

DISTRIBUTION AND TAXONOMIC NOTES ON SOME PARROTS FROM WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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SUMMARY

The distribution limits of *Platycercus icterotis*, *Neophema bourkii*, *Psephotus haematogaster narethae* and *Pezoporus wallicus flaviventris* are outlined. Geographic variation in *Platycercus icterotis* and *Pezoporus wallicus* is described. The generic status of the Bourke Parrot and Night Parrot are discussed: the placement of the Bourke Parrot in *Neopsephotus* is questioned; the relationship between the Night and Ground Parrots is considered to be close enough for the two to be placed in the genus *Pezoporus*.

PLATYCERCUS ICTEROTIS.

Western Rosella.

Distribution

The eastern limit of the range of the Western Rosella is usually given as Lake Dundas (Serventy and Whittell, 1962). McColl (1929), however, reported the

species as occurring in the tall mallee, *Eucalyptus oleosa*, woodland along the Hampton Scarp near Madura. There seems no valid reason to doubt this record.

Variation

The Western Rosella is usually divided into two subspecies, *viz.* nominate *icterotis* Kuhl in the wet sclerophyll forest block of the South-West, and *xanthogenys* Salvadori in the eastern and northern parts of the species' range (Condon, 1941; Cain, 1955; Serventy and Whittell, 1962). In *xanthogenys* the green and yellow plumage is paler and the distal margins of the back feathers are red instead of green. These differences are due to an overall decrease in the Tyndall effect, less deposition of yellow carotenoid,

and the replacement of yellow by red carotenoid pigment.

The intergradation between *icterotis* and *xanthogenys* appears to be stepped. In order to explain the narrow zone of intergradation, Cain (1955) suggested that while there is considerable gene flow within the range of *xanthogenys*, nominate *icterotis* is partially isolated by mountain barriers and dense forest. However, since there are no mountain barriers and the species occurs continuously and plentifully from the lower south-west forested corner to the more open eucalypt woodland formations, this suggestion is untenable. Other factors must be operating to reduce gene flow between the two forms. Possibly there is very little dispersal of birds. The colour variation is apparently due to a simple genetic difference (cf. Condon, 1959) and, therefore, the variation gradient is possibly maintained by selection arising from climatic factors. However, is it possible that the difference developed while the two colour forms were in isolation and now selection against gene introgression, because of partial genetic incompatibility, is maintaining a narrow zone of intergradation? If the colour differences between nominate *icterotis* and *xanthogenys* have an ecotypic basis and evolved without the intervention of geographic discontinuities, then no subspecies should be recognised.

Platycercus icterotis is one of several species in the South-West which require collecting along radial transects outwards from the south-west corner (cf. Serventy, 1953). Such collecting will provide important information on the situation at the zone of contact between nominate *icterotis* and *xanthogenys*.

NEOPHEMA BOURKII. Bourke Parrot.

Distribution

In a previous contribution (Ford, 1961), observations were presented which showed that the Bourke Parrot is abundant in the mulga vegetation zone of mid-Western Australia. Further observations (by me except where indicated) now show that it is distributed from the west coast right through the mulga country to Central Australia and South Australia, the main distribution limits being the mulga-eucalypt line in the south and the mulga-spinifex line in the north.

Several observations are from the southern part of the Gibson Desert and the northern part of the Great Victoria Desert.

Faulkner Hill, Great Victoria Desert. One flew along a mulga-fringed watercourse on May 23, 1966.

Watt Creek, Great Victoria Desert. Two in mulga on May 13, 1968.

Miss Gibson Hill, Great Victoria Desert. Three pairs in mulga scrub on May 14, 1968.

Warburton Mission. Several pairs seen and apparently common in mulga, 20 miles east, on May 25, 1966.

Gahnda Rock Hole, Great Victoria Desert. Two came in to drink during the middle of the day when the weather was fairly warm on May 25, 1966.

Beegull (Pikal) Rock Hole, Great Victoria Desert. Two in mulga, 17 miles east on September 2, 1965. About 20 in mulga on stony hills on May 12, 1968.

Garden Mill, 3 miles east of Laverton. Several came in to the mill in the morning of May 16, 1966.

Carnegie Homestead. One flock flew over open mulga, 21 miles east, on September 5, 1966.

Mt. Nossiter, Gibson Desert. A flock in mulga country, 19 miles west, on September 5, 1966.

