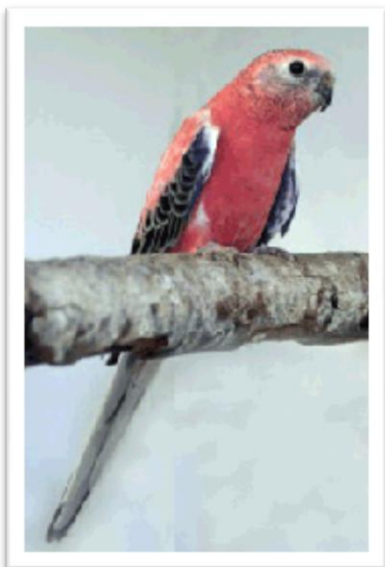




Bringing Up Bourke's Parrots First Experiences

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Bourke's Parrot
Rosa Cock (Mutation)
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Charming, delightful, inoffensive, docile - such are the adjectives that have been used to describe the Bourke's parrot. Having now held these birds in my aviary for over a year, I find I must agree.

My interest in this [Neophema](#) was first stimulated after encountering a hen bird which was kept as a cage pet. Enthusiastically she would greet her owners with pleasantly soft call notes which were firmly entrenched at the lower end of the decibel scale - a characteristic which instantly appealed after being greeted for a number of years by the early morning heraldings of a pet Galah! The pet Bourke had adapted well to cage life having spent the past fourteen years in captivity. In her fourteenth year she presented her owners with a clutch of five eggs - and this without the courtly attentions of a cock bird to encourage her to such credible efforts.

At about the same time I was on the market for some birds to occupy the aviaries that had come with a recently purchased house. A quick consultation with various parrot books unveiled the above adjectives describing the species temperament, coupled with a number of assertions which attested to the ease with which these parrots would breed in captivity. So it was that I purchased my first Bourke's Parrots and tentatively ventured into the fascinating world of aviculture. The first steps in this direction however, proved somewhat shaky.

The birds were housed in aviaries 4 metres long, 1.5 metres wide and 2 metres high. Despite the provision of a 2 metre deep sheltered area, the birds would stubbornly roost in the open flight at night in the foulest weather. They would also choose to bathe at the most inappropriate time - usually in the cold and driving rain of the infamous southerly buster. I began to question the point of providing this shelter area for my ungrateful menagerie until one day I was gratified to find the shelters fully occupied - during the warm and sunny part of the day! The first winter saw the loss of three birds from chills and pneumonia and further weatherproofing is under way for the coming winter.

Notwithstanding this early setback, two pairs remained as the breeding season approached. Towards the end of July, nest boxes containing peat moss were placed in the shelters. Courtship behaviour commenced and both pairs went to nest early in August. The fact that two identical boxes were placed in one of the aviaries did not deter the female from making a diligent and thorough inspection of both. After much to-ing and fro-ing by this conscientious little hen, and the flying about of prodigious quantities of peat moss, a nest site was duly selected... much to the relief of her ardent mate patiently waiting his companion's decision.

Nest inspections by both pairs were conducted in the morning. Neither pair were ever observed performing this behaviour in the afternoon or evening. The eggs were laid on the bare floor of the nest box in a corner excavated by the female. During the egg laying period, the female would occupy the nest during the morning and emerge in the afternoon and evening, suggesting that the eggs were laid during these morning occupations.

One pair laid three eggs of which only one hatched and the second pair scored four hatched from four laid. It was then expected that the females would behave according to Bourke's protocol and brood closely for the first 8-12 days. However from the day after hatching, the female would spend considerable time outside the nest during the day - so much so I despaired at the hatchlings ability to survive such casual attentions from its parents. Fortunately, the female brooded at night for the first 10-12 days. Feeding was conscientiously performed by both parents and 27-28 days after hatching the short-tailed, yellow mandibled versions of the adult fledged successfully. Thirteen days later they were removed from their parents and hopes were high for a second clutch from each pair.

