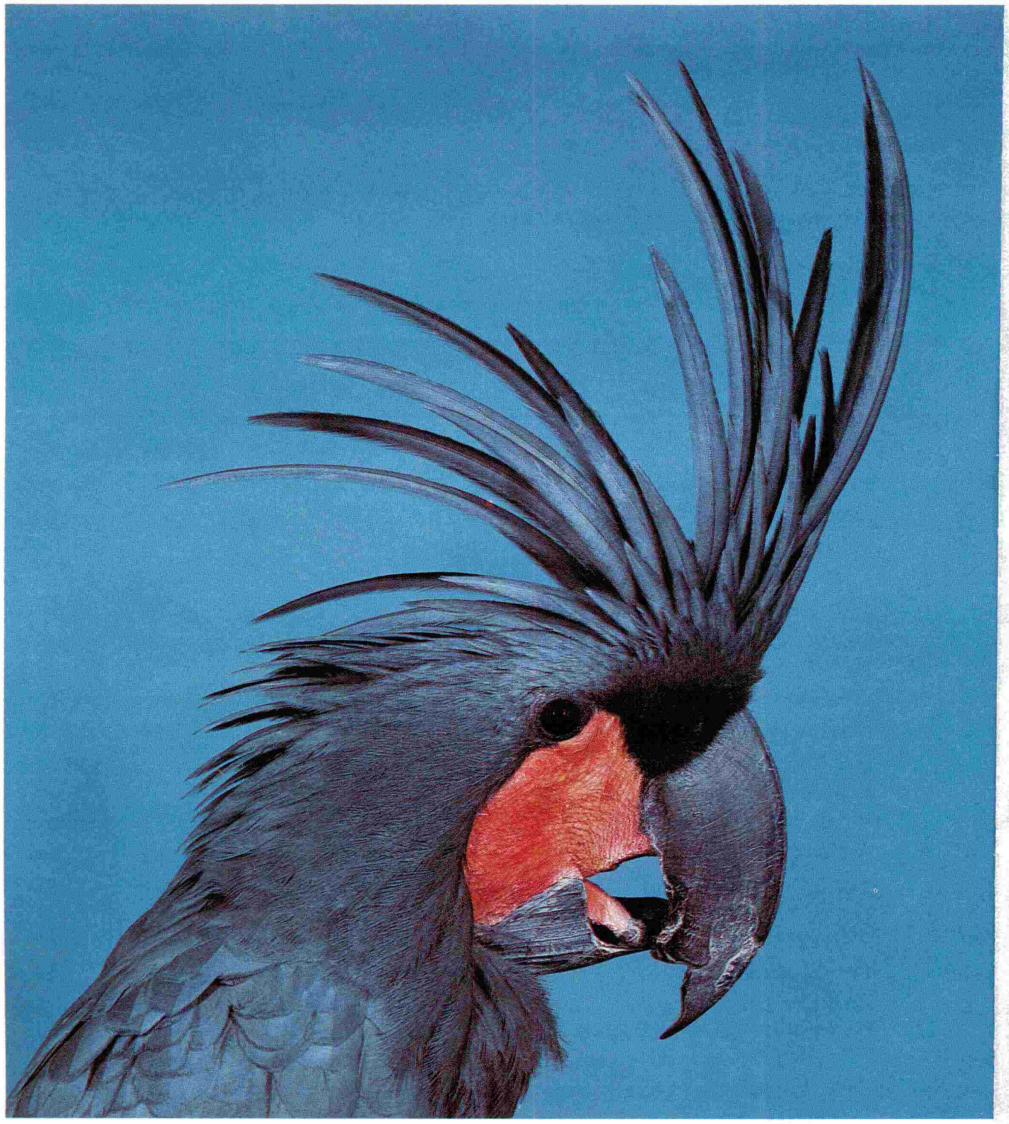
PARROTS IN PROFILE

Palm Cockatoo

Probosciger aterrimus

Photographs by Cyril Laubscher
Text by Joseph M. Forshaw

Photo by Cyril Laubscher



Palm Cockatoo Probosciger aterrimus goliath

We determined that the species selected to commence this series should be one of the more spectacular parrots, and preferably one which is familiar to readers, though not necessarily common in aviculture. Our eventual choice was prompted by my recalling what probably was my most memorable field experience with parrots in Australia – my first sighting of a Palm Cockatoo at Iron Range, Cape York Peninsula, in November 1963.

Less than two hours after arriving at Iron Range airport, I was setting up camp in a rainforest clearing beside the Claudie River when a lone cockatoo flew into the uppermost leafless branches of a tall tree standing at the forest edge. Obviously alarmed at my presence, this bird climbed with slow, deliberate footsteps to the top of an emergent branch; alternatively placing one foot in front of the other, it advanced up the branch, regularly bowing forward and raising the spectacular crest while giving loud, whistling call-notes. Sitting atop the projecting limb, it continued to scold loudly, with a flushing of the red cheek-patches being clearly visible, before eventually flying off through the forest canopy. On return visits to Iron Range, I have seen these majestic cockatoos numerous times and encounters always are exciting, but that initial sighting retains special significance.