Mt. William Lambert, Gibson Desert. A flock in mulga country on September 5, 1966.

Mungilli Claypan, Gibson Desert. Two birds, 3 miles east on September 6, 1966.

Well 48, Canning Stock Route. K. G. Buller saw a flock of 28 fly over on July 9, 1943.

Granite Peaks. Two in mulga, 27 miles south, on August 25, 1962. According to Mrs. C. Smith of Granite Peaks, it is common in the area.

Glenayle Station. Two on August 26, 1962. According to Mr. A. Ward of Glenayle, it is plentiful in the area.

Windich Spring, Canning Stock Route. Small flocks came in to drink at dawn on August 30 and September 1, 1962, until they numbered a few hundred. None came in at dusk possibly because the weather was cool.

Lake Nabberu. Four in mulga on south side on April 17, 1964.

New Springs. Two, 15 miles north, and one, 2 miles north, on April 17, 1964.

Davyhurst and Callion. Common accord-

ing to a station-hand at Credo interviewed on May 12, 1964.

Jeedamya Station. Small flocks in mulga on January 16, 1965.

Nichol Springs, Ethel River. Numerous in early morning of August 26, 1964.

Yilbrinna Gorge, Tunnel Creek. Small flocks came in to drink at dawn on August 31, 1964.

Lyons Soak, Ashburton River. Small flocks at dawn on May 14, 1965.

Old Ullawarra. Two birds in mulga-minnieritchie scrub, 7 miles north, on May 17, 1965.

Billabalong. Several in mulga, 12 miles north on May 20, 1965.

Overlander, Hamelin Pool Station. Small flocks started to arrive at a nearby mill at 5.50 a.m. on April 22, 1962, until they numbered about 100 birds, and disappeared well before sunrise which was at about 6.50 a.m.

Warroora Station. G. M. Storr found the species to be common in mulga near the coast.

Generic Status

Immelmann (1964) places the Bourke Parrot in a monotypic genus *Neopsephotus* Mathews, a course which has been followed by Serventy and Whittell (1967). The reasons listed for this action are the *bourkii* differs from all the other species of *Neophema* in its coloration, way of life, body build and in not producing aviary hybrids with the other six species.

I prefer to follow Cain (1955) and other recent reviewers of the Platycercine parrots by treating *bourkii* as constituting one of three species groups in *Neophema*, the others being the *pulchella* and *chrysogaster* species groups, the latter with two subgroups (Cain, loc. cit; McGill, 1960). It is agreed that *bourkii* is the most distinctive species but more evidence should be gathered before a definite decision is made on the species' generic position. The morphological and ecological adaptations of *bourkii* indicate that it has been a desert species for a much longer period than *N. splendida*. The crepuscular habit of visiting watering places and the somewhat drab plumage coloration due to loss of yellow carotenoid are two peculiar adaptations of *bourkii*.

PSEPHOTUS HAEMATOGASTER.

Blue Bonnet.

Distribution

Apart from Cain (1955), recent authors (Serventy and Whittell, 1962; Forshaw, 1963) give the range of the Little Blue Bonnet, *P.h. narethae*, as the country on the western and north-western edge of the Nullarbor Plain and have ignored McColl's record (1929) of its occurrence in numbers above the Hampton Scarp, between Madura and Eucla. Its presence on the southern edge of the Nullarbor Plain has been confirmed personally.

In January, 1966, while travelling through the myall, *Acacia sowdenii*, and bluebush, *Koockia spp.*, savannah between Eucla and Mundrabilla, north of the Hampton Scarp, I saw at least three pairs of Naretha Parrots. According to Mr. R. Langford, the manager of Mundrabilla Station, it is quite common. Further confirmation of its presence in the myall woodland on the southern edge of the Nullarbor Plain comes from Mr. A. M. Douglas who recorded it north of Madura, and Mr. I. C. Carnaby who saw it north-east of Eucla just east of the Western Australian-South Australian border on September 5, 1965. I also saw several pairs in myall between Rawlinna and Cocklebidy in May, 1968.

