

## Introducing The Superb Parrot

### Learn more about this bird species

*By Joseph Forshaw*

Superb parrots (*Polytelis swainsonii*) are also known as barraband parakeets.

You learned about the superb parrots in superb country in the May 2008 issue of BIRD TALK magazine. Now go behind the feathers of this superb little bird and see how they are live in their native home of Australia.

#### Superb Aviary Guests

Although at risk in the wild, the superb parrot (*Polytelis swainsonii*), also known as the barraband parakeet, is well established in aviculture in many countries and is an ideal aviary bird, being an excellent species for a person seeking experience with less commonly kept parrots. It is hardy and does well in captivity, there being reports of breeding pairs producing young for more than 20 years.

Furthermore, it has a pleasant disposition, soon becoming trusting of its keeper, and generally breeds freely. Hand-reared males make excellent pets, and some become quite accomplished talkers. Certainly it is one of my favorite bird species and, at most times, one or more pairs were included in my aviary.

It has been my experience that if denied ample exercise, these parrots can become overweight, so each pair should be housed in an aviary 13 feet by 19 feet in length, at least a meter in width, and 6 1/2 feet in height. My pair shared a large aviary with a breeding pair of yellow-tailed black cockatoos (*Calyptorhynchus funereus*) and a pair of Spinifex pigeons (*Geophaps plumifera*) that was 26 feet long, 6 feet wide and 10 feet high.

These parrots do not chew woodwork or bite through wire, so their aviaries can be constructed with light-gauge materials. Also, their docile nature makes them suitable for inclusion in a mixed collection in a large aviary, but to avoid hybridization they should not be housed with not to be house with Australian king parrots or other *Aprosmictus*, *Alisterus* and *Polytelis* species.

Because they spend much time foraging on the ground, superb parrots are susceptible to nematode infestation if housed in aviaries with earthen floors, so aviaries must be kept clean and the birds drenched regularly. In common with other *Polytelis* species, they are susceptible also to what appears to be a particularly virulent form of chlamydial conjunctivitis or "eye infection," which can be fatal if not detected and treated early. My only experience with this problem was with a female that showed symptoms when I returned home from an absence of two weeks and, even after that brief time without treatment the affliction could not be cured. I have no experience with paralysis of the feet, causing the toes to curl tightly so that the bird is unable to grasp a perch. This is said to occur more commonly in males, and some birds have responded to treatment with vitamin B.

#### Food & Diet

Superb parrots will take a wide variety of foods and are usually willing to sample new offerings. For my birds, sunflower and safflower seeds were given in separate containers, while in another container there was a mix of equal parts of plain canary seed, white (French) millet and panicum, with a little hulled oats being added in winter. A variety of fruits and vegetables was supplied, together with seedheads of grasses, thistles, endives and celery tops, and corn-on-cob was strongly favored, especially by parents feeding chicks. All birds respond excitedly to placement in the aviary of branches of flowering eucalypts or grevilleas, coming immediately to feed on the flowers and then spending many hours stripping the leaves before chewing away the bark.

#### Breeding Superb Parrots

Despite the preference of wild birds for nesting in colonies, little success has been achieved from attempts to breed superb parrots in a captive colony, and best results are from pairs held in separate aviaries. My pair showed a strong preference for nesting in hollow logs with entrances through natural spouts, but other breeders have experienced little difficulty in persuading pairs to accept nest boxes.

A clutch of four or five eggs normally is laid, and incubation by the female lasts 22 days. Fledging of chicks takes place approximately 40 days after hatching and the young birds are quite clumsy in flight, so precautions need to be taken to prevent injury or death from collisions against the wire or aviary fittings. Adult male plumage is attained through a slow molt, which normally produces some yellow and scarlet feathers on the throat and foreneck at six to nine months, and full

plumage coloration is acquired at about 16 to 18 months.

It is surprising that few mutations have been reported, for the species has been in aviculture for a long time. Lutino birds have been recorded in the wild and in captivity, and there has been a report of two olive males being bred in an aviary in New South Wales, but no details have been provided.

#### Feeding & Nesting Habits

Feeding is mostly on the ground, where the parrots take seeds of grasses and herbs, but the diet also includes fruits, berries, nuts, nectar, blossoms and insect larvae procured in trees or shrubs. They are particularly fond of psyllid nymphs and their scaly coverings or lerps, and large flocks may be attracted to eucalypts infested with these insect larvae.

Small groups of parrots also visit homesteads, farm buildings or stockyards to pick up spilled grain, and in crop-growing districts they are attracted to roadsides where grain spills from passing trucks. Often in the company of yellow rosellas (*Platycercus elegans flaveolus*), they come to feed on blossoms in groves of introduced sugar gums (*Eucalyptus cladocalyx*), which are widely planted as windbreaks throughout farmlands.

Breeding commences in late September, with chicks fledging during late November to early December. Data collected from 90 nesting trees in riparian forests of river red gums were used to profile a typical nesting tree, so enabling forestry managers to exempt actual or potential nesting trees from logging operations. A typical nesting tree is mature and healthy, usually the largest tree in that part of the forest, and on average is located 85 feet from a watercourse. It averages 108 feet in height, with a maximum crown diameter averaging 36 feet, and the trunk has an average diameter of 5 feet at breast height. A majority of nests are in hollow spouts in lateral branches at an average height of 56 feet and nesting is in discrete colonies of between two and six nests in the same or neighboring trees. Many hollows traditionally are reused year after year, and occasionally different hollows in the same tree may be occupied in successive years. Hollows vary greatly in depth, with eggs having been found at 40 centimeters from the entrance and also at ground level some 36 feet below the entrance. A normal clutch comprises four to six eggs, and these are incubated only by the female. After fledging, young birds accompany the adults on an almost immediate exodus from the breeding area.

Did you enjoy this information on the superb parrot? Learn more about this parrot in the May 2008 issue of BIRD TALK magazine.