

Elegant Parroté (Neophema elegans).

By Dr. Wm. Hamilton.

Nine inches in length, this is a wonderful little Parrot, and one that I have been fortunate enough to be able to study in its native haunts. I have observed it closely at intervals for nearly three years, and there have been times when I thought that there was very little that I did not know about the Elegant, only to find on the next occasion that the bird would do the unexpected again.

The description of the Blue-Wing (*N. chrystoma*) would roughly cover that of the Elegant as a general description. They have the same colours in the same places, but the Elegant outdoes his relative in beauty. The green has less olive in it and more green. The band across the forehead is double, two-colour blue, pale blue above and Prussian blue below. These same two colours are in the wing, outer dark blue and inner light blue, but not very wide as in the Blue-Wing Parrot.

When the bird is resting on a tree this blue-wing edge is very narrow, only about one-eighth of an inch showing. The abdomen from the chest down is a very rich yellow, and in adult birds there is an orange patch which increases a little with age. This yellow extends to the under-tail centre feathers, and the top-tail feathers are blue, tending towards green. The side outer-tail feathers are dark blue on the inner side and yellow on the outer half. Around the eye is a bright yellow patch, which is very noticeable, even from a distance of 40 yards.

The female is similar, with less yellow around the eye and with the forehead double-band much duller. The young are very dull-coloured birds, greyish-olive, with the blue showing on the edge of the wing. The two-colour forehead band commences to show at the first moult, which occurs at different periods according to the dryness of the season. This has been an exceptionally dry season in Australia, and the birds are moulting now at the age of four months. As a rule, it is nearer six to eight months when they commence to moult.

This Parrot is considered to be comparatively rare, and in danger of extinction. Living, as it does, near coastal sandhills, and in the sandhill country up north, I am of opinion that it will never become extinct. This year the birds seem to have had an unusually successful breeding season, and the number of young birds is enormous. The country they favour is the wild tobacco-tree country with sand or limestone formation, and there is plenty of water, almost always fresh, extending for

hundreds of miles. The country is not suited for closer settlement, and will not carry many cattle and sheep, so that I cannot see that the bird is ever in any danger of becoming extinct or ever being driven from its present haunts.

Nature, at this spot, has made an ideal sanctuary for the bird life. The Parrots nest in the fallen trunks of the teatree down south, and in the gumtrees up north. I am informed that they are more plentiful up north now than they have been for many years. Their colouring, I am convinced, is purely protective, as they live in a district where Hawks abound, and that these Hawks do eat them I know. I have, unfortunately, too often found evidence on the ground, and have heard the warning cry of the desolate mate circling above the Hawk who has captured its partner.

The tobacco-trees are low and stunted owing to the nature of the soil and limestone which occurs at a depth, on an average, of six inches from the surface. A number of these trees are dead, and it is *always* on a dead tree that these birds alight after a flight. I am sure that it is in order to have an unobstructed view of the approach of their enemy, the Hawk. As soon as he is seen the warning cry is given, and off go the birds close to the ground, and keeping in between the trees. When resting on a tree their habits differ from most Parrots that I know. They do not seem to be very sociable, nor are they in any way curious, like the majority of Parrots. You will see one Parrot on a branch and its mate six feet away. They will keep fairly motionless, and have a most pleasant twittering chatter when resting.

Odd Parrots may be scattered here and there on different trees, but they do not join forces. This unusual habit renders them very difficult to catch. I know, because, in company with Australia's best bird-catcher, I have tried. They are almost impossible to trap. They will not call to one another as other Parrots will, and they sit so still that they do not attract the other birds. Even when the Parrots see a call-bird they will sit and look at him for twenty minutes and then fly off. Other Parrots would come down to him.

The tobacco-tree has a broad green leaf and a yellow flower, which, when dead, has a seed-pod about the size of that of an Iceland poppy, and which contains dozens of small seeds. When the Parrot is about to feed it alights first of all on a dead tree, and stays there perhaps twenty minutes, or even longer, then flies low down to one of the live trees and perches about two feet from the ground. After a rest there it flutters gracefully

to the ground under the tree, and there it stays, looking up and around every now and then.

At the present time these birds are living on the seeds from the tobacco plant, and at a distance of 20 feet can hardly be distinguished from a young tobacco leaf or shoot coming from the ground. They are very motionless feeders, and this, in conjunction with their resemblance to the yellow and green of the tobacco plant, their invariable first perching on a dead tree, and their enemy the Hawk, makes one think that their colouring, though remarkably beautiful, is really protective.

Their habits this season differ from those of past seasons, and, though I have added to my store of knowledge of the *Elegant*, I am afraid there is still much to be learnt. They commence at sunrise, and their first call is heard as they ascend from their sleeping-place in the teatree. You will see them in pairs, and at times up to six or ten birds will fly over. They go west at first, some alighting close to the sleeping-place to feed and water, and others going for miles. Where they go to I have never yet found, but as they cover at least 50 miles in an hour they may breakfast and water anywhere.

In past years, after ten o'clock in the morning they would all have gone from the haunt I know and have flown westward. Odd birds would commence to arrive back about four o'clock in the afternoon, alighting on the dead trees, and then to feed. The majority, however, would be seen returning home about six o'clock, after having heard their cry, which, when in flight, is quite metallic, and not unlike that of a Purple-crowned Lorikeet—something like a circular saw cutting through metal.

They fly overhead high, at about 300 feet, and at night may be seen in bands of 50 or more. There are not many of these large bands, however, most of the return being in pairs, fours, or sixes. Their flight is ragged, and they zigzag a lot. Over the resting-place they dive as if shot, and in a second are in the foliage from a height of 300 feet. Stragglers keep arriving back until dusk, when all is silent.

This year, on the first occasion I observed them, they were very plentiful, comprising a very large percentage of uncoloured birds. They kept to the tobacco-trees and flew from tree to tree as one walked slowly towards them. They seemed less shy than in past seasons, and, contrary to their previous habits, did not leave this ground all day. When evening came they did not fly off to their resting-place, but remained in the trees. A week later their habits had altered again. Flying overhead, high as before, they went to their old sleeping-place. Next morning at sunrise up in the air, and large numbers off to the

west again. Others settled close, and fed and watered as in the past. After 8.30 in the morning there was not a sound. They had all gone, but this time a lot of them returned to the sleeping-place and settled down in the teatree. This is the first time I have ever known this to occur.

After that there was no sound and no sign of bird life, but for a few Castor-oil Birds (Yellow-winged Honeyeaters), Singing Honeyeaters, and an occasional Goldfinch, Magpies, Crows, Hawks, and a few sea birds. At 3.30 in the afternoon the first metallic cry was heard, and a pair of Elegants settled on a dead tree again. From then until about six o'clock there were a few to be seen alighting and feeding. More cries from the westward, and the bulk of the birds returned home, flying high and ending with a nosedive into their home.

In captivity they require a separate aviary if they are to breed. They will mix with larger birds, and can look after themselves pretty well. They like low perches, and will always choose them for preference. They like sitting on rocks, and even on the ground. They do not destroy bushes or trees, as other Parrots will. Growing grass and seeding millet is much appreciated. Limestone and cuttlefish are necessary for them to keep their upper mandible from growing too long and having to be cut. Should not be wintered out the first year, but after that will do well. Sandy soil in the aviary with seeds thrown on to it is useful, as that is what they are used to in their natural state.