There is no doubt that *narethae* diverged from the main *haematogaster* population while isolated and that it is still isolated from nominate *haematogaster* of the drier mallee areas of Eyre Peninsula and the myall country to the north of the Gawler Range. Though myall is more or less continuous from Eucla to Koonalda, *narethae* probably does not range much eastwards beyond Eucla because of the lack of trees with suitable nesting hollows. At Mundrabilla and doubtless elsewhere on the southern edge of the Nullarbor Plain, *narethae* nests in mallee gums, *Eucalyptus oleosa*, and not in the myall trees since these do not have suitable hollows. The mallee vegetation peters out just east of Eucla and does not reappear until near the Head of the Bight. The break in the myall belt on the southern edge of the plain between Koonalda and the Head of the Bight operates as an additional distribution barrier. On the northern edge of the plain, the eastern range limit of *narethae* is probably where the mallee vegetated desert sand-hills spill onto the open plain north of

Cook. As well as mallee, the region to the north of Cook is vegetated with black oak, *Casuarina cristata*, the favoured nesting tree at Naretha (Whitlock, 1922), but *narethae* only inhabits these trees where they are associated with myall (Calaby, 1958).

Variation

Two specimens collected 15 miles north of Mundrabilla homestead on January 30, 1966, and two collected 88 miles north of Seemore Downs homestead on May 20, 1968, agree in size and coloration with descriptions of topotypical *narethae* (see White, 1921). Their dimensions in millimetres and weight in grams are set out in Table 1.

TABLE 1
MEASUREMENTS OF
NARETHA PARROTS

	Mundrabilla		Seemore Downs	
	M	F	M	F
Bill to feathers	16.4	16.1	16.7	15.3
Tarso-metatarsus	17.5	16.5	18.0	16.5
Wing	122	116	122	112
Total length	289	260	288	260
Tail	156	141	161	141
Weight			79	70

PEZOPORUS WALLICUS. Ground Parrot.

Distribution

In Western Australia the Ground Parrot formerly occurred in swampy and wet heathland along the south-west coastal fringe from at least as far north as Perth to as far east as King George Sound. John Gilbert collected it near Perth in the 1840's and George Masters found it to be plentiful at Albany during his visits in the 1860's. The few observations made this century are summarised by Serventy and Whittell (1962).

There is some evidence that the species formerly occurred along the coastal strip much farther north than Perth. Though the record has not been given much attention, Ashby (1921) reported that he was informed by an early settler that the Ground Parrot inhabited the sandplain country between Dongara and Watheroo up to the 1890's before bushfires wiped it out. Messrs. P. T. Sandland and C. L. E. Orton (pers. comm.) of Moora informed me that the late Mr. F. Whitfield of Mungedar reported to them that on several occasions he flushed a green parrot-species from the stunted heath scrub on the laterite hills between Jurien

Bay and Badgingarra in the 1890's and 1900's while he was cattle droving. When flushed the parrots would fly with twists and turns for a short distance just above the vegetation and would seemingly crash into the scrub when alighting. Whitfield was familiar with the Rock Parrot, *Neophema petrophila*, which is plentiful on the coast and offshore islands at Jurien Bay. This information was passed on to Lawson Whitlock who, according to Sandland and Orton, was convinced that Whitfield's parrots were Ground Parrots. The heath vegetation on the laterite hills and sandplain in the Badgingarra-Jurien Bay country is very similar structurally and botanically to that at Cheyne Beach where the species still exists.

The best evidence for the Ground Parrot's former occurrence north of Perth was provided by Gilbert (Gould, 1848) who gave a name (viz. Boo-run-dur-dee) used by the Aborigines to the north of Perth in addition to names (Djar-dong-garri and Djar-doon-gur-ee) used by the tribe in the Perth area.

The British Museum has two juvenile specimens of the Ground Parrot, from the Gould Collection, in down with feathers just beginning to show, labelled as having been collected on the sandplains near Wangun Hills, Western Australia (Salvadori, 1891). Mr. J. D. MacDonald (*in litt.*) informs me that there is no other information on the specimens. Since John Gilbert visited the Wongan Hills in 1842 (Whittell, 1942), then also known as Wangun Hills, the intriguing question arises—did Gilbert collect these specimens for Gould? Unfortunately no definite answer can be given. The only Ground Parrot specimens mentioned by Gilbert in his various letters to Gould were two in a large consignment of material shipped on the *Napoleon* in January, 1844 (Whittell, p. 303) though it is probable that he collected others.

