

Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos feeding on Common Stork's Bill *Erodium cicutarium*

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The Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo *Zanda funerea* occurs throughout south-eastern Australia west to Eyre Peninsula, with closely related taxa in south-west Western Australia. Its diet is relatively well known and includes both native and introduced seeds. Dawson's (1994) review reported that *Z. funerea* fed on an enormous variety of native and exotic seeds and flowers, but rarely on the ground.

The Common Stork's Bill (Wild Geranium or Corkscrew Grass) *Erodium cicutarium* is a common annual weed to about 20 cm high in temperate pastures throughout the world including Australia (Jessop and Toelken 1986). After flowering it produces a fruit with five seeds each about 10 mm x 1 mm, surmounted by a long (10 cm) straight awn. When ripe the seeds separate and the awns spiral, drilling the seed into the soil. There are several other species of *Erodium*, both native and introduced, that are common in grassy habitats in South Australia, although *E. cicutarium* produces the most prolific and largest fruit.

On the morning of 27 September 2009, I observed fifteen *Z. funerea* on the ground in a paddock about 5 km SW of Victor Harbor on Fleurieu Peninsula. The group comprising both adult males and females was scattered over about 20 m. I approached via a nearby shelter belt to within 20 m and watched for about 10 minutes without disturbing the birds. The pasture was unimproved with predominantly Capeweed *Arctotheca calendula*, clovers *Trifolium* spp. and *E. cicutarium*. The cockatoos walked to each plant and either bit off the immature fruits of *E. cicutarium*, or occasionally first held the fruit with the left foot. The fruit was held sideways in the bill with the awn clearly

visible, then rotated by the bill to extract the unripe seeds. Several Galahs *Eolophus roseicapilla* were also feeding on *E. cicutarium* in a similar manner nearby. I had previously seen a flock of about forty *Z. funerea* on the ground nearby on 1 October 2007, but was unable to determine what the birds were doing. Up to 50 *Z. funerea* regularly visit this area to feed on the seed of pines (*Pinus radiata*) or less often on wood-boring grubs extracted from the stems of Drooping Sheoaks *Allocasuarina verticillata*. I have also observed *Z. funerea* feeding on the ground, extracting seeds from partly consumed discarded cones under pine trees.

Higgins (1999) lists *Erodium* seed in the diet of most parrots and cockatoos that occur in temperate southern Australia. In Western Australia, the Short-billed or Carnaby's Black Cockatoo *Z. latirostris* regularly feeds on *Erodium* seed, particularly in the more developed farming districts (Saunders 1980). In some areas it is the cockatoo's main food when seeding (September to October), although due to its short fruiting period was of limited use to rear nestlings (Saunders 1977). On Kangaroo Island, Baxter (2015) noted *Z. funerea* on the ground eating both seed-heads of 'Corkscrew Grass' (*Erodium* sp.) and excavated corms of Guildford Grass *Romulea rosea*. L. Pedler (pers. comm.) also saw *Z. funerea* feeding on unripe *Erodium* near Eleanor River on Kangaroo Island in September 1995; he also observed them in September-October in several subsequent years in the same paddocks and in the vicinity of Kingscote, where they were assumed to be feeding again on unripe *Erodium*. Another instance was reported in Dawson (1994) by Mr B. Vogel of *Z. funerea* feeding on immature seeds of *E. cicutarium* near Bordertown in the South East of SA. Lendon (1973) saw a flock of

over one hundred feeding on the ground near the western entrance of Flinders Chase National Park, Kangaroo Island in April 1965, but did not report what was eaten. It is unlikely that *Erodium* seed would have been available at that time of year.

The observations reported here add to our knowledge of the range of introduced plants in South Australia exploited as food by *Z. funerea*, which help to supplement its limited and dwindling supply of native foods.

During its short fruiting period *Erodium cicutarium* provides a source of seed for a wide variety of parrots and cockatoos in temperate Australia, including *Z. funerea*. However, this species is generally regarded as a pasture weed and is easily reduced or eliminated by more intense pasture management or tillage.

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