

## Eclectus' True Colors Revealed

**Researchers take to the treetops & discover that color means everything to Eclectus**

*By Robert Heinsohn*

Few birds have puzzled scientists more than the Eclectus parrot (*Eclectus roratus*). One of the 20th Century's great evolutionary biologists, the late Professor Bill Hamilton of Oxford University, used to show a slide in his lecture series of a male and female parrot sitting side by side. The male was a vibrant green, and the female a stunning vermilion. Whereas evolutionary theory had plenty to say about why one sex in birds is often larger or more gorgeously colored, it stumbled somewhat in establishing what had happened in this species. No other bird has sexes so "beautified," but in such different ways. Hamilton ended his talk by saying, "When I understand why one sex is red and the other green, I will be ready to die."

Hamilton was essentially puzzled over why Eclectus parrot boys look like girls and the girls look like boys. Sadly, however, he passed away before the mystery could be solved. Male and female Eclectus parrots are in fact so different, they were long thought to be different species. Male Eclectus from the Moluccan Islands of eastern Indonesia were first discovered in 1776, but the females were not seen until 1837, and even the best naturalists of the 19th century were fooled for a long time. It was not until 1874 that males and females of this species were finally united under the same name.

**\*\*For the full article, pick up the February 2009 issue of BIRD TALK\*\***

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