

## THE STATUS OF THE ELEGANT PARROT AND THE ROCK PARROT ON KANGAROO ISLAND

C. BAXTER AND S. A. PARKER

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The status on Kangaroo Island of the Elegant Parrot *Neophema elegans* is not well understood. Of its status in South Australia generally, Condon (1969: 63) wrote: 'Common and fairly widespread in southern wetter districts, including Kangaroo Island', but gave no details. Abbott (1974) considered the species 'apparently accidental' to the Island, citing Sutton's tentative report of one at Eleanor River on 28 January 1926 (see below). Further records have allowed a fresh appraisal of the matter:

R. Collier, *in* Cox (1976): noted near Flinders Chase, November 1973.

H. J. Eckert (pers. comm.): 4-5 birds *ca* 3.2 km south of Willoughby Telephone Exchange, Dudley Peninsula, 13 January 1976; one sub-adult male collected (SAM B30282).

C. Baxter (pers. obs.): 1978-79: one, mouth of Ravine des Casoars, 29 December; 14, western edge of Murray's Lagoon, 20 January; six

on road, Yacca Flat, 22 January; 12 in pasture near D'Estrées Bay, 15 March, and six in same area two days later. 1979-80: four, Western Highway 3 km north of Flinders Chase NP main entrance, 2 December; one in melaleuca swamp *ca* 2 km northeast of Karatta School, 7 December; two flying low over heath in firebreak, 16 km north of Flinders Chase main entrance, 1 January; one flying up from road *ca* 3.2 km north of Cape du Couedic lighthouse, 4 January; four on Western Highway *ca* 5 km north of Flinders Chase entrance, 12 January; one flying up from regenerating swampy heath in firebreak on The Shackle road *ca* 13 km north of Flinders Chase homestead, 15 January; one flying up from regenerating firebreak on south side of Breakneck Creek, 17 January; two flying up from regenerating heath in firebreak on road *ca* 6.4 km south of West Bay, 17 January; one flying over Karatta School, 24 January; three

understorey consisted of grasses in the watercourse and chenopods on the plains.<sup>1</sup>

A single bird was seen at North Creek, Allandale Stn. (27° 43'S, 135° 36'E), 25 km SE of Oodnadatta, on 19 and 20 November. It was flushed from grass and chenopods by the roadside soon after sunrise on 19 November and was lost to sight among Gidgea along the watercourse. A search late that afternoon revealed a female or immature-phase Bourke's Parrot in Gidgea bordering the creek. The habitat consisted of Gidgea, Coolibah and *Santalum lanceolatum* along a stony watercourse bordered by gibber plains, with understorey of grasses, *Atriplex vesicaria*, *Rhagodia spinescens*, *Enchylaena tomentosa* and other chenopods under 600 mm in height. Whilst driving through this same area late on the following afternoon, I again flushed a single bird from chenopods by the roadside.

#### 1979

During 1979 I did not record Bourke's Parrot until 20 October, when three birds were seen at Ockenden Creek, four km E of Mt Dutton RS (27° 48'S, 135° 44'E = 45 km south-east of Oodnadatta). They were flushed from chenopods bordering the watercourse in late afternoon and flew into Gidgea along the creek. The country bordering the watercourse consisted of gibber plains, well vegetated with *Atriplex spongiosa*, *Salsola kali*, *Brachycome ciliaris*, other chenopods, grasses and samphire.

#### 1980

On 6 June I recorded two birds one km S of Carpamoongana WH on The Hamilton (26° 45'S, 134° 45'E) and later that same day saw at least two Bourke's Parrots 29 km NE of the Todmorden HS (26° 57'S, 134° 55'E). Both locations are NW of Oodnadatta. Habitat on both occasions was dense Mulga scrub covering sandy flats and low jumbled sandhills with *Eremophila freelingii*, *E. glabra*, *Cassia helmsii*, *Acacia tetragonophylla*, *A. ligulata*, *Sclerolaena* spp., *Brachycome ciliaris*, *Crotalaria strehlowii*, *Enneapogon avenaceus* and other grasses. The birds near Carpamoongana WH were seen around a large, dead Mulga for about 10 minutes; one bird was investigating holes in the tree, while the other bird remained perched on a dead branch of the same tree. This tree was about five metres in height and its bole was

200-250 mm in diameter, with many hollows. The behaviour of these two birds was very similar to that of the birds I observed at Douglas Creek on 13 August 1978.

#### DISCUSSION

Although the Bourke's Parrot is undoubtedly a bird of the Mulga scrub, it is found in and breeds in other habitats. The increase in the number of sightings by me in the area to the west of Lake Eyre and south of Oodnadatta (and in particular to the south of Peake Creek) during the latter part of 1978 is almost certainly directly attributable to the excellent conditions which prevailed following the good winter rains of 1978 (see Badman (1979) for sight records for 1977 — March 1978).

Seasonal conditions in 1979 were equally as good as in 1978, again due to good winter rains, and much better than in 1977 which was a dry year in this area, yet I recorded Bourke's Parrot on only a single occasion. During 1979 I spent a total of 24 days in the field in the area north of William Creek, south of Dalhousie Springs and west of the Simpson Desert and Lake Eyre, an area where I had often recorded the Bourke's Parrot in 1977-78. During 1978 I spent a total of 31 days in the field in the same area, and during 1977 I lived there continuously for the first nine months of the year.