The female which had hatched only one chick in her first attempt, laid a second clutch of two eggs and commenced incubating before the first chick had fledged. When it finally left the nest box, the male competently assumed the duties of feeding the fledgling.

The second pair had laid their first eggs within two weeks of the fledgling of the first chick and proceeded to lay six eggs, of which three hatched, two were infertile and one contained a dead chick. One of the two that was laid by the first pair eventually hatched.

Meanwhile ominous signs were starting to appear in both aviaries. As I quite frequently reflected upon the pink and grey feathers that swirled about in the midsummer breeze, the thought crossed my mind that the birds had commenced moulting - smack in the middle of the breeding cycle.

In both pairs this time, the females did brood closely for 10 days. However, from inspection of the nest box it appeared that the 10 day old chicks were not developed enough to sustain the necessary warmth and though they were being fed, they became badly chilled. Three died and one was removed for hand rearing. The moult became heavier and all breeding activity ceased. Oh well, better luck next time was my initial reaction.

Much to my surprise, after the moult was complete (mid February), both pairs commenced courtship procedures anew and each laid a clutch of four eggs.

Unfortunately one clutch proved infertile but from the second clutch, four chicks hatched and were reared successfully, the last one leaving the nest on May 1, fledging after 23, 30, 31 and 33 days. This clutch was brooded by the female very closely for the first 10 days, with the female merging only briefly in the morning and evening to feed and be fed. On day 11 and 12 most of the day was spent outside the nest box with the female returning at night. After day 12, the chicks were on their own day and night as far as warmth was concerned and managed quite nicely. The nest box was inspected each morning without undue concern from the parents and the chicks were always warm and well fed. The chicks were fed by both parents, usually entering one after the other, but occasionally both entering at the same time.

I found [silverbeet](#) to be a favoured food while the chicks were being reared and so I placed a potted plant in the aviary to ensure a continuous supply. The birds systematically attacked the stalk of the plant until only a few frayed and tired looking fibres remained attaching a dejected looking leaf to the rest of the plant. They would then proceed to demolish the next stalk, barely touching the leaf and considerably shortening the life expectancy of a plant otherwise known for its longevity in the home vegetable plot. It can of course be removed and allowed to regenerate. It is also a good idea to remove the wilted parts of the plant as they appear.

Seeding summer grass ([Ditaria sanguinalis](#)), [corn on the cob](#), apple and grain bread were all eaten in varying amounts depending upon the whims and inclinations of the parents.

Large quantities of [sunflower](#) were also consumed during the rearing period.

From these first experiences with the Bourke's Parrot I have found that there can be more variation between pairs of birds and even between clutches of the same pair. In one pair of birds, the male courtship display and feeding was conspicuous and frequent, in the second pair, much less so. The female would sometimes emit calls while being fed by the male, at other times this would not occur. The male would generally call the female from the nest and feed her on a perch in the flight. During the brooding of chicks I have seen the male enter the nest presumably to feed the female. It appears that in some cases incubation does not commence until the laying of the last egg as in both clutches of four, all hatchlings were of the same size. Clutches can overlap but whether this occurs only when the first clutch is small I cannot say. One group of four fledglings was very docile on leaving the nest and could be picked off the perch without attempting to move. A second clutch of four from the same pair would fly awkwardly when the aviary was entered.

Though [Lendon](#), in his book "Australian Parrots in Field and Aviary", states the Bourke's are not known to plunge bath, I have seen them do this on a number of occasions. The same book also states that members of the *Noephema* genus do not indulge in mutual preening and so I was rather surprised to see one of the females attempt to preen her mate. He disdainfully rejected her advances, quickly moving out of beaks way. I later observed her preening one of her recently fledged chicks which was engaged in a bit of auto-preening at the time. I have seen her on at least four occasions attempt to preen either her mate or offspring usually without success as the object of her attentions generally moves away. So there can always be exceptions to the general behaviour patterns expected for the species and it is this variability which adds so much to the interest of aviculture. As to the nature of the Bourkes, I do find it to be a friendly creature, curious about its surroundings and deserving of its reputation.

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