapes, guava, wild figs and cotoneaster berries, which only fruited in winter and was a favorite diet of Gang Gang Cockatoos in the wild. Their seed diet consisted of grey sunflower, millet and plain canary seed and during winter some hulled oats were added, along with some pine nuts and other tidbits.

The nest box was 30" deep and 12" square with a metal ladder inside to allow the bird to climb down rather than jump. An inspection door was at one side but this was difficult and as most breeders of Eclectus would know, they become very aggressive when nesting. Males will attack and I had to wear a hat to ward off a male that would delight in hopping on my shoulder but then proceed to bite my neck, and you know when you have been bitten by an Australian Eclectus! Although all the birds were handraised, once they had paired up and were nesting, you could expect to get a bite or two.

In November 1985, one of the pairs laid two eggs. The incubation period
was 28 days. I did not inspect the nest once I knew she had laid until a week after the hatching date. On inspection there were two healthy chicks just getting the familiar grey down. I decided to remove them for hand feeding and in the hope the parents would double clutch. This they did but both eggs this time were infertile.

Again in those days, little was known about hand feeding and incubation. It was not until around 1987 that the boom happened and suddenly everyone was handfeeding and new formulas started to appear in avicultural magazines. I developed a feeding formula that suited me which was half a weetbix plus half a wheatmeal biscuit, soak with half a cup of boiling water, cover and let swell, prepare dry mix of half a teaspoon of millet meal, half a teaspoon of sunflower meal, half a teaspoon of fine oatmeal, two teaspoons of high protein baby cereal, 1/4 teaspoon of fine raw peanuts, and two teaspoons of fine Mueslic. This was added to the weetbix and wheatmeal biscuit and mixed, three drops of corn oil and one or two drops of vitamin were added, plus one teaspoon of baby mixed vegies and fed at around 105°F four times a day.

At six weeks these birds can be sexed as they start to show color. These both turned out to be males, but I was happy just the same and it could well be the first breeding of this species in captivity.

In 1986, I accepted the position as Curator of Birds at Pearl Coast Zoo, Broome, Western Australia. Broome is situated 2500 miles north of Perth in an area called the Kimberleys. It is a tropical but dry area of Australia and although on the coast, it is also on the edge of one of the largest deserts in the world. As I had never been to Broome before, in fact I had never been to Western Australia, it was quite an experience to fly in for the first time. Broome had a population of 7500 people and is considered a tourist town - it is famous for pearls and cattle, some of the largest cattle stations in the world are in the Kimberleys.

For the first 18 months or so, my job was to put together the largest collection of parrots and cockatoos in Australia, as it was Lord McAlpine's wish to have as near as possible a full collection of all the 65 species of parrots native to Australia, a feat, I might add, that has never been attempted by any zoo or private aviculturist in this country.

Other species such as softbills, waterfowl and zoo species were on my shopping list and on two occasions I transported large consignments of birds by private plane from the east coast to the west coast which took two days because no commercial flight flew across Australia, all domestic flights flew around the coast. When I had a shipment of softbills or valuable parrots, we decided to charter a private plane and fly directly to Broome.

When I moved my wife and son to Broome to live, of course I took the seven Eclectus Parrots with me. Lord McAlpine was instrumental in the next phase of this breeding program. He had developed this zoo to breed rare and endangered species and the Australian Eclectus was high on our list of priorities for future breeding programs.

Over the next two years, I concentrated on obtaining the right staff to feed and look after the 1000 odd birds and the 120 aviaries at that time.

It was not until 1988 when a new breeding program was attempted, as we were still developing this zoo, building now larger flights housing species like Palm Cockatoos, macaws and the tiny Fig Parrot.

Our two pairs were set up in the same aviary, this aviary was 120 feet long and 20 feet wide and 15 feet high. It was well planted and had a running stream through it, nest boxes were placed at each end of the flight in case they would prefer to nest apart, but, as I predicted, both pairs nested next to each other and to this date (June 1992) they have nested next to each other, although there were eight nests to choose from and from time to time they would swap over, we never had a problem. All chicks were taken and hand reared and there was quite a deal of excitement when we had hand reared our first female. "Betty" was hatched on the 9th July 1988 and her nest mate turned out to be another male.

Over the next few years with selected pairing and hand feeding every chick, I am proud to say we have now reached our goal of ten pairs of unrelated stock and our third breeding pair 2nd generation has now produced young. It has been a tremendous effort by my bird curator and his staff of extremely dedicated bird keepers. Without their devotion to duty and after-hours feeding, this breeding success would not have been possible.