Smith (1979) noted an increase in the abundance of this species throughout its range, yet in the area under review there appears to have been great variation in distribution from year to year which cannot wholly be attributed to seasonal conditions. Davies (1977) suggests an increase in the abundance of this species on pastoral land to be due to the grazing of sheep and cattle which in turn removed small chenopod shrubs, thus permitting the growth of annual grasses and herbs. Grasses and herbs were still plentiful in this area during 1979, so I think it unlikely that a lack of suitable food from such plants was responsible for the paucity of records of Bourke's Parrot for this particular year. Nor would it seem likely that 'subtle alteration of the environment' brought about by stocking with sheep and cattle, or by rabbits, as suggested by MacGillivray (1927) can be blamed for the lack of records in 1979. From my own observations I would say that cattle and rabbit numbers in this area showed little change during this three year period. There are no sheep in this area. The crepuscular habits of this species undoubtedly caused me to miss sighting it on several occasions in 1979, yet this also holds true for 1977 and 1978. It is unlikely that the yearly fluctuations in numbers of Bourke's Parrots were due to poorer seasonal

<sup>1</sup> Of note on this occasion is the fact that five other species of parrot were also seen nearby along this watercourse; i.e. Galah, Little Corella *Cacatua sanguinea*, Cockatiel *Nymphicus hollandicus*, Budgerigar *Melopsittacus undulatus*, and Port Lincoln Ringneck *Barnardius zonarius*. Such an abundance of parrot species has not previously been recorded by me in such a small section of this region. I attribute it to the exceptionally heavy winter rains of 1978 and the subsequent lush condition of the countryside.

flying up from edge of South Coast road *ca* 1.6 km east of Karatta School, 22 February; six flying northeast fairly high up over South Coast Road *ca* 10 km west of Seal Bay turnoff, 12 March; eight on road 8 km west of Vivonne Bay, 27 March; one near Karatta School, 1 April.

S. A. Parker and A. F. C. Lashmar (pers. obs.): A pair sitting on dirt road bordered by strips of mallee/heath, on the 'Hundred Line road' (Section 161, Hd of Haines) *ca* 18 km southwards by road from Kingscote, 23 November 1979.

J. Anderson (pers. comm.): Several sightings over the last 20 years, in the vicinity of Kangaroo Lagoon and in the Karatta-Grassdale district, not every year but always in late summer.

R. Ellis (pers. comm.): Several sightings during summer of 1978-79, on his property 'The Ravine', near head of Ravine des Casoars on northern boundary of Flinders Chase NP; mostly of pairs or small groups flying over calling but once of a pair perched within tall dense Sugar Gum woodland along the Ravine des Casoars creek.

Observations on the birdlife of Kangaroo Island are available from all seasons. This being so, the dates of the above records tend to suggest that *N. elegans* is a visitor to Kangaroo Island in late November-early April, presumably from the opposite mainland. It is likely too that the species breeds on the Island, for the nearby breeding populations of the southern Mount Lofty Ranges are on eggs in October-December. Moreover, the latter populations begin post-breeding dispersal in February-March, too late for them to be the source of the majority of birds occurring on Kangaroo Island.

We return to Sutton's (1926: 265) tentative sighting of an Elegant Parrot on the Eleanor River on 28 January 1926. He wrote: 'From the coloration I thought it was *N. elegans*, but was not sure.' The species most easily confused with *N. elegans* is the Blue-winged Parrot *N. chrysostoma*, so far not reported from Kangaroo Island. However, it is unlikely to have been the latter, whose post-breeding movements take place from late March to October (Parker 1980 and in prep.). Another unlikely possibility is the Rock Parrot *N. petrophila*, which is much duller than either of the two preceding species, and which Sutton recorded in addition to his possible *N. elegans*.

A few words require now to be said about the status of the Rock Parrot on Kangaroo Island. Ford (1979: 109) stated that it certainly bred, citing Lashmar (1937), who wrote: 'This species is often seen on the rougher parts of the coastline. The birds are found in pairs or small parties, and are fairly tame, especially in the hot weather.' Ford's inference that the Rock Parrot bred on the Island was, understandably, drawn from the title of Lashmar's article: 'Nesting activities in the eastern portion of Kangaroo Island. Season 1936-7.' Nevertheless, there are no breeding records of this species from the Island, and available evidence suggests that the bird is a regular post-breeding visitor in January-September from its breeding grounds on smaller offshore islands (Parker & Cox 1978: 198, Lashmar pers. comm., Baxter pers. obs.).

In summary, we suggest that *N. elegans* is a regular but hitherto largely overlooked visitor to Kangaroo Island from the opposite mainland in late November-early April, with breeding highly likely but so far not reported. *N. petrophila* appears to be a non-breeding visitor in January-September. *N. chrysostoma* has so far not been reported from the Island but may occasionally occur during its regular post-breeding dispersal to Eyre Peninsula, Yorke Peninsula and the North-East of South Australia in March-October. Considering the timing of the seasonal movements of these three species, it is likely that the unidentified *Neophema* seen by Cleland (1926: 237) between the Vivonne Bay district and Kingscote on 20 November 1924, was *N. elegans*.

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C. Baxter, Flinders Chase National Park, K.I., 5223.

S. A. Parker, South Australian Museum, Adelaide, 5000.