



## The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

(Founding in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)

### Aviculturist of the Month

**Les Clayton**

**Head Bird Keeper at Taronga Park Zoo**

**Interviewed by Joelle Dunbar, Mike Canon and Terry Atkinson**

*(The Avicultural Review August 1985 Vol. 7 No. 8)*

*Les Clayton is well known to many of you. He is the Head Bird Keeper at [Taronga Park Zoo](#). He is in great demand for interviews and we would like to extend to him our thanks for making the time to speak to us. The Editorial Panel.*

Extract from "[Postcards from the Zoo](#)" by Darill Clements

Available on Google Books as a Google eBook

From Chapter 5 "Dancing with Brolgas"

*Australia is so fortunate to have more than 670 different species of birds that breed in or regularly visit this country, and Taronga Zoo has long had a commitment to displaying as wide a variety of those species as possible as well as birds from other lands.*

*Taronga has also had a long history of exceptional bird specialists whose aviculture and ornithological knowledge has been envied around the world and their commitment to their feathered charges absolute. Their desire to share with Zoo visitors this passion for birds has ensured that Taronga's aviaries have always been little centres of excellence in zoo keeping and display.*

*Les Clayton was the "Bird Man of Taronga" for over 40 years and had been at the Zoo for about 25 of those when I arrived in 1975. I always thought of him as our 'national treasure' and a Zoo 'tribal elder'. Everyone loved Les of the twinkling blue eyes and cheeky smile. He was a gentle and quiet man, who not only toiled long and hard for the benefit of Taronga's bird collection but also found time to answer pleas for help from all over Sydney to rescue native birds in distress any time of the day or night.*

*I got to know and rely on Les right from the beginning of my Zoo days. It was Les I would turn to for advice on the many phone calls from members of the public that I handled through Taronga's Animal Enquiries service. This daily telephone service, now operated by Zoo Friends Volunteers, gives the community an opportunity to contact Taronga and receive advice on countless numbers of wildlife problems and issues ranging from animal identification and the care of orphaned native animals to the removal of pesky possums in the roof or, alternatively, how to attract them and other wildlife to your garden.*

*Being the dispenser of this twice daily dose of vital information was a steep and sudden learning curve for me as I began my Zoo career from a zero animal knowledge base. Although I relied heavily on the 'Zoo Bible' – a loose-leaf folder of helpful animal hints compiled and added to over the years perhaps by from struggling public relations officers – I soon learned that I could rely on dear Les Clayton for all manner of answers to birdie questions. He was always available and nothing was ever a trouble.*

*Initially, along with my Animal Enquiries duties, I also had to carry out the Zoo's Animal Reception tasks and was the repository for the daily stream of sick, injured or orphaned native animals that members of the public brought to Taronga for care. These animals were usually victims of cat or dog attacks, road accidents, or other miscellaneous urban perils.*

*Many birds were accident victims and found their way to my office. It was Les who came to collect them. His comforting hands would soothe the injured bird as he helped me, in my early days, to identify each species and fill out the dreaded arrival form before the patient was put in a box or, more often than not, tucked safely inside "Les's khaki shirt and taken off to the Zoo Veterinary Hospital or Les's 'outpatients' ward in the Bird House for assessment and treatment.*

*I used to look at Les and wonder how anyone could appear so dishevelled so early each morning. His uniform looked like he had slept in it and he always looked like he was covered with birdseed and bird pooh. It wasn't until I visited the Zoo Bird House and saw Les's 'office' that I realised that all of the above was very true. Les often slept the night at the Zoo surrounded by boxes, cages, small aviaries and humidicribs full of newly hatched chicks that needed his intensive care to survive. His bed was a tiny camp stretcher wedged under rows of bird boxes. A restless night by seed-eating birds meant Les started the day covered with seed from head to toe.*

Much of Taronga Zoo's world-recognised reputation for successful bird breeding was a result of Les's dedication and expertise. Les also enjoyed success in his own breeding program as he and his wife, Pat, had seven children but goodness knows how, as Les always spent at least half the year, especially during late winter and spring, at the Zoo hand-raising his feathered 'children'.

