

Talking with Filmmakers of “Parrots In The Land Of Oz”

Go behind the scenes of the documentary about Australian parrots

By Jessica Pineda

Cameraman Lindsay Cupper with a glossy black cockatoo.

Photo: © D. Parer & E. Parer-Cook

David Parer films inside a hide to not scare the parrots.

Photo: © D. Parer & E. Parer-Cook

Thirteen/WNET New York, one of PBS's major producing stations, and its acclaimed series Nature, alights with the parrots in the land down under when “Parrots In The Land Of Oz” premieres January 27, 2008 on PBS.

Birdchannel.com and BIRD TALK magazine sat down with Australian wildlife filmmakers David Parer and Elizabeth Parer-Cook who have filmed all around the world. Best known for their blue-chip wildlife films focusing on detailed behavior of animals, David and Elizabeth have also made many programs that have integrated wildlife and people. They produced and filmed three of the “Nature of Australia” documentaries for Australia's Bicentennial celebrations in 1988, a co-production with PBS, WNET thirteen New York.

BC: Why did you set out to do this particular documentary?

DP/EP: We were looking around for a wildlife subject that had an iconic status for the Australian public and one that could be exploited for its beauty and color for the newly emerging medium of high definition television - HDTV. HDTV is a widescreen format of high resolution and ultra-rich colors. And the new sets available in Australia using plasma and LCD screens produce amazingly detailed and impressive pictures. Parrots and cockatoos seemed a natural for this new medium. Our aim was to capture their beauty and grace, and the stunning variety of species that occurs in Australia.

BC: Did the parrots prove to be photogenic?

DP/EP: Absolutely brilliantly colored, which shows up particularly well on the new HDTV screens.

BC: It is mentioned in the show that sulphur-crested cockatoos can cause \$10,000 worth of damage for a single farmer. Is there a clash between conservationists and farmers, and have the two parties resolved ways to work together?

DP/EP: For a century, there has been a war raging between the farmers and cockatoos in much of Australia. In the south-east of the continent, it's but a stones through to the wheat country and a smorgasbord for the cockatoos. This is the breadbasket of Australia, where millions of tons of grain is harvested each year. The corellas fly en masse when the crops are sown, posting sentries in the nearby trees to alert the flock when a farmer approaches. Scarecrows, alarms, and shotguns do little to deter them. Day after day, they return for their daily feed and there is little the farmers can do. But in some areas, farmers are working with National Parks scientists and conservationists to solve the problem.

In the peanut-growing area of Lakeland Downs in the tropical far north, sulphur-crested cockatoos were devastating the crops. Conservationists suggested to the farmers that they band together and plant a sacrificial peanut crop, one where the birds could gather and feed and not be harassed. Unfortunately, the cockatoos would not or could not get the idea of which was their crop and which ones belonged to the farmers. The birds continued to feed where ever they wished. Eventually all but one of the seven peanut farms had to close down.

Fruit orchards are a favorite of the parrots and lorikeets. They arrive at dawn in large numbers when the apples and stone fruits are ripening, and farmers begin their patrols to drive them away. To make matters worse, the birds often take just a single peck from each piece of fruit before moving on to the next and thus spoiling much of the crop for sale. Some orchard farmers even employ helicopters as a non-lethal way of keeping them at bay; a very expensive scare-crow.

BC: How does the local community (not farmers) react to the parrot's presence?

DP/EP: Many city and country people love having parrots and cockatoos around the place. They attract them by putting out bird feeders and by planting native trees and shrubs in their gardens and streets. These flower and attract the nectar-eating lorikeets, and the large seeds of the eucalypts attract the cockatoos. And for a while there is harmony.

But on some occasions parrots and cockatoos can become disruptive and destructive. Most are very social, and when they land on your doorstep they bring a bunch of their mates with them. With so much free food about these days, getting a meal is not a problem for the parrots. Farmers and suburban households provide crops and fruit trees full of delicious

goodies. And once they have had their fill many of the cockatoos, who are amongst the brightest of birds, look around for some fun and light relief.

Their beak is a formidable weapon, and they love using it to rip things apart. A favorite are the balcony railings and window frames of timber houses, particularly the expensive ones made from west red cedar. In a morning they can inflict a damage bill of \$25,000 to a single house, especially when the occupants for the house happen to be away.

BC: What was the most interesting experience you had while filming?

DP/EP: Without doubt the most exciting moment for cameramen David Parer and Lindsay Cupper was filming the drumming behavior of the black palm cockatoo.

Parer recounts the incident: "We were in adjoining hides (blinds), waiting for days and days, and suddenly the female and male flew in and they started displaying. Then the male flew off and I could just see him through the telephoto lens, breaking off a stick. He then flew back to his nest hollow with the stick where he clutched it firmly in his claw and rhythmically struck it on the side of his nest, drumming out a melody to his lady love. The tension was palpable. The hair was standing up on the back of my head. My palms were sweaty, and all the time the film is running through the camera. My worry was whether the film would run out before the drumming was completed - all very high-tension stuff and a great moment."

Soon after a cyclone came through the area and produced Parers' worst experience. Steve Murphy, the scientist who had for nine years in a row always seen palm cockatoos in this area, for the first time, he didn't see any. He mimicked their calls to draw them in, but none came.

Parer continues: "As we walked further and further into the forest, we saw great trees blown down by Cyclone Monica, and we started to realize that this cyclone had had a major effect on the palm cockatoo. We were there six days with scientist Steve Murphy, and we hardly saw a bird. Where once he had spotted dozens of palm cockatoos, he now saw none. We got a glimpse of one flying ahead and just managed to film it. We got a few shots of them early morning. Slowly, over many trips to the area, we were able to build up enough footage to make a sequence - but it was tough going."

BC: Any plans to film parrots in other parts of the world, such as Africa or South America?

DP/EP: No. I think we have done our dash with parrots for two people's lifetimes. For us it's time to move on.

Check out the April 2008 issue of BIRD TALK magazine to read more of the interview with the filmmakers of "Parrots In The Land Of Oz."

Available in high-definition, "Parrots in the Land of Oz" premieres Sunday, January 27, 2008 at 8pm (ET) on PBS. For more information and to Catch a preview of the episode go the PBS website.