

Western Australian Cockatoos & Parrots

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Western Australia has ten cockatoos, ranging from the Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo with three subspecies in the state, to the smallest, the monotypic Cockatiel, often called Weero. The only corella native to the south-west is the Western Corella. The Little Corella, although native to WA has either been introduced through aviary escapees, or perhaps moved south over the past hundred years. The Long-billed Corella was introduced through aviary escapes or deliberately released birds. This is also true of the less common Sulphur-crested Cockatoo and the Galah, strangely referred to as the "Pink and Grey" by the majority of Western Australians. The Galah was absent from the south-west until about the 1920s. It became noticeable in the metropolitan area around 1960.

The family *Psittaculidae* contains 184 species worldwide and 41 species in Australia. These are generally brightly coloured and vary greatly in size. In Western Australia, the 20 species of parrots we have can be broken up into lorikeets (4 species); long-tailed parrots (3 species) and broad-tailed parrots (13 species). This last group could be further broken up into rosellas, *neophemas* or grass parrots, and others that are harder to fit into groups. Almost all are herbivorous to a greater or lesser degree; many also like insects and their larvae; and some are largely insectivorous. They drink in various ways, lapping, ladling or suck pumping. They are generally gregarious, and movements range from resident, highly nomadic or dispersive and migratory. Feeding habits range from arboreal to terrestrial feeding, feeding at all levels. Only females incubate, but both sexes feed young except the Ground Parrot where it seems the male assumes the feeding responsibilities. Some nest in loose colonies whereas others are solitary nesters. Most roost communally at least when not breeding. Parrots are often conspicuous, vocal and active; but can be hard to observe when feeding in treetops or on the ground. They all courtship feed. Calls can be described as whistles, chatterings, pipings and some shrieks; they are often melodic and complex.

COCKATIEL *Nymphicus hollandicus*

Widespread through most of the Australian mainland and absent in Tasmania. Males and females are easily distinguishable. The male is more brightly coloured than the female, which is enough to easily tell them apart; although there are other differences as well. Juveniles are like females, but first year males can be discerned. Endemic to Australia and quite unlike any other cockatoos. There has been quite a lot of discussion over their status, and they have been called Cockatoo-parrots; but current thinking sees them fixed among the cockatoos, at least for the present. Also known as a Weero.

RED-TAILED BLACK-COCKATOO *Calyptorhynchus banksii*

The nominate race *banksii* is the largest black cockatoo in Australia. There are three subspecies in WA. *naso*, the Forest Red-tail, is found only in the south-west and is considered endangered. It lacks the white cheek patches of the two white tailed species and is more obviously dimorphic. The red tails of the male and female are very different and the female has spots on the head and upper wings and with more distinct banding on the breast. *samueli* occurs in the northern wheatbelt through to the Pilbara. *macrorhynchus* occurs in the Kimberley and the Northern Territory.

BAUDIN'S BLACK-COCKATOO *Calyptorhynchus baudinii*

Very similar to Carnaby's but has a longer upper mandible and the whole beak is markedly more narrow viewed from front on. Since the generic name of our local black cockatoos, *Calyptorhynchus*, means "covered bill" due to the dense feathering that covers the lower mandible it is extremely difficult to separate the long-billed bird from the short-billed unless it lifts its head. A head on view is desirable. The calls are also similar, but Baudin's has a shorter, more clipped tone. In flight when just taking off or coming into land they also have a distinct series of "vicki-vicki" notes.

CARNABY'S BLACK-COCKATOO *Calyptorhynchus latirostris*

Endemic to the south-west; still more common than the Forest Red-tail but equally endangered with an alarming drop in population numbers in recent years. The female is easily separated from the male, having slightly whiter and larger ear coverts than the male. Beak colours also differ; being ivory in adult females and black in adult males. The female has a grey to dark grey eye ring, whereas it is red in the male.

GALAH *Eolophus roseicapilla*

A small cockatoo, widespread, abundant, familiar and unmistakable. There are small geographical variations in colour. The female is like the male but has a pink red iris in contrast to the male's dark brown. Noisy, extremely playful birds that often engage in wrestling matches when feeding on the ground. There are two subspecies in WA. *roseicapilla* extends up just south of Broome. It has a grey eye-ring and the breast is less intense. *kuhli* occurs in the Kimberley and across northern Australia. It is slightly smaller with a pink eye-ring and the shorter crest is only on the front of the crown and very pale pink. There is a third subspecies *albiceps* that occurs in the Eastern States, but there are feral birds in the Perth metropolitan area. It has more intense colour on the breast and a very pale crown.

