



## Black Cockatoos

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Among the most fascinating and majestic of our birds are the black cockatoos. The six species that fall into this descriptive group have colonised almost every area of Australia, adapting to a wide range of climates and landscapes. Few sights are more rewarding to the naturalist than seeing a party of these birds circling and wheeling high in the air, before descending on a stand of eucalypts or casuarinas.

### Introduction

The black cockatoos are divided into three genera — *Probosciger*, *Calyptorhynchus* and *Callocephalon*. All are characterised by a dark or black body, strong beak and legs and feet well adapted for gripping.

Nesting is carried out high in a tree, in a hollow limb, where one or two eggs are laid. Incubation is undertaken by the female, who is fed by the male during her time at the nest.

The young, when they hatch, are naked and helpless, and will stay in the nest for about 10-12 weeks before venturing into the outside world.

Large numbers of black cockatoos were taken for the pet trade before controls were introduced. Generally, the young were removed from the nest and raised by hand.

If the nest was inaccessible, then the whole tree was cut down — a practice which effectively diminished the supply of nesting sites for future seasons. Today, the black cockatoos are fully protected, but destruction of habitat is still a threat as more areas are cleared for agriculture.

### Palm Cockatoo (*Probosciger aterrimus*)

#### King with a strong beak

The king of Australian parrots is without doubt the Palm Cockatoo, *Probosciger aterrimus*, of Cape York. It is the only member of the genus, and is also called the Goliath Cockatoo — quite appropriate considering its size and strength.

Individuals have been measured at nearly 70cm-10cm bigger than the familiar Sulphur-crested Cockatoo!

The beak of the Palm Cockatoo is incredibly strong. Captive specimens quickly shred metal containers and have been known to bend cyclone wire fencing, the only material strong enough to restrain them.

Handling these birds is obviously a risky business and several fingers are known to have been parted from their careless owners. In the wild, the massive beak is an essential tool in extracting the seeds of the [pandanus palm](#), which lie deep inside a protective cover.

The Palm Cockatoo is distinguished by its glossy black plumage, large crest, and a naked cheek patch which blushes to a bright red when the bird becomes excited. Distribution is confined to the rainforests of Cape York, some off-shore islands and New Guinea.



## Breeding birds secretive

Pandanus seeds make up a great deal of the Palm Cockatoos' diet, but they also feed on nuts, fruit, leaf buds and wood-boring larvae. This liking for larvae is common among the black cockatoos and is another reason for the strong beaks.

The larvae may be several centimetres inside a tree and a good deal of strength and dexterity is required to extract the tasty morsel.

The nesting habits of the Palm Cockatoo have not been studied greatly although generally quite approachable; during the breeding season the bird becomes intensely secretive. This lack of knowledge has hampered attempts to breed the Palm Cockatoo in captivity, something essential for its survival.

Habitat loss has already diminished its range and any further significant clearing of the rainforests could see it wiped out.

**Palm Cockatoo (*Probosciger aterrimus*)**. Queensland Government - Department of Environment and Heritage Protection.

**Palm Cockatoo - Australian Wildlife Conservancy**. What is AWC doing? AWC undertakes early dry season burning program at Piccaninny Plains to reduce the incidence of hot wildfires later in the year which have the potential to destroy nest trees of Palm Cockatoos. AWC currently supports research into ecology, population dynamics and genetics of this species.

**Palm Cockatoo *Probosciger aterrimus***. World Parrot Trust Projects. "Habitat alteration and nest tree loss threatens species. About one-quarter of all Palm Cockatoo (*Probosciger aterrimus*) nest trees have been removed in Iron Range National Park, Cape York."

**Palm Cockatoo Husbandry Manual 1998**. Published by Caloosahatchee Aviary and Botanical Gardens and the International Aviculturists Society.

**Palm Cockatoo EEP Husbandry Manual**. Adapted by Cathy King and Roger Wilkinson from the SSP Manual with kind permission of Mike Taylor. *Published: 2006, The North of England Zoological Society.*

## Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus funereus*)

### New source of food

Fortunately the position of the other black cockatoos is more secure. One, the Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo, *Calyptorhynchus funereus*, has even benefited from European settlement. Although it has suffered from habitat loss, pine plantations have given it a new and expansive source of food.

An inhabitant of eastern Australia from Central Queensland to the Eyre Peninsula in South Australia, the Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo favours well watered areas that support large tracts of forest.

It is, perhaps, the best known of the black cockatoos; and its large dark brown and black body, yellow cheek patch and characteristic yellow band across the tail are unmistakable.

The Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo was one of the first known to early settlers and earned the name of "funeral cockatoo" because of its dark plumage and long drawn out whistle — a call that gave it the Aboriginal name of wylah.

The famous naturalist, **John Gould**, noted that its flight was 'rather powerful, but at the same time laboured and heavy'. When feeding, however, it displays exceptional talents of strength and agility, being equally adroit at dissecting pine cones for their seeds and extracting grubs from infested trees.



**Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus funereus*)**. ASNSW article by Glenn Matheson.

**Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus funereus*)**. NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. "The yellow-tailed black cockatoo is one of the largest species of parrot. With dusty-black plumage, they have a yellow tail and cheek patch. They're easily spotted while bird watching, as they feed on seeds in native forests and pine plantations." Conservation Status: Protected.

**Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus funereus*)**. Science and Technology Innovations Centre | Bacchus Marsh. Ecolinc - Biodiversity of the Western Volcanic Plains. Details, Distribution, Audio, Public Sightings and Conservation Status.

# White-tailed Black Cockatoo (*C. baudinii*)

## Birds 'brought' rain

A close relative of the Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo is the White-tailed Black Cockatoo, *C. baudinii* (photo courtesy of [Wikipedia Commons](#)), of southwest Western Australia. In fact, the two are so similar that some ornithologists choose to treat them as one species. This move, however, has not gained widespread acceptance, as there are some distinctions between the two.

The White-tailed Black Cockatoo has a white cheek patch and white bars across the tail. It often moves about in large flocks, while the Yellow-tailed species is seen in small groups of two to 10 birds. The White-tailed species has also adapted to the drier areas, as well as the wetter, forested districts, giving rise to a variation within the species.

Forest birds tend to have a longer, narrower beak to extract seeds from their capsules, while birds of the dry inland tend to have a shorter, heavier beak to crush the cones of banksias and hakeas.

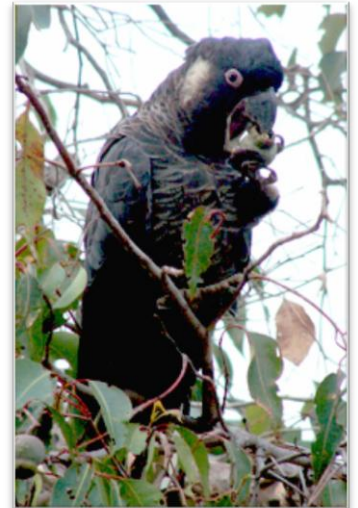
During the summer months the long-billed birds often congregate in large flocks in forested areas, returning once again to the inland before the winter rains.

Aboriginals and white settlers knew of this movement and looked forward to the birds' approach as a signal of the coming rains. Aboriginals, who called the White-tailed Black Cockatoo "Ngol-yë-nuk" and even included a few of its feathers in rain-making ceremonies.

## Living pesticides

The Yellow-tailed and White-tailed Black Cockatoos share a liking for pine seeds and at times thousands can be seen blanketing a forest, grabbing a pine cone in one foot and clinging to a swaying stem with the other.

Foresters at first saw the birds' depredation on pine cones as a threat to the industry, but realised that the birds' habit of dropping a large number of unopened cones to the ground would make seed collection a much easier task. Both species do the timber industry a great service by feeding on wood-boring larvae. A good deal of timber is saved and the spread of these pests is slowed significantly simply by allowing these cockatoos to take the place of harmful pesticides.



[Forest Black Cockatoo \(Baudin's Cockatoo \*C. baudinii\* and Forest Red-tailed Black Cockatoo \*C. banksii naso\*\) Recovery Plan.](#)  
Government of Western Australia - Department of Environment and Conservation.

# Red-tailed Black Cockatoo (*C. banksii*)

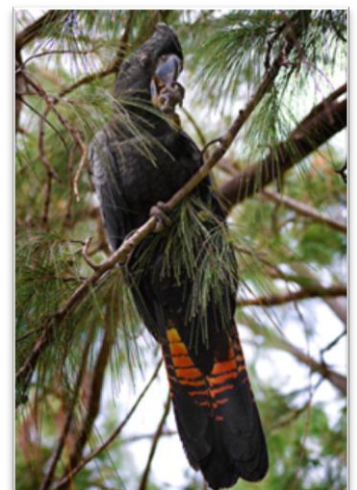
## Seed-eating nomads

The most widespread of the black cockatoos is the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo, *C. banksii* (for many years known as *C. magnificus* - as originally referred to in this article in 1993) (photo courtesy of [Wikipedia Commons](#)), a highly nomadic bird which ranges, at various times, across northern Australia, into western Victoria and east to Adelaide. It is about the same size as the Yellow-tailed and White-tailed species — 50-60cm.

The body is black, males being considerably darker than females and possessing the distinctive red tail bars. Females have yellow-orange tail bars and yellow flecks on the head and shoulders.

Although wooded areas are preferred by this species, it is not averse to feeding on the ground in more open areas and often helps in the control of certain pasture weeds, such as the [doublegee](#), *Emex Australis*.

Seeds, particularly [casuarina](#), [marri](#) and [hakea](#) are commonly eaten and at times the birds will also take nectar and berries.



The Red-tailed Black Cockatoo has the distinction of being the first Australian parrot to be sketched by a European. In 1770, the draughtsman, [Sydney Parkinson](#), assistant to [Sir Joseph Banks](#) on the [HMS Endeavour](#), made a pencil sketch, but unfortunately the intended painting was never completed.

[Forest Red-tailed Black Cockatoo, \*C. banksii\*](#). Government of Western Australia - Western Australia Museum.

