



The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

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The Hooded Parakeet (Psephotus Dissimilis)

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By Mrs Falkner J Blaxland

The Hooded Parakeet *Psephotus Dissimilis* is a native of the Northern Territory and is exclusive to that part of Australia. It is generally seen in pairs or small flocks inhabiting open forest lands and spinifex country, where it is usually observed on the ground feeding on the seeds of grasses and other plants.

This beautiful parakeet is very often mistaken for the Golden-shouldered Parakeet. The hooded is lovelier and by far the better known. The word *Psephotus* is a Greek word which means "inlaid with pebbles". The originator had in mind that although the group were uniform in build they differed greatly in colour pattern and taken as a group resembled somewhat the colourful mosaic design adopted by the Greeks. The group comprises seven species indigenous to Australia. They are:- the Red-backed or Grass Parrot, known as the "Grassie"; the Mulga, or as it is commonly known in parts, the Many coloured; the Blue Bonnet and the Little Blue Bonnet or "Naretha"; the Hooded; the Golden-shouldered and the Paradise Parrot. The latter is the most beautiful of the family and is now almost extinct.



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The size of this family is between the Rosella and the Neophema group; they are all grass seed eaters. The Red-backed, Many-coloured, Blue Bonnet and the "Naretha", all choose hollows in the limbs and trunks of trees to build their nests, whilst the three rarer species the Hooded, Golden-shouldered and the Paradise, prefer the termite mounds which are peculiar to their habitats.

The Hooded is slim and has a relatively long tail; there is a very marked difference between sexes. The adult male has a black head, which commences on the forehead and extends to the back of the neck; its name is derived from this hood. The back is a dark greyish-brown; the upper wing coverts rich yellow; rump and upper tail coverts turquoise blue; central tail feathers bronze green, becoming blackish at the tips; under tail coverts salmon red margined with white. The hinder face, sides of the neck, throat, breast, abdomen, sides of the body and under wing coverts are turquoise blue. Neville Calyley in "Australian Parrots" calls it turquoise; Dr Alan Lendon describes it as a vivid bluish green in his book "Parrots in Captivity". I have noticed this colour alters in appearance in different lights. The bill is greyish white; legs and feet a mealy brown. The average length in the flesh is about eleven inches.

The colouring of the adult female is mainly yellowish olive green with a pale bluish tinge on the cheeks, lower breast, abdomen and rump. The under tail coverts are salmon tipped with white as in the male.

The immature birds almost exactly resemble the female apart from the yellowish beak, which later changes to a horn colour. Hoodeds, whether trapped or aviary bred, seem to come into breeding condition in autumn.

I purchased my first pair of Hoodeds in August, 1951. They went to nest later in March, 1953; four eggs were laid and four chicks were duly hatched and reared, two hens, two cocks.

Early in August the hen commenced a second clutch, five eggs being laid; one chick was hatched and reared, a cock.

In 1955 there were two nests; five eggs in each, and two chicks were hatched and reared in each nest. The incubation period takes 21 days and the young birds leave the nest in approximately 28 days, when they are fully feathered. Incubation is carried out by the hen. The male takes no part in it, except to feed the hen whilst on the nest. It is difficult to accurately sex immature birds, although some show brighter blue cheek patches.

Both parents feed the young and after they leave the nest, continue to feed them for about four weeks; although they are quite capable of fending for themselves soon after leaving the nest. After about a month the parents become very intolerant of their presence and then they have to be removed. Two clutches are usual in a season, but occasionally there are three.

The youngsters are lovely and very playful; they have great fun with a ping-pong ball, which I give them to play with. Towards the end of November the parents begin their moult. The young Hoodeds undergo a moult of body feathers when about three or four months old. Young males do not begin to assume adult plumage for some considerable time and the transition is not completed until they are about fifteen or eighteen months old.

The nest I use is an elongated box type, 14" x 9 1/2" x 6 1/2" with a hinged lid and spout; decayed wood is used for nestlings; the nest is hung in the front part of the shelter.

The aviaries are wood construction for flights, fibro shelters, roof corrugated fibro; they are approximately 12 feet x 6 feet x 5 feet, with an earth floor. Ti-tree is placed in the aviary and renewed from time to time. This is hung in the front part of the shelter; it is essential to have twiggy branches for them.

They have access to iodine nibbles, cuttle bone, charcoal, grit, sand, rock salt, roots and piece of decayed wood, which they spend a lot of time chewing. Their seed is a mixture of six parts Hungarian millet, one part Jap, two parts white, two parts plain canary, hulled oats, rape and linseed, half a pint each. Plenty of green feed and seeded grasses, including milk thistles, dandelion heads, chickweed, also carrot, apple, orange, red *crataegus* (common Hawthorn) berries. When they are feeding their young they eat large amounts of green peas.

During the mating season the display of the Hooded is very pleasing. The cock alights with great ceremony on the perch near the hen or follows her along the ground in a series of exaggerated hops, the shoulders being simultaneously depressed and the feathers on the head erected in the form of a tiny crest. He also puffs the feathers on his lower breast so that they stand out separately and performs graceful short flights around the hen, holding himself very upright, alighting and walking with a great deal of dignity.

The Hooded is a hardy and most attractive aviary bird, but quite unsuitable in a mixed selection on account of its pugnacity. In Neville Cayley's "Australian Parrots", under "Aviary Notes" it is stated: "The Hooded is quite unsuited to cage life." Also Tavistock says "No parakeet suffers more quickly from the effects of very close confinement, even six months in a cage on hard perches will produce overgrown and deformed bill and toe nails, wry tail feathers and a general sad disfigurement.

The Hooded and its kin excavate nesting tunnels in termite mounds or anthills. The plains in which these birds live are sparsely timbered and are from four to twelve feet high and from eighteen inches to ten feet in diameter. The birds burrow into the mound to a depth of about one foot and about three-quarters of the way from the bottom of the mound. The entrance is just large enough for the bird to enter, but the nest itself is about six inches in diameter. The eggs are laid on the dirt of the ant-bed.

It is interesting to note that any break or exposure of the anthills upsets their air-conditioning circuits and disastrously affects them; and must be urgently and promptly repaired by the termites. If the hard, sunbaked clay-like outer wall of the mound is broken, a host of brown coloured termites will be found. These are the workers; the white termites are blind and can only live confined to darkness.

The tough, brown skinned worker can see and face the outside world. His work is to build, and to repair any breaks; he is as indispensable to the nesting birds as to the white ants. The birds excavate the burrow, but the brown termites make it habitable for them by repairing the break and thus sealing off the nesting chamber. Thus the birds and the termites share the same abode and each enjoy its own privacy.

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