The successful hatching of native and exotic birds at Taronga was always a great delight to Les and provided the Zoo with wonderful media opportunities. Photographers and television crews would always flock to Taronga to meet the newly hatched kiwi, brolga or macaw. Les was always so proud of his chicks and the media loved him for his enthusiastic co-operation with their every request at these publicity calls.

ONE PARTICULAR FAVOURITE of Les's was the Blue and Yellow Macaw (*Ara ararauna*) chick that hatched in an incubator in December 1983 and was hand-raised by the doting Les. This bird, which Les named Eleni, was the first Blue and Yellow Macaw ever bred at Taronga Zoo. Macaws are large, brightly coloured parrots from the rainforests of South America and are an endangered species, so this bird was very precious indeed. Apart from the destruction of their habitat, the adult macaw is killed for its feathers and the chicks are often taken for the live bird trade. They attract attention by their vivid colouration and spectacularly strident call. Macaws are large parrots measuring about 90 centimetres and weighing about one kilogram.

Les spoiled Eleni from day one, feeding her every few hours and only giving her the very best tropical fruit and nuts all mashed up and fed from a specially fashioned silver spoon made to resemble her mother's beak.

I have to say I never really warmed to Eleni and I don't think she was too fond of me, either. In fact, I think she went out of her way to cause me grief. As I reflect on my Zoo memories the ones involving Eleni invariably involve angst.

Initially we got on quite well as she was perfectly behaved when she made her media debut as a rather ugly hatchling with a 'five o'clock shadow' of pinfeathers, a huge beak and an extremely loud shriek.

Some months later, the Channel 9 'Midday Show' asked if Eleni and Les could appear live on the program and I saw this as a great opportunity to promote the upcoming Zoo Month. By this time, Eleni was fully coloured, looking resplendent in her blue and yellow flight feathers – and she knew it. We drove in the bird truck to the television station at Willoughby and I don't know how I made it there with my right ear still intact. Les insisted on Eleni travelling freely in the cabin with us and not in a cage in the back like most other birds. She obviously didn't like me being in the truck with Les or was, perhaps, jealous of my gold earrings as she spent the whole trip either shrieking her disapproval or using her can-opener beak to try and prise the gold studs from my ear lobes.

"Postcard from the Zoo" by Darill Clements is available from Google Books as a Google eBook ... [read more about Les and his beloved Eleni](#) ...



... or the day when Eleni went missing ... [Dec 24 1985 Sydney Morning Herald](#) ...

... or about the day when Petrel Peter was released back into the wild by Les after a spell in Taronga Zoo's hospital ... [Sep 3 1968 Sydney Morning Herald](#) ...



(left and centre) Les Clayton with the pet Macaw, Eleni, on his shoulder. Les raised her from an egg.  
(right) Some Sulphur Crested Cockatoos in a section of the Zoo's bird house.

# Interview

**Joelle Dunbar**      **How long have you been at the Zoo?**

Les Clayton      Thirty-seven years. I started off as a boy, only 14 years old. I've been the head Bird Keeper for about fifteen years.

**Joelle Dunbar**      **The area we are in now is the bird room, isn't it?**

Les Clayton      No, actually my office. I sleep here and look after the baby birds here.

**Joelle Dunbar**      **You have quite a reputation for hand-rearing. Could we discuss that for a while?**

Les Clayton      I was the first person to raise a [Kiwi](#) in captivity and I have raised them from the egg. This was probably one of the greatest thrills of my life. I have raised so many types of birds here at the Zoo that I can't remember all the species. A few that stand out in my mind are [Lyrebirds](#), [Brolgas](#), [Condors](#), [Macaws](#), [Victoria Crowned Pigeons](#) and so on and from some of the very small [softbills](#) upwards.

**Joelle Dunbar**      **The most famous would be your Macaw in the cage looking at us now?**

Les Clayton      Yes, she's very affectionate. She's become a favourite of mine. When I hand-raise birds I tend to let them pull on surgical rubber to help them digest their food. Every time I gave her the rubber, she would snap it, so I had to resort to putting a baby's dummy into her mouth when she was very little. This certainly made people give her some funny looks.