The six years I have spent here at Pearl Coast Zoo, first as curator of birds and now as director, has been exciting and we can now boast over 1400 birds, including 51 species of Australian Parrots and Cockatoos, over 300 breeding aviaries. During 1990/91 over 700 birds were bred at this zoo and many of them threatened or endangered species, for example the rare Golden Shouldered Parrot, *Psophotus chrysopygus chrysopygus*. Out of four breeding pairs, 47 young were produced. These have been sent around Australia to other aviculturists who wish to breed this species.

During the 1992/3 breeding season we plan to offer a few unrelated Australian Eclectus to other Australian aviculturists who are keen to obtain this species of parrot.

When I sit at my desk in my office in Broome, it is not that hard to let the mind drift back to those days in the late sixties when collecting and filming expeditions were exciting, to say the least. That first trip to Cape...
This pair of juvenile Australian Eclectus has plenty of space to socialize within this planted aviary.

This photo shows the difference in subspecies of male Eclectus. The bird on the left is Eclectus roratus polychloros and the one on the right is E.r. macgillivrayi.

Eight pairs of Eclectus Parrots are housed in this large flight aviary at the Pearl Coast Zoological Gardens. This beautiful aviary is decorated with many plants and trees, rock work and waterways.

The director, Graham Taylor of the Pearl Coast Zoo, has a good relationship with these Eclectus Parrots.

York in 1968 was a real challenge because at that time there weren’t any roads, just tracks. People today cannot believe that in those days it took five days to travel from Cairns in north Queensland to Portland Roads on the east coast of Cape York, a distance of 430 miles, crossing sixty creeks and rivers, and I remember one particular day it took us seven hours to travel just 14 miles. Today it is just a matter of catching a plane and in three hours you are there. Somehow I prefer the good old days. There was a real feeling of achievement in those days and also disappointment.

In 1975, I decided to fly up from Cairns during the wet season (Cairns received about 130 inches of rain during February and March). I arranged the loan of a Land Rover 4 x 4 for the six day scouting trip. I spent six days caught between two tributaries of the Claudie River and only heard a few bird calls, it rained non stop for those six days, a cyclone passed about twenty miles from my camp and in just one night they had 13 inches of rain, but if I had the chance all over again I would be the first one on the plane. Cape York is the type of country that once you have been there you can’t wait to return.

I am sure aviculturists around the world get the feeling I get when they breed something for the first time. I hope they enjoy my experience with this amazing parrot, the Australian Eclectus Parrot Eclectus reoratus macgillivrayi.
ELGAS STUDIOS

Presents...

"Scarlet Macaws"

"Hyacinth Macaws"

Beautiful Full Color Limited Edition Macaw Prints

By Nationally Acclaimed Artist

Bob Elgas is a recognized naturalist, aviculturist, writer and artist. He is credited with the discovery of the first known breeding colony of Greater snow geese on the North American continent, the previously unknown breeding ground of Gambel's white-fronted goose and the Tule goose. At his ranch near Big Timber, Montana, he maintains an extensive flock of wild birds and a breeding facility for macaws. His paintings are in collections and galleries throughout the United States and in private collections in North America, Europe and Asia. Beautifully reproduced on premium quality ph. neutral stock. Image size approx. 16" x 20". A limited number available in which each print bears the identical numbers.

Available For Immediate Shipment!

$75.00 each

Plus $3.50 postage & handling

To order send check or money order with the name of the print you want to:

Elgas Studios
P.O. Box 928
Big Timber, Montana 59011

(406) 932-4333
Thief of Hearts has three styles of Nursery * Hospitals to choose from!

From our popular nursery we introduced in March 1990, to the all-new, all-molded plastic, electronic thermostat, filtered air, built-in humidity tray, and more.

Also

STANDS
No more cluttering your kitchen cabinets. These stands come with an electrical outlet. Plug all three brooders into the stand, then plug the stand into the wall.

The Proof of the Pudding!

Very Adequate
“We use the Nursery * Hospital unit by Thief of Hearts. The combination of heat and nebulization is extremely functional, and works well for birds and reptiles. We’ve found the Nursery * Hospital easy to clean and disinfect, and the price is certainly right.”

Dr. Roger Harlan DVM
Southside Animal Clinic
Oklahoma City, OK

Commercial or Backyard Breeder
“I’m so pleased with the Thief of Hearts brooders. They are probably the most economical brooder on the market today. I need a large enough to provide adequate support for my large flock of psittacine chicks this season. I look forward to using your brooders next year.”

