

BREEDING RECORDS OF THE SCARLET-CHESTED PARROT IN THE GREAT VICTORIA DESERT, AND FURTHER RECORDS IN THE LOWER NORTH-EAST

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BREEDING RECORDS IN GREAT VICTORIA DESERT

This species was found breeding in an area within the North-West "Unnamed" Conservation Park which is located adjacent to the Western Australian border, and extends approximately from the northern perimeter of the Nullarbor Plain to the Great Victoria Desert west of Emu. The South Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service conducted a fauna survey of the park during the last two weeks of October, 1976. This survey was carried out in the northern section of the park from Vokes Hill corner, west, as far as the Serpentine Lakes on the W.A.-S.A. border.

N. splendida was found breeding 100 km west of Vokes Hill corner. The nest was situated in an almost vertical dead spout of a Marble Gum *Eucalyptus gongylocarpa*, the entrance hole being about 5 m from the ground (see plate 1). The nesting chamber had been lined with green eucalypt leaves and contained a clutch of four eggs. The entrance hole was smooth and rounded with a diameter of about nine cm, surprisingly large for *Neophema* species. The internal diameter of the nesting chamber was approximately 12 cm with a depth of about 40 cm.

This nest was found by chance about 50 m from where we happened to make camp. On our third day there, at about 1700 hours, a single *N. splendida* was heard calling from a Marble Gum about 100 m from our camp. On investigation it was found to be a female. As I approached the tree she flew straight to the nesting tree and entered the hollow. At approximately 1900 hours the male arrived at the nesting tree. The female came out of the hollow immediately and both birds flew off together, landing on a dead branch about 100 m from the nest. The male then proceeded to feed the female. After about 10 minutes the female returned to the nest; she was not accompanied by the male who flew off in another direction.

The second pair of *N. splendida* was found breeding several km west of Vokes Hill corner. We were returning east from the Serpentine Lakes when I observed a male *N. splendida* fly from a mallee tree. This tree contained a dead hollow spout similar to the nest found pre-

viously; so I stopped to investigate. As I approached the tree a female *N. splendida* emerged from a smooth round hole about six-seven cm in diameter near the top of the dead spout, and about five m from the ground. (See plate 2.) Unfortunately it was not possible to inspect the nest further as the spout was very thin and brittle, and would certainly have snapped off if an attempt had been made to climb upon it.

Two weeks before our visit to this area, Shane Parker, Curator of Birds at the South Australian Museum, visited the same area. He found *N. splendida* in two areas: 10 km north-west of Emu, and at Vokes Hill. Although we did not visit the locality north-west of Emu, we did search the area at Vokes Hill; but the only birds located were the one breeding pair.

Parker collected three female *N. splendida* in adult plumage (S.A.M. B30341, B30342, B30343) 10 km north-west of Emu; and an examination of the ovaries revealed that they



Plate 1.



Plate 2.

had not yet come into breeding condition for the season: at least one (B30342) had bred previously in its life, as its oviduct was convoluted.

Although the evidence available is not conclusive, it suggests that with *N. splendida* the ovaries develop rapidly, and that intending breeding pairs disperse from groups or flocks only very shortly before breeding takes place, unlike many other parrot species, which may spend many weeks investigating and preparing the nesting hollow before the first egg is laid.

OBSERVATIONS IN LOWER NORTH-EAST

I have studied *N. splendida* in mallee areas north of the River Murray since 1960. My observations of the birds in this area show that they remain in flocks of from five to 30 birds during the period April to August, usually in the same locality. After August the birds disappear; and I have always presumed that this is a general dispersal prior to breeding. The flocks do not appear again until April the following year. This appearance and dispersal of *N. splendida* occurred regularly in the one locality (on Hawks Nest Stn.) during the years 1960, 1961 (no record for 1962), 1963, 1964, 1965. The flocks were observed in an area of burnt-out mallee (*Eucalyptus socialis* — *e. gracilis* species complex) and *Triodia irritans*. These are no doubt the large flocks referred to by Condon (1969) as "north of the River Murray (? at Gluepot)". After 1965 the birds did not return to the study area; and other than an isolated record where five birds were observed drinking at a dam three km north of Lake Bonney at Barmera (B. M. Pollard, N.P.W.S., pers. comm.) in August, 1966, I have no further records until 1969.

In June 1969 the late Mr. Dick Germein of Cobdogla, South Australia, advised me that he had located *N. splendida* in large flocks in an area on Gluepot Station (Mr. Germein was a keen amateur ornithologist who had a special

interest in *N. splendida*.) On 16 June, 1969, I visited the locality and found *N. splendida* in several flocks of from five to 20 birds. It was difficult to count the birds in the area, as they were continually moving backwards and forwards along a corridor between two high ridges. There would, however, have been at least 100 individuals. The birds were feeding on the fallen seeds of *Newcastelia dixonii*, *Haloragis odontocarpa* and porcupine bush *Triodia* spp. It is interesting to note that males outnumbered the females by about six to one. Many of these males were obviously young from the previous breeding season, as only a few scarlet feathers were present on their breasts.

The birds remained in this area until August 1969. A search of the area about mid-August resulted in the location of three males only. There are no further records from this locality until six birds were observed on 22 February, 1970 (R. Germein, pers. comm.). Since 1970 I have not had the opportunity to return to this locality during the periods when the birds are likely to be present; so I do not know whether *N. splendida* still occurs there.

There follow two further records of this species north of the Murray that are not mentioned in Joseph (1976). A single male was observed by myself on Gluepot Stn. (approximately three km north from the above locality) on 18 July, 1969. An adult pair and two young were observed by R. Germein (pers. comm.) feeding near the base of some *Newcastelia dixonii* plants five km north-east of Overland Corner on 19 January, 1970.

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REFERENCES

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Joseph, L., 1976. Recent records of the Scarlet-chested Parrot. S.A. Orn. 27:144-145.