On November 5, 1963, I led a party of R.A.O.U. members to Cheyne Beach, east of Albany. Two Ground Parrots were flushed from dense stunted heath and sedge association on the hills overlooking the ocean, several hundred yards south of the Cheyne Beach settlement. The occurrence of the Ground Parrot at Cheyne Beach was brought to my attention by Mr. Charles Allen of Cuthbert (pers. comm.). Allen showed me a feather of the species which was one of a

bundle he had obtained from fishermen in the 1940's when the species was quite common in the heath on the dunes and the higher wind-swept hill slopes of the easternmost extension of the Mt. Many Peaks range system. The fishermen shot the birds as their dogs flushed them out of the heath scrub.

A convincing report of the Ground Parrot has recently come from the Israelite Bay sandplain area, east of Esperance. On March 27, 1968, Messrs. John Bannister (Curator of Mammals W.A. Museum) and Alex Baynes flushed a green parrot seven miles west of Mt. Baring on a track to Israelite Bay in flat country with stunted heath up to two feet high. The bird flew with rapid wing beats followed by a glide close to the ground. It resembled a Budgerygah, *Melopsittacus undulatus*, in shape, and a Twenty-eight Parrot, *Barnardius zondrius*, in size.

Relationships

Though the close phylogenetic relationship between the Ground Parrot and Night Parrot, *Geopsittacus occidentalis*, has been long recognised (Beddard, 1898; Gould, 1861; Mathews, 1917; Murie, 1868; Serventy, 1953; Brereton, 1963), few workers have attempted to study their osteology and anatomy. In his description of *Geopsittacus occidentalis*, Gould (*loc. cit.*) stressed that in his opinion the differences were of sufficient magnitude to warrant its generic separation from *Pezoporus wallicus*. *Geopsittacus* has longer wings, a shorter tail, longer legs, diminutive nails, no red on the forehead, and the plumage has a less barred appearance.

If the differences between the Night and Ground Parrot are considered in relation to their habitats, arid spinifex country and wet coastal heathland respectively, it becomes clear that they are not necessarily of generic importance. Since *occidentalis* lives under clumps of spinifex, *Triodia spp.*, its tail may have become relatively short so as to reduce damage and fraying by the spinifex needles (cf. *Stipiturus ruficeps*). Even if this is not the case, relative tail length is not always a good generic character. The long wings of *occidentalis* appear to be an adaptation to enable it to fly over relatively long distances to water (cf. Andrews, 1883), whereas *wal-*

licus probably obtains sufficient water by eating moisture-laden seeds and has no need to travel far. Cain (1955) gives an excellent account of how the remiges, principally the primaries, have been modified in the platycercines and related groups so as to meet different ecological requirements. Why *occidentalis* has short nails is uncertain but it may somehow be related to its terrestrial existence. Some variation of the relative length of the tarso-metatarsus within a genus is not uncommon (vide *Charadrius*). No generic significance can be given to the presence of the red forehead patch in *wallicus* and its absence in *occidentalis* (cf. *Barnardius*). The brighter coloration of *occidentalis* is due to reduction of melanins and is apparently a consequence of the Gloger effect.

Murie (1868) found no significant differences in the sternum of *occidentalis* and *wallicus*, and considered only the nocturnal behaviour of the former species favoured its generic separation. There is no later work on their comparative osteology although Forshaw (in litt.) comments that there is a narrowing of the cranium in *wallicus*. It appears that the nocturnal behaviour of *occidentalis* is yet another adaptation to its life in an arid environment where it is necessary for the species to visit water-holes. By drinking at night, *occidentalis* avoids diurnal birds of prey which would have little difficulty in capturing it at the exposed drinking places in the interior because of its relatively weak flying ability. Apparently the nocturnal habit evolved as a result of strong selection (predation) pressures by diurnal birds of prey (cf. Goodwin, 1967). It is noteworthy that some recent work (Bevege, 1968) has shown that *wallicus* has crepuscular habits and, therefore, so might have the ancestors of *occidentalis*.

Serventy (1953) considered the degree of difference between *occidentalis* and *wallicus* as a strong specific one, and recently (1967) placed *occidentalis* in the genus *Pezoporus*. J. D. MacDonald (in litt.) informs me that he can see no valid reason for keeping the two species in separate genera. In view of the foregoing, I conclude that *Geopsittacus* should be relegated to the synonymy of *Pezoporus*. I consider that this arrangement illustrates the reasonably close relationship between the two species.