Closely Associated with Rainforest

Palm Cockatoos are unmistakable, being readily identified by the prominent, backward-curving crest of narrow, elongated feathers and an enormous black bill, the mandibles of which meet at only one point thus exposing the small black-tipped, red tongue. Bare facial skin is crimson, while the general plumage is black with a slight bluish-grey suffusion coming from a heavy coating of powder-down on the feathers. A smaller bill distinguishes the adult female, while juveniles have feathers of the underparts finely edged with pale yellow and the bill is pale grey with a contrasting white culmen.

These cockatoos are distributed throughout the lowlands of New Guinea, and occur also on the Aru and western Papuan Islands, Indonesia, and on Cape York Peninsula, northernmost Queensland, Australia.

Subspecies are differentiated by size and by structure of the crest. Smallest birds belong to *P. a. aterrimus* from the Aru and western Papuan Islands, and many of the pairs that I have seen in captivity are of this subspecies. A significantly larger size differentiates both *P. a. goliath* from the lowlands of western and southern New Guinea *and P. a. stenolophus* from northern New Guinea, but the latter has much narrower crest feathers. *P. a. macgillivrayi* from Cape York Peninsula, northernmost Australia, and southern New Guinea, between the

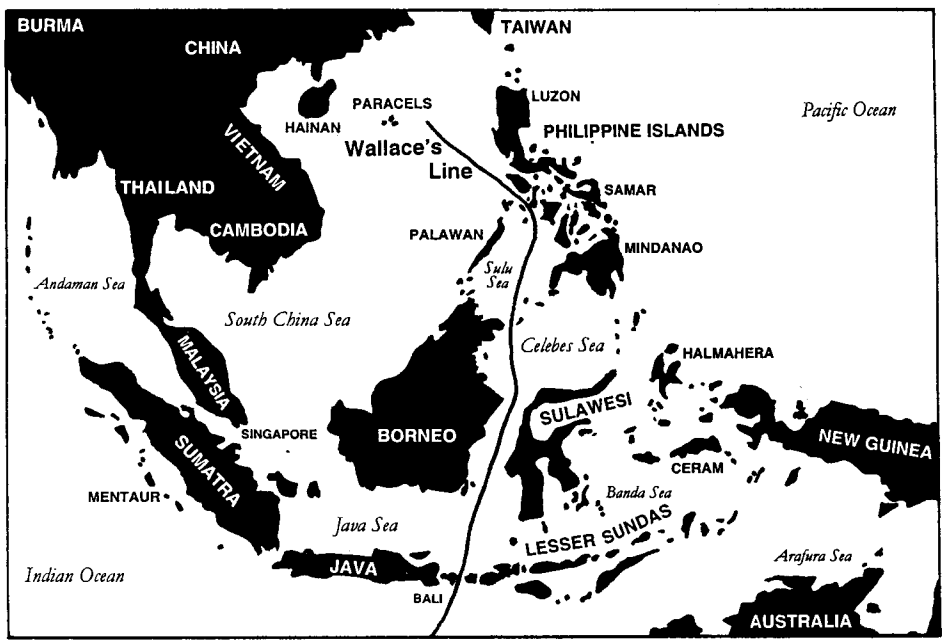
Fly and Bian Rivers, is intermediate in size between *aterrimus* and *goliath*.

Closely associated with monsoonal rainforest, Palm Cockatoos commonly are seen at forest edges or in clearings, though also in tall secondary growth and tropical woodland. On Cape York Peninsula, I have found them to be very much birds of the ecotone, where rainforest meets *Eucalyptus-Melaleuca* woodland, and they seem to be more prevalent in the woodland, though rarely venturing more than a few hundred meters from rainforest margins. During the middle of the day they tend to retreat into the rainforest, presumably to shelter from the heat.

Conspicuous Interactions in the Early Morning

These cockatoos usually are encountered singly, in pairs or in small groups, the last being more prevalent outside the breeding season, but occasionally larger flocks of up to 30 birds will congregate to feed. At Iron Range, I observed that they habitually roosted singly in the topmost branches of tall trees, and daily activities did not commence until about an hour after sunrise, when each bird spent some time preening before calling to another and then flying off to join with other birds at a favored tall tree in open woodland. At this 'congregating tree' the birds interacted with each other, performing bowing displays with wings outstretched and crests raised or making mock attacks in which two or more birds flew at another sitting nearby. Parties then drifted out from these 'congregating trees' to feed in open woodland until mid morning, when they retreated into the rainforest.

I found also that, while feeding in the rainforest, the cockatoos could be approached fairly easily, but in open woodland they are very shy, immediately flying off when disturbed. They feed on seeds, nuts, fruits, leaf buds and possibly insects and their larvae. Feeding is mostly arboreal, but birds will come to the ground to pick up fallen seeds, and they have been seen scratching about in the soil along creek banks. On one occasion, I watched



The above map shows how the Wallace's Line divides many islands of Southeast Asia into two different worlds. This issue treats the islands to the east of the Line.