**Joelle Dunbar**      **Do you have different formulas for each type of bird?**

Les Clayton      I tend to use a lot of Hi-protein baby cereal as a base. I add different mixtures to this for the different birds and according to their age. The Victoria Crowned Pigeon I am feeding at the moment is fed on a special [pigeon milk](#) made up by the university. I add things like chicken crumbles to it. As they get older I decrease the pigeon milk and make the mixture thicker. Then I wean them onto dry food. They become very quiet from about three weeks old and will follow me around.

Parrots are always fed from a spoon, but birds like the pigeons I use a tube and place the food directly into their crop.

**Mike Canon**      **Could you describe the way you use the surgical rubber?**

Les Clayton      I just stretch it across the box. When a baby parrot is being fed it shakes itself back and forth and I can't do this with the spoon. The bird grasps the surgical rubber in its beak and mimics this movement. This helps with the digestion. Eleni, the Macaw, is eighteen months old now and she still uses her dummy.

**Joelle Dunbar**      **When you are hand raising, do you use any preventative medicines in the mix?**

Les Clayton      We sometimes have a lot of trouble with thrush and I find Mycostatin fixes this. You can tell when the bird is getting this because it becomes very inflamed around the crop. I then use the Mycostatin to treat this.

**Mike Canon**      **During your hand rearing you increase the dose. Do you weigh them as a guide?**

Les Clayton      Yes, I weigh them every day. It's a very good sign that if they are putting on weight each day you know you are being successful.

- Joelle Dunbar**      **When you raise a bird from the egg do you give them a crop wash from the parents?**
- Les Clayton      No, I have never needed to do this. I don't think it is necessary. I find the best thing I can use is my own saliva. This seems to work very well. If I don't spit into the food I find they can't digest as well. I find I really only need to do this with pigeons.
- Mike Canon**      **Have you bothered to test your saliva to see what it contains?**
- Les Clayton      No, but I do know that I am allergic to birds. When I have the flu, I have to find others to spit into the food for me. I started because years ago I used to raise pigeons myself by feeding them from my mouth and I never lost one. Then I became very scientific and used syringes and they were dying so I went back to using saliva, and I haven't lost any more.
- Joelle Dunbar**      **It must be heart breaking when they go out into the aviaries once they are fully raised?**
- Les Clayton      Yes, it can be, but they never forget me. There is one Lyrebird that I hand raised and I may not see her for weeks yet whenever she sees my truck she jumps up and down and goes crazy. She thinks I should be her mate and she grabs me by the leg and tries to drag me to the nest she has made.
- Terry Atkinson**      **I can remember coming here once and there were about 60 young birds. In winter there doesn't seem to be so many?**
- Les Clayton      I spend nearly all spring and summer in here and really only go home in winter. This winter I haven't been home because I have had the Victoria Crowned Pigeon to rear. We were very concerned about him because we lost one of the hens recently and that meant there was only one hen left in Australia, so it was important the young survive.
- Terry Atkinson**      **Les, I am particularly interested in [Raptors](#). Have you had much success hand rearing them?**
- Les Clayton      I really have not had much of an opportunity. I have raised the two Condors and was very pleased with this as the parents were over 40 years old. We are given a lot of orphans that people find on the road and in their backyard, but we don't have a lot of experience with trying to raise them from the egg. There are not a lot of pairs in the Zoo. For instance, we surgically sexed all our Macaws and found that we only have one hen amongst them. This was a sad loss because we have the only [Green-winged Macaws](#) in Australia and they are all males.
- Joelle Dunbar**      **Has the Zoo ever experimented with artificial insemination?**
- Les Clayton      They have with [Crowned Cranes](#) but it was not successful.
- Joelle Dunbar**      **Could you talk about the problem you have with the [Flamingos](#)?**
- Les Clayton      In the wild they breed in large flocks and because we have such a small flock, we tried to mimic a large flock by placing mirrors around them. It was successful in that they went to nest but they are very old and no eggs were produced. The situation is very desperate as they are the only Flamingos in Australia and if they don't breed they will die out. The ones we have now came here in 1948 and they weren't young when they came. There are moves to allow us to import eggs into the country sometime in the future and they will be some of the ones at the top of the list. At present the Government won't allow us to import any birds or eggs at all.
- Mike Canon**      **In your incubator, do you find that you need different temperatures and levels of humidity for different species' eggs?**
- Les Clayton      Yes, it can be very hard in a Zoo because we have small numbers of different types of eggs. I don't have enough incubators to go around all the time. I keep the temperature at about 99.1°F and the humidity at about 85%. This tends to be fairly successful for parrots, pigeons and doves. If I have ducks or any others that need more humidity, I just wet my hand and rub it over the egg.