TABLE 2
Measurements in millimetres of the Ground Parrot

MALES				FEMALES					
	No.	Mean	Range	S.D.	No.	Mean	Range	S.D.	
Bill, to feathers	N.S.W.	13	16.1	15-17	0.75	6	15.7	14.5-16	0.65
	Vic.	6	15.6	15-17	0.70	4	15.1	15-15.5	0.34
	Tas.	3	17.0	16-18	1.00				
	S.A.	2	15.0	14-16					
	W.A.	2	16.3	16-16.5		2	15.3	15-15.5	
Bill, to cere	N.S.W.	13	14.5	14-16	0.64	7	13.6	13-15	0.80
	Vic.	7	14.5	13-16	0.97	4	13.7	12.5-14.5	0.96
	Tas.	4	15.4	15-16	0.48				
	S.A.	2	13.4	13-14					
	W.A.	1		14.5		2	13.8	13.5-14	
Tarsus	N.S.W.	13	23.9	21-25	1.30	7	24.6	22-27	1.90
	Vic.	7	24.6	23-25.5	0.90	4	24.6	23-26	1.33
	Tas.	3	22.3	21-24	1.43				
	S.A.	2	24.3	24-24.5					
	W.A.	2	24.6	23.5-25.5		2	24.1	22.5-25.5	
Wing	N.S.W.	13	131.1	128-134	2.99	7	126.6	123-128	4.46
	Vic.	6	126.8	122-135	4.04	4	130.5	127-133	2.58
	Tas.	4	129.0	127-133	2.71				
	S.A.	2	130.0	129-131					
	W.A.	2	129.3	127-131		2	124.0	120-128	
Tail	N.S.W.	13	186.5	169-204	10.7	5	184.2	169-204	15.0
	Vic.	6	178.4	168-188	9.5	4	181.5	177-186	4.3
	Tas.	3	176.3	170-191	11.4				
	S.A.	2	179.0	173-185					
	W.A.	2	172.5	170-175		1	184		

S.D. denotes standard deviation.

Variation

North's (1912) separation of the south-west isolate of *Pezoporus wallicus* as the form *flaviventris* was based on a series of skins collected by George Masters at King George Sound in 1866 and 1868. It was described as differing from *wallicus* in having broken barrings on the undersurface, and in having the central lower breast and abdomen yellow instead of green. The differences were stated to be particularly noticeable in adult specimens.

After examining material from New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia, I conclude that the differences diagnosed by North are not entirely consistent. A small percentage of specimens from the nominate and south-western populations can be confused. Thus the ventral markings and coloration of a male specimen (Aust. Mus. no. O.28465) from Narrabeen, New South Wales, tallies with those of *flaviventris*, while a female from King George Sound (Aust. Mus. no. O.23539) has barrings right across the lower breast and abdomen.

In a series of specimens from Madden's Plains, New South Wales, collected by J. A. Thorpe in August, 1885, there is some degree of variation in the colour of the abdomen and the intensity of the bars. Possibly the bars are paler and the abdomen more yellow in older birds since this would tie in with North's remark that the differences between *flaviventris* and nominate *wallicus* are more pronounced in adult birds. It has also been pointed out to me by Mr. Peter Slater that the dark markings on the face, throat and neck seem to be paler in older birds. Some of the variation may also be correlated with sex.

Because some eastern and Western Australian specimens are inseparable, I consider that *flaviventris* is not a particularly well differentiated subspecies. It is noteworthy that Mathews (1917) made a similar comment and remarked that South Australian birds are intermediate.

The subspecies *leachi* Mathews of Tasmania and the Bass Strait Islands is a minor form which is darker and greener (Condon, 1942). Its coloration is due to increased

saturation of pigment in accordance with Gloger's rule. The table of measurements shows no significant size trends.

Specimens Examined

Western Australia:—Albany (3); Swan River (1); Wilson Inlet (3); no locality (3).

South Australia:—Tantanoola, Thengelly River (1); no locality (3).

Victoria:—Pt. Ricardo (1); Marlo (2); Echuca (1); Geelong (1); Shallow Inlet (1); Mallacoota (2); Wilson Promontory (1); Oxford, near Port Fairy (1); Cabbage Tree Creek, Orbost (1); Western Port (3); no locality (3).

New South Wales:—Maddens Plains (18); Narrabeen (3); Wollongong (5); Appin (1); Nowra (1); Long Bay (3); no locality (9).

Tasmania:—East coast (1); no locality (5).

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