[South-eastern Red-tailed Black Cockatoo](#). Threatened Species Network - a community-based programme of the Australian Government and WWF-Australia.

[Husbandry Guidelines for Red-tailed Black Cockatoo \(\*Calyptorhynchus banksii\*\)](#). Aves: Cacatuidae. Compiler: Sam Bennett. Date of Preparation: 9/6/08. Western Sydney Institute of TAFE, Richmond Course Name and Number: Captive Animals Certificate III 1068. Lecturers: Graeme Phipps, Jacki Salkeld, Brad Walker, Andrew Titmuss.

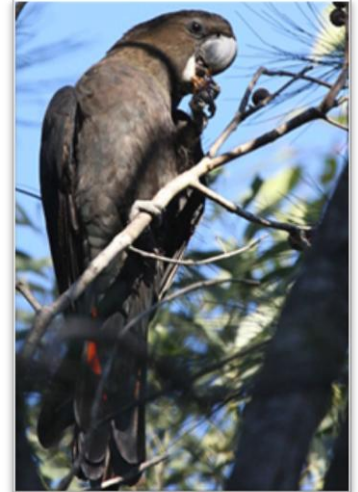
## Glossy Black Cockatoo (*C. lathami*)

### Obsessed about diet

Often confused with the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo is the Glossy Black cockatoo, *C. lathami* (photo courtesy of [Wikipedia Commons](#)); at a distance, the two are quite similar. Close observation is difficult, as it is a shy and suspicious bird, but when examined at close range the differences between the two become apparent.

The Glossy Black Cockatoo is about 5-10cm smaller than its counterpart and the female has a more yellow head. In addition, the Glossy Black Cockatoo does not have a crest — the only black cockatoo without this feature.

The Glossy Black Cockatoo is also known as the Casuarina Cockatoo, because of its almost exclusive preference for seeds of the casuarina tree. This preference becomes obsessive in captivity and thwarted early attempts by aviculturists to breed them.



It was not until the late [Sir Edward Hallstrom](#), Chairman of the Taronga Zoo Trust, went to great lengths in 1954 that success was achieved. Hallstrom was plagued by a lack of casuarina trees - a problem which today confronts the Glossy Black Cockatoo in the wild. He and his employees had to drive many miles each day in search of suitable seeds.

Attempts at preserving the Glossy Black Cockatoo in the wild centre around re-establishing large stands of casuarinas, such as on Kangaroo Island, off the South Australian coast.

[Glossy Black Cockatoo \*C. lathami\*](#). NSW Government - Office of Environment and Heritage. "Since European colonisation, a major threat to the survival of the glossy black-cockatoo is habitat loss - the clearing of casuarina trees in woodland areas, and the loss of mature eucalypts for nest hollows. The Riverina in NSW is one area in the bird's range that has suffered a major decline in population due to the removal of habitat. There has also been evidence to suggest that some glossy black-cockatoos from this region have been trapped for the illegal bird trade."

## Gang-Gang Cockatoo (*Callocephalon Fimbriatum*)

### Trips to Tasmania

One of the more spectacular of the black cockatoos, and the most confiding, is the Gang-Gang Cockatoo, *Callocephalon Fimbriatum*. It is in a genus on its own, like the Palm Cockatoo, but its dark plumage places it under the general heading of black cockatoos.

It is the smallest of the group, 35cm, with white edging on its grey feathers. The male is distinguished by a bright red head and crest; the female lacks this bold marking.

Gang-Gangs inhabit the southeast corner of Australia, occasionally making vagrant crossings of [Bass Strait](#) to [King Island](#) and [Tasmania](#). Mountain forests and valleys are preferred, especially during the breeding season, after which many birds move into the lowlands for the winter months.



## Soft berries preferred

Suburban areas have opened up new feeding possibilities for the Gang-Gang and it relishes a meal of soft berries. Gang-Gangs also eat the seeds of [eucalypts](#) and [acacias](#) and the larvae of various moths and insects.

The sight of a party of Gang-Gangs foraging among snow-laden branches is in stark contrast to the majesty of a Palm Cockatoo soaring high above the rainforest canopy, and bears testimony to the marvellous success of our black cockatoos.



**[Gang-Gang Cockatoo - Profile](#)**. NSW Government - Office of Environment and Heritage. "Gang-gang Cockatoos are one of the more distinctive and charismatic members of Australia's avifauna. These birds are primarily slate-grey, with the males easily identified by their scarlet head and wispy crest, while females have a grey head and crest and feathers edged with salmon pink on the underbelly. They range in length from 32 to 37 cm, with a wingspan of 62 to 76 cm. The call has been likened to a creaking gate or cork being pulled from a bottle."

**[NSW Scientific Committee - Gang-gang Cockatoo \*Callocephalon fimbriatum\*](#)**. Review of Current Information in NSW. December 2008.

**[Gang-gang Cockatoo, \*Callocephalon fimbriatum\*](#)**. NSW Government - Office of Environment and Heritage. "Gang-gang cockatoo population, Hornsby and Ku-ring-gai Local Government Areas - endangered population listing. NSW Scientific Committee - final determination."

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