

PLUMAGE VARIATION AND FEEDING OF THE RINGNECK PARROTS OF THE NORTHERN FLINDERS RANGES

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PLUMAGE

The casual visitor to the Flinders Ranges who has a little knowledge of ornithology may have some difficulty in identifying the species of Ringneck Parrot of this area using the usual text books. The typical Mallee Ringneck has a green crown, a red frontal band, a bluish grey back, a green chest and a narrow yellow or orange abdominal band. The birds at Angorichina Hostel have a dark greyish crown and a red frontal band, a greenish back and an abdominal band which varies in width from about $\frac{1}{2}$ " to $2\frac{1}{2}$ " (but is usually $1\frac{1}{2}$ "-2") and from yellow to orange or yellow with red streaks. Most of the birds occurred in pairs and usually the brighter of the two birds had the narrower and redder abdominal band. Often in the duller bird there was no clean differentiation between the yellow of the abdomen and the green of the breast which was itself sometimes blotched with yellow. However there was no consistent association between the width of the band, the colour of the band or the brightness of the plumage.

This dark headed variety of the Mallee Ringneck is *Barnardius barnardi whitei* and differs from the typical Pt. Lincoln Ringneck (*B. zonarius*) which has a black head and no red frontal band, and a broad yellow abdominal band, (with no red flecks or orange tinge).

COURTSHIP FEEDING

On a number of different occasions courtship feeding was noted:—after a pair had been feeding for some minutes the most brightly coloured bird would approach the other and bow five or six times nodding its head at the same time. It then fed the duller bird with what appeared to be regurgitated material. The recipient crouched down to receive the food but did not appear

to "beg" for food and its actions seemed largely passive. Almost at once both birds began to feed again.

On only one occasion was this "courtship" feeding observed of a bird which made no effort to feed itself either before or afterwards.

FOOD

(a) The Ringnecks were frequently found feeding on the berries of the pepper tree (*Schinus molle*). Two birds were watched at a distance of about 10 ft. The whole fruit was taken in the beak and all but the seed rejected. Some of this rejected material was collected and it contained skin and flesh but no seed. Both birds fed at a great rate, except when courtship feeding was observed.

(b) At Aroona Dam two birds were seen feeding in red gums (*E. camaldulensis*). The leaves were picked off by the bill and held in one claw while something was picked off the leaves which were then dropped. Examination of fallen leaves suggested that the parrots were eating lerp insects. (*Glycaspis*.) These sap-sucking larvae make a waxy pyramid-shaped covering or lerp.

Early in August at Angorichina Hostel Dr. F. D. Morgan of the Waite Agricultural Research Institute had made similar observations, and identified two genera of lerp insects (*Glycaspis* and *Rhinocola*) present on the leaves of the red gum. The Ringnecks picked a leaf and moved it edgewise through the bill. Large numbers of fresh leaves and loose lerp were found underneath the tree indicating that the birds were eating these insects. By late August very few lerp insects remained on the trees at Angorichina either because they had been eaten or had hatched into the adult form, and only the occasional pair of Ringnecks was seen eating lerp insects there.

(c) At Angorichina Hostel two Ringnecks were watched eating the flowers of Ward Weed (*Vella annua*) which was quite widely distributed near the Hostel. This is a small introduced plant about 4" high with cream-

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coloured flowers up the stem. Both birds were stripping off the flowers up each stem working rapidly and efficiently. After four or five minutes courtship feeding was observed and then both birds continued to pick off the flowers again.

Ringneck parrots are usually thought of as grass-seed eaters. These three observations indicate that their diet is far more varied than this and that they are probably an important means of controlling lerp infestation on eucalypts.