Rick Jordan
Author of Parrot, Incubation Procedures, and Parrots, Hand Feeding & Nursery Management
Director of Luv Them Birds
Miami, FL

I’m the Proud Owner of Seven
“I wanted to let you know how much I like using the Nursery * Hospital by Thief of Hearts. The temperature is accurate and easy to adjust, they’re roomy inside and easy to clean. I’ve recommended them to a lot of my friends. They love theirs too.”

Larry & Judy Duke
Volary Aviaries
Royal Palm Beach, FL

I wanted to let you know how much I like using the Nursery * Hospital by Thief of Hearts. The temperature is accurate and easy to adjust, they’re roomy inside and easy to clean. I’ve recommended them to a lot of my friends. They love theirs too.”

Larry & Judy Duke
Volary Aviaries
Royal Palm Beach, FL

Just a Note to Say Thank You
“...For really great service. You took the time to answer my questions and then filled my order promptly. I’ve been very pleased with the brooders. They’re easy to maintain and have a good constant temperature. My grey babies stay warm and contented.”

Pat Weber
Spicewood, TX

I Love My Brooder!
“I just pulled a clutch of Blue Crown Conures, and placed them in it last weekend. They’re doing great! It’s maintaining a perfectly constant temperature, and so easy to clean and disinfect. Thank you.”

Susan McCord
Ashburn, GA

I Recommend It Above All Other Brooders
“The Nursery * Hospital by Thief of Hearts is lightweight, easy to clean and transport. Temperature does not fluctuate as in water brooders. I was very pleased and recommend it above all other brooders.”

Dr. Greg Harrison DVM
Mary Partello
Lake Worth, FL
Founder of the Association of Avian Veterinarians, Co-author of Clinical Avian Medicine and Surgery (The only avian textbook written for veterinary students), World Class Aviculturists

I’m Using Five of Your Units
“I much prefer the Nursery * Hospitals to the units I first purchased elsewhere for a lot less money! I’m very pleased with these. Thanks again.”

Bill Mooty
Exotic Acres Bird Farm
Cocoa, FL

Hyacinths Haven
“Being the world’s largest breeder of only Hyacinth Macaws, we have to maintain a very scientific breeding operation, producing a constant supply of incubator-hatched, handfed day one, sexed baby Hyacinths. I can’t have equipment that I have to worry about. I sure like my Nursery * Hospital. Thank you.”

Bill Bennett
Hyacinths Haven
Christiansburg, VA

Satisfactory Infant Brooder
“I have used several kinds of brooders to hold young Psittacines during the early stages of handfeeding, and I’m most pleased with the one by Thief of Hearts.”

Mary Partello
Lake Worth, FL
Published in the Fall 1991 Journal of Avian Veterinarians

Call or write for our “FREE” Catalog
Octagon - 20

The Revolutionary Incubator Especially Designed for Parrots

(No Vibration)

The Simple Safe Way to Hatch Your Parrot Eggs

ONLY $249.95 + $10.00 S & H

- Fully automatic egg turning / with cradle
- Made from a tough molded plastic, easily cleaned, very compact
- Fan-assisted ventilation
- Electronic thermostat
- 40 / 60 Egg Capacity
- All-round visibility – ideal for schools
- Humidity is controlled by a twin compartment accessible from outside the incubator
- Fully guaranteed for 5 years

Portable Brooder
Mobile Home...®
Means it’s portable!
Just plug into any 12 volt power source, car, RV, airplane. We’ve incorporated thermoelectric technology developed by NASA.

Completely New Unit $249.95

THE BLEEDING!
- Cordless Convenience
- Pioneered Practical Cordless Cautery
- Powered By Rugged Nickel Cadmium Battery
- Includes Recharging Stand and Tip
- Loaded $69.95

Avian First Aid Kit
Hospital quality stainless steel instruments...
Plus a complete book on emergency procedures.

Call or write for our “FREE” Catalog

The Magnavox® Observation System
Seeing where you can’t be is easy and affordable. Now, watch over your birds without interrupting what they’re doing.

$499.95

OHAUS® Baby & Egg Scales
Easy to use, rugged construction, stringent quality. Designed to take the use of everyday routing.
Available in digital or the triple beam balance model.

$129.95

Also, we have special hard to find items
Thermometers LCD Digital / Dial / Hygrometers
Laboratory quality, uncompromising accuracy.
Handfeeding Syringes (large catheter tip)
Stainless Steel Feeding Needles
Calcium / Vitamins
Isopropyl Alcohol Gel
Bloodstop, Styptic Powder
Disinfectant, in pints or gallons
Much more

Chief of Hearts

509 N. West St.
Wichita, KS 67203
(316) 943-3443

afa WATCHBIRD 39