MAJOR MITCHELL'S COCKATOO *Cacatua leadbeateri*

Unmistakeable, small, pink and white cockatoos; larger than galahs but smaller than corellas. It has a striking forward curving crest. The female has a broader yellow band in the crest on average, but there is some overlap and cannot be used to determine sex reliably. The male iris is dark brown to black and the in the female is red. Found mainly in semi-arid and arid regions, in dry woodlands particularly mallee-eucalyptus-Callitris-casuarina assemblages. Widespread but patchy throughout Australia; only found in the extreme south-west of Queensland and absent from Tasmania.

LONG-BILLED CORELLA *Cacatua tenuirostris*

Not native to Western Australia and only comparatively recently recorded in WA. Bigger and bulkier than the Little Corella with a less noticeable crest; but a markedly longer upper mandible. Has more red on the face and breast than either of the other two corellas and is subsequently more attractive. It has to be regarded and an unfortunate addition to our native corellas.

WESTERN CORELLA *Cacatua pastinator*

Endemic to the south-west; again similar to the Little Corella but somewhat larger and bulkier with a longer upper mandible. Found in two separate populations. *derbyi* is called

Butler's Corella and occurs east and north of Perth from about Northam to Wubin to just south of Geraldton. *pastinator* is called Muir's Corella and occurs south of Perth, probably most common in Frankland, Rocky Gully, Lake Muir and Tone River. More common in their northern habitat but nowhere in big numbers. Used to be found in small numbers in Perth, but very rarely seen there now.

LITTLE CORELLA *Cacatua sanguinea*

Similar to both the Long-billed and Western Corellas, but slightly smaller and with a shorter tail. Less red on the face and somewhat paler. Range much larger than the other corellas. Found in every state, absent only in the western central deserts and the south-west of WA. Moved into the Perth region during the 1960s and found naturally from about Toodyay and Kellerberrin through the Gascoyne and Pilbara. Widespread in the Kimberley. Feed and play on the ground. Calls are difficult to separate from the other corellas and they will feed together. Various considered resident, partly nomadic and seasonal movers.

SULPHUR-CRESTED COCKATOO *Cacatua galerita*

Large, bulky cockatoo – bigger than the corellas with a conspicuous yellow crest. The iris in the male is brown-black and typically red-brown in females, but in many older females can be brown-black. Found in north-east and south-east Australia. The birds found in the south-west of WA are either escapees or deliberate releases. First recorded in 1935 at Mandurah, Pinjarra 1955 and Guildford-Midland area 1964. In 1982 the population was estimated to be 300 to 500 birds. Control programs in the early 1980s reduced numbers to low levels, but eradication was not achieved.

REGENT PARROT *Polytelis anthopeplus*

One of the three long-tailed parrots and, in my opinion, the most graceful and elegant of all the Australian parrots in flight. In fairness it is hard to differentiate from the Princess Parrot for attractiveness. It has a somewhat chequered career: populations greatly reduced among eastern subspecies but increased in the central and southern wheatbelt from the 1920s to mid-1950s. It started to decline in some areas at that point, but seems to be recovering. Was considered vermin and extensively shot until 1983 in WA. Thought to have been affected by 1080 baits which, together with shooting and destruction of habitat, may account for declines. Invaded the Swan Coastal Plain around 1943 and seems to be increasing. Regarded as being somewhat nomadic. Used to be called the Smoker Parrot, probably because the black marks looked like nicotine.

PRINCESS PARROT *Polytelis alexandrae*

It has been said to be "elusive, seldom seen and little known". The fact that it is confined to the arid interior makes it less well known, but its habit of not being seen for long periods then appearing briefly is also a factor. Can be found at Jupiter Well and Neale Junction. It is undoubtedly rare but whether it could be considered vulnerable is hard to ascertain. As in the other long tailed parrots, the two central feathers in the tail are elongate and extend past the rest of the tail. The eighth primary feather is spatulate and extends beyond the other primaries. G. A. Keartland noted "it has the singular habit of lying along the stout limbs of a tree like a lizard, instead of perching on a twig or thin branch". This is also mentioned in HANZAB and may be alarm behaviour.

RED-WINGED PARROT *Aprosmictus erythropterus*

A stunningly beautiful broad-tailed parrot, mostly confined to the Kimberley region, with a few records further south in the Pilbara. It was given a most unfortunate name by Gould in 1842 – *Aprosmictus* – meaning unsociable, solitary. He said Red-winged Parrots “are of a dull and sullen disposition and do not readily become tame and familiar”. Easy to recognise, being the only parrot with mostly green plumage and a prominent red shoulder patch. When courting the resplendent male makes a circling flight around the perched female. Alighting he extends his wings downward exposing the usually hidden patch of blue on the lower back, then moves with care towards the female, holding his feathers against the body and contracting his pupils. During this ritual he may feed the female.