This Issue

Once you get past the extraordinary bird on the cover of this issue, you will find many other items to grab your attention. The zoogeographical region of focus starts at the Wallace's Line and moves eastward. This Australasian region is separated from the Asian land mass by a very deep trench in the sea floor. The trench runs along what is called the Wallace's Line and separates Bali from Lombok by only 20 miles in distance but a whole world of difference in birds and other animals. See map above.

This region is rich with many species of birds including the wonderful Eclectus Parrot and many of the cockatoos we see most often in our aviaries. We have an article on the Palm Cockatoo, one on a possible way to control male cockatoo aggression, four articles on the Eclectus subspecies, a visit to Papua New Guinea, an article on the Papuan Mountain Pigeon, a highly entertaining and informative piece on the Blyth's Hornbill on the island of Seram – the photo of the author in a super high tree may make you dizzy – and several others treating the region of focus.

Then, among the general interest material, we have some zoo articles, including one on the Hadada Ibis (you may not have one in your aviary), a new breeding facility for the North Carolina Zoo, and "brailing" – a flight restraint technique that will surprise you. And do you know that many feral parrots live in southern California? Learn about them in the California Parrot Project. (A flock of conures flies by my window often – but I do not try to catch them.) Also, take a closer look at sprouting seeds – your birds will thank you. And for the finch enthusiasts, Ian Hinze continues his waxbill series with "Breeding" as a subject.

Of course we have a couple of pages highlighting the year 2000 convention in Los Angeles and "Convention Corner" pointing toward Convention 2001 in Houston. Give yourself a treat – don't miss the conventions. This issue has a lot to offer – so much, in fact, that we couldn't get it all in this issue. We will continue with birds of this remarkable zoogeographical region in the next issue of the Watchbird. It will have more Eclectus, more cockatoos, perhaps a King or two (King Parrot, that is), a surreptitious visit to a Manila bird mart, and many more articles than I have room to count here. Don't miss the Next Issue.

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* Position open: contact regional vice president if interested.

** indicates 2 year term has been fulfilled. If no new interested party comes forward and indicates a desire to serve, incumbent remains in position.

For information about contacting any of these member clubs, please call that club's state coordinator.

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seven birds feeding in a nonda tree *Parinari nonda,* under which the ground was littered with husks, twigs and fruit remains; the cockatoos showed surprising agility as they clambered about at the extremities of branches, often stretching out and down to get at fruits, which then were held in the foot while the bill was used to split them along the small axis and the seeds extracted

A Unique Territorial Display

Breeding pairs are territorial, spending much of the year in their territories, where they may be accompanied by offspring from previous seasons, while groups of non-breeding birds wander more widely. Within each territory are several sites regularly used for territorial displays. A typical site is atop a vertical or near vertical dead, hollow snag, and here the male performs the spectacular, almost bizarre territorial display. With crest fully raised, wings outspread and bare cheek-patches intensely flushed, he slowly pirouettes while striking repeatedly the hollow trunk with a stout twig, stone or large seed held in the foot, thus producing a loud, resonant knocking sound, which can be heard from a distance of more than 100m. Accompanying this 'drumming' display is the continual emission of loud, piercing whistles. No other parrot is known to use a tool in display!

Virtually all that is known of the nesting behavior comes from field studies carried out on Cape York Peninsula, where active nests have been found in all months of the year, though there seems to be a peak between August and March. Pair-bonds probably are lifelong, and at all times of the year pairs inspect or add twigs to nesting hollows. The nest is in a hollow limb or hole in the trunk of a tree, mostly a living or dead eucalypt, and the bottom of the hollow is lined with layer upon layer of splintered twigs. As longer branchlets, these twigs are collected by both birds and brought to the hollow entrance to be split into shorter lengths before being dropped into the cavity. Dried leaves and discarded shreds of bark litter the ground around the base of the tree, and are a telltale sign of nesting activity. Since many nests are in exposed vertical hollows, it has been suggested that during the rainy season this bed of twigs allows water to drain away from the egg or chick, while at the same time enabling excreta or other waste to filter through to the bottom. A single egg is laid on the platform of twigs.

While nesting, both parents normally are very quiet and secretive, so presenting difficulties in determining their respective roles in nesting duties. At nests in the Iron Range district, incubation by the female lasts approximately one month, and during this time she is fed by the male. However, there are reports of captive males sharing incubation. Some three months after hatching, the young bird leaves the nest and remains in the company of the parents until the next breeding season.

Not Well Established in Aviculture

Although the first documented parent-reared breeding in captivity was achieved by Sydney aviculturist Robert Lynn, there now are very few Palm Cockatoos in captivity in Australia. Only one, an incapacitated male more than 20 years old, is known definitely to have come from Cape York Peninsula, while other individuals originated from New Guinea or are the progeny of birds from New Guinea. Elsewhere, successful breeding is being achieved more frequently, but the species remains one of the more difficult cockatoos to breed, and at this time it cannot be considered to be well established in aviculture.