- Mike Canon**      **How difficult were the Condors to raise?**
- Les Clayton      They were quite easy really. Initially I used the insides of adult mice, then as they grew I used mice pinkies.
- Joelle Dunbar**      **Did you have any guidelines when you began hand rearing?**
- Les Clayton      No, it has all been learnt by trial and error. I find that I am always learning and modifying my techniques. Lately I have been using the Lucky Dog dog food and find they work very well. I put them into hot water and soak them until they are soft. They have a high protein content and I think that plenty of protein is the basis for hand rearing any bird.
- Joelle Dunbar**      **Some people have had problems with using too high a protein level in hand rearing.**
- Les Clayton      Well I have never had that problem.
- Joelle Dunbar**      **Les, has there been a heartbreaking experience with your hand rearing?**
- Les Clayton      Yes, there have been many heartbreaks. The first Kiwi I ever hand raised was accidentally killed when a log rolled onto her and pinned her to the wall of the aviary. I have been here for so long that many of the birds I have known since they were young and it's always sad when one of my old mates dies.
- Joelle Dunbar**      **We are now standing in one of your holding aviaries. What is it used for?**
- Les Clayton      This is where I keep the birds before they go out into the aviaries. Last year I raised 28 [Noisy Pittas](#) from the egg. Many of these have been exchanged with aviculturists. I am quite happy about this because I know the people they have gone to will care for them properly. It also is used as a brooder area for all kinds of birds including Swans and Ducks. The floor is sloped so that it can be filled up with water to any height you want. The floor area is heated and there are Infra-red lights that can be raised or lowered. I think the only problem with this area is that it is a little too dark. I like to have plenty of sunlight and if I don't get the birds out of here they can develop [Rickets](#).
- Joelle Dunbar**      **How many staff do you have in the Bird Section?**
- Les Clayton      There are nine. They are all kept busy as the biggest part is preparing the food for all the birds. All the food is diced at night by hand. We are very busy until about 10 o'clock each morning feeding the birds. Then the cleaning is done.
- Joelle Dunbar**      **How much time is spent checking the nests?**
- Les Clayton      We try not to disturb the birds as much as possible so this is not commonly done. It really does depend upon the species. We have a lot of vandals who come into the Zoo and take eggs so we find we have to collect the eggs more often than we would like. Much of the theft occurs at night.
- Joelle Dunbar**      **Do you have a quarantine section?**
- Les Clayton      We have a Veterinary Block and all the birds stay there for 14 days. They are checked for worms and they do cultures on them.
- Joelle Dunbar**      **Do you carry out any medical checks on the birds on display?**
- Les Clayton      Every three months we go around and collect faeces and they are tested for worms. We have a lot of trouble with worms. They are usually wormed each three months. We check for [Tapeworms](#) and other problems not detected by the tests on droppings by having the birds post-mortemed. [Roundworms](#) seem to be our main problem at the moment.

- Mike Canon**      **What are the main disease problems you have with the birds?**
- Les Clayton      [Salmonella](#) carried by mice and rats, worms and there is a lot of trauma as the birds are easily spooked. Hawk attack occurs occasionally. We have a lot of problems with foxes as well. Over the years we have destroyed 30 foxes at night.
- Joelle Dunbar**      **What vitamin supplements do you use for your birds?**
- Les Clayton      The food is made freshly each day, we use a lot of Pet-Vite, Vetemul. Any bird that is suffering from vitamin deficiency is given vitamin injections.
- Joelle Dunbar**      **With some of the birds where you cannot get new blood, do you have any problems with inbreeding?**
- Les Clayton      No not really. I think you have to get past a certain stage and then they will breed well for you. For instance with the [White-breasted Ground Doves](#), only three of them came to the Zoo so you can imagine