BLUE BONNET /NARETHA BLUEBONNET *Northiella haematogaster*

There are four subspecies of Blue Bonnets, three of which are found west of the Great Dividing Range, then further west to mid-South Australia. The fourth is the Naretha Blue Bonnet *narethae* which ranges from the extreme west of SA to just west of Rawlinna in WA, a small area to the south and stretches from Eyre to Eucla. It was discovered in the mid-1920s by F.L. Whitlock. It exists in a harsh arid area and favours acacia savannah with bluebush and clumps of mallee. Considered to be scarce and may well have declined because of trapping for aviculture. The discovery caused great excitement among aviculturists, even though the bird is not friendly in aviaries, where it has a savage reputation, attacking and even killing larger birds. Regarded as sedentary or locally nomadic.

MULGA PARROT *Psethotellus varius*

A medium-sized, rather slender parrot; similar in size to the Red-rumped Parrot, but with a slightly longer tail. It has been called the dry country representative of the Red-rumped but is more deliberate and more confiding. Generally forages on the ground but also in trees. It is quieter, less obtrusive and keeps to cover more than the Red-rumped. The old name of Many-coloured Parrot is attractive but rather raises the picture of a brightly coloured and striking bird – whereas the male is more quietly beautiful rather than flamboyant – somewhat in the manner of the Purple-crowned Lorikeet and Bourke’s Parrot. Widespread, relatively common in the arid country, but probably somewhat in decline. The female wears more subdued colours and is easily distinguished from the male.

RED-CAPPED PARROT *Purpureicephalus spurius*

HANZAB and the National Photographic Index begin their description of this endemic SW species by saying: a) “Unmistakeable, and adults rather gaudy”; b) “In full frontal view, the unlikely colour combination of purple, lime green and crimson is an assault upon the eye”. Ranges from about Moora in the north to the coast in the south and to the Esperance district, just beyond Ravensthorpe, in the east. Mostly found among eucalypts but also coastal peppermints and yate, also Banksia woodland and coastal heath; Marri provides much of its food. The long upper mandible is inserted into the gumnut with the nut itself held in one foot. By rotating the foot and manipulating the bill, the seed is extracted quickly and efficiently. The female is like the male but duller, often with a white line across the secondaries and primaries (as in juvenile) of varying length and sometimes absent. The specific name *spurius* comes from the radically different juveniles and means illegitimate.

Seriously declining on the Swan Coastal plain due to habitat clearing and competition from Rainbow Lorikeets for nest hollows.

NORTHERN ROSELLA *Platycerus venustus*

Very closely related to the Pale-headed and Eastern Rosellas. Its voice is very similar to the Eastern Rosella, and all three have white cheek patches. Only the Northern has the black head. Once called Brown's Rosella after an eminent 19th century botanist. Local residents called it the Smithy Parakeet. Endemic to Northern Australia, particularly WA and NT, but just enters northwest Queensland. Two races: *venustus* and *hilli*, the latter being the Kimberley race. Generally uncommon or moderately common, although numbers have probably declined or early reports were exaggerated. Its movements are virtually unknown, but evidence points to some movement.

WESTERN ROSELLA *Platycerus icterotis*

Considerably different from the other rosellas. It is much smaller and is the only yellow cheeked rosella. In other rosellas sexes are similar but the Western female, particularly the nominate race *icterotis*, lacks the brilliant red head and breast of the male. The more easterly race *xanthogenys* has paler and less extensive yellow on the face, there is red mottling on the mantle and has a blue, rather than green upper tail. There is hybridisation in the central part of the range. Appears sedentary through most of the range but partly nomadic in some areas. Can be inconspicuous at rest, but it has a calm disposition and will allow humans to approach to close range. Was on the vermin list until 1998 for no good reason, and was still legally trapped until this year.

AUSTRALIAN RINGNECK *Barnardius zonarius*

Most of us will know that the Australian Ringneck was once regarded as four different species: Mallee and Cloncurry Ringnecks with pale heads and the Port Lincoln and Twenty-eight Parrots with black heads. The Black-headed species are found in WA although the Port Lincoln had a range that extends into SA and southern NT. The Twenty-eight has a limited range in the coastal southwest and a buffer zone of hybrids between the two species. There are noticeable differences in the calls, particularly the two-noted whistle that sounds like "twenty-eight" or "vingt huit", which is French for 28. Sometimes the "eight" is missing and we only get "twenty". The Twenty-eight is also larger and has a deep green belly as distinct from the yellow bellied Port Lincoln. It also has a red forehead band which is absent in the Port Lincoln.

(WESTERN) GROUND PARROT *Pezoporus wallicus flaviventris*

The scientific names of the Ground Parrot give play to imagining the bird as a marathon performer. *Pezoporus* – "walking" or "pedestrian" and *wallicus* – from 'Nova Wallia Australis' or New South Wales. So imagination comes to walking New South Wales and, since early NSW was all of mainland Australia, excluding WA, it was quite a trek. But back to reality. An enigmatic bird which has declined across its whole range. As its name implies it is largely terrestrial, although it can fly strongly if flushed. Found mainly in heath land, sedge land or button-grass plains. Extinct in South Australia and the subspecies *flaviventris* in WA appears to be declining dangerously. Storr and Johnstone say it was declining well before the arrival of foxes. Fox poisoning saw a rise in cat numbers which would have added a footnote of destruction. F.L. Whitlock blamed bushfires for its decline, which appears to be relevant in WA. The story of its decline over all of its range is a litany of ignorance, indifference and mismanagement.

NIGHT PARROT *Pezoporus occidentalis*

Similar to the Ground Parrot but smaller (about the size of a Mulga Parrot). Difficult to assess its distribution and population – we know it was endemic to arid and semi-arid inland Australia but its distribution was not well known and its present range is even more clouded. There are only 23 known specimens and only two of which were collected in the 20th century – 1912 in the Gascoyne (specimen lost) and 1990 in W Queensland. Only 4 acceptable sight records after 1935 – all 1979-80 (Australian Atlas). There have been many unverified sightings; mainly Cloncurry (N Qld), Lake King-Varley in south WA, the northeast and far east Pilbara and the Fortescue marshes. Until the discovery of a corpse in 1990, the species was presumed extinct.

BOURKE'S PARROT *Neopsephotus bourkii*

The National Photographic Index opens its account of this parrot by saying “the pale pastel beauty of Bourke’s Parrot is a softened reflection of an austere environment”. This is a charming description of a beautifully understated little *neophema* or grass parrot. These elegant little birds feed on the ground and have similar habits, behaviour and plumage patterns. All the others have extensive green in their plumage. Both sexes are similar but the female is slightly duller. Found right across the arid centre in three blocks joined by narrow corridors. Lives in areas dominated by mulga, emu-bush and cassia. It has been said that it should be named Mulga Parrot, a name already in use. Spends most of the day loafing quietly; coming in to drink before dawn or after sunset – one of its names was the Sundown Parrot. Because of its crepuscular drinking habits it can be difficult to find even though it is relatively common and will allow observers to come close.

ELEGANT PARROT *Neophema elegans*

elegans means ‘fine’ or ‘choice’, which adequately describes this pretty little bird. It has bright yellow sides, as are most of the underbody and, particularly, the undertail. The upper body and wings are a golden olive with a narrow two tone blue leading edge. Once scarce, and limited to the natural grasslands east of the jarrah forest, it has greatly increased its range and numbers since colonial times. It began to expand to the more sub-humid south west interior, as it was cleared, during the early 1900s and first visited the Swan Coastal Plain in 1943, and reached the orchard country east of Mundaring in the 1960s; it colonised the Swan Coastal Plain in the 1970s. Populations are found in the SW, near Carnarvon, then southern SA and south west Victoria.

ROCK PARROT *Neophema petrophila*

Has the dubious honour of being the most plainly coloured Australian parrot. Nevertheless it is still an attractive little bird, with a dark violet blue forehead and a pale blue that extends above, below and beyond the eye and into the lores. Seldom found far from the coast where it feeds on samphire, pigface, rhagodia and the South African invader, euphorbia. Mostly nests on offshore islands, although it has bred on the coast in the past, usually at the beach. Found on coastal SA, from Eyre west along the south coast then north to Dongara. Small population in the Shark Bay area and its offshore islands. The northern birds have yellow tinged orange on the underbelly on contrast to the dull yellow in the southern birds. This is somewhat in line with the fact that the Orange-bellied Parrot is their closest relation. Once abundant on Rottnest Island but the capture and sale of young birds during the 1940s – 1950s greatly reduced their numbers.

SCARLET-CHESTED PARROT *Neophema splendida*

This is a stunningly beautiful *neophema*. The blue head and wing bars, yellow belly and scarlet breast (green in female) makes it a joy to behold; but unfortunately not easy to behold. In WA found mainly in the Great Victoria Desert and vicinity from Laverton, north east to Warburton and then south to near Rawlinna. It can sometimes be found near Cocklebiddy and Arubiddy Station. Early reports record it near Perth on the Swan River, the Moore River and the East Murchison between 1840 and 1854. Reported at Neale Junction as well. It wasn't recorded in WA again until 1932 near Naretha and Bullabulling in 1941. The status of the early reports is uncertain: Storr and Johnstone don't mention them but they are recorded in HANZAB. They are rated as uncommon to moderately common. Seem to be irruptive on occasions. Have a small voice. William White said of it (1863) "It appears to me that it is an extremely solitary, and almost noiseless, resident of the most lonely scrub, and only sufficiently social to go in pairs at certain times of the year".

PURPLE-CROWNED LORIKEET *Glossopsitta porphyrocephala*

The only naturally occurring Lorikeet in the southwest; it also extends east to about 30 kilometres south of Madura. Common in the eucalypt woodlands and forests of the southwest. Can be found high in the Karri forests in large numbers but easier to hear than see because of its small size. A comparison between it and the largest lorikeet, the Rainbow, is interesting. Rainbow Lorikeet: length 30cm, wingspan 46cm, weight 120-130grams. Purple-crowned: length 17-18.5cm, wingspan 28-30cm, weight 45grams. Its call, often given in flight, is a harsh 'zit-zit'; which saw it given the informative name of "Zit Parrot" among many others.

VARIED LORIKEET *Psitteuteles versicolor*

Much smaller than the Rainbow Lorikeet with a proportionally shorter tail. A bird of the tropical north from slightly south of the Dampier Peninsula in the West Kimberley – reaching Cape York only on the northern tip. Its movements are generally irregular and unpredictable; although at Argyle were wet season visitors (Frank O'Connor). Historic evidence from John Gilbert suggest it may have been more abundant than it is today: "It congregates in immense numbers and when a flock is on the wing their movements are so regular and simultaneous it might easily be mistaken for a cloud passing along, were it not for the utterance of the usual piercing scream, which is frequently so loud as to be almost deafening". Much faster through the air than the larger lorikeets.

RAINBOW LORIKEET *Trichoglossus moluccanus*

Most local birdwatchers need very little information regarding what is probably our most infamous current "weed bird". This is a complex species that was recently broken into seven full species which includes the Red-collared Lorikeet being reinstated as a separate species. The nominate subspecies *haematodus* was renamed Coconut Lorikeet which occurs in Papua New Guinea and the Torres Strait islands, and the name Rainbow Lorikeet was given to the east coast subspecies *moluccanus*. The Red-collared Lorikeet *rubritorquis* differs from *moluccanus* by: darker blue head; its chin, throat and fore neck are darker and blackish without blue streaking; the half-collar is bright orange, bordered below by a band of dark blue breaking into dark-blue and orange scaling over low hind neck; breast, bright orange and more uniform (less scaling) and belly darker, blue-black to green-black. The species is our largest lorikeet with the longest tail.

RED-COLLARED LORIKEET *Trichoglossus rubritorquis*

The bird *Trichoglossus rubritorquis* was for a long time regarded as a full species; it was then lumped with the Rainbow Lorikeet as one of many subspecies, and has now it has been returned to its previous full species status. Found through the top end of the Northern Territory. Although the birds look alike in many respects they are quite different in others. The Red-collared is probably even more beautiful with its red collar, orange edged with red on its breast and dark blue belly. Both of these birds show that camouflage doesn't need drab colours to be effective – bright colours that break up the shape are equally so. When the Red-collared feeds in *Eucalyptus mineata* it can hard but is hard to see.

BUDGERIGAR *Melopsittacus undulatus*

The world known and loved Budgerigar is seen largely as an aviary bird with a large number of coloured forms; in reality it is a green and yellow patterned bird somewhat like the Ground and Night Parrots, but much smaller. Just as this fact surprises people who see it as a pet, perhaps its generic name *Melopsitticus* would surprise those of us who rejoice in the name of birdwatcher. Obviously *psitticus* means a parrot, but *melos* means a song and few of us see it as a songster, yet it has a surprisingly complex range of soft calls. In addition, groups call for 30 – 40 minutes each hour. Probably the most remarkable facet of this little bird is its ability to fly in flocks of 1,000+, in perfect synchrony. They are able to turn, swoop and exercise perfect formation, maintaining their position within the flock with wonderful skill. Mainly seen in big flocks when moving or drinking, seldom when feeding. Budgerigars cover much of the state, but largely absent in the greater south west and western coastal Kimberley – do reach Eyre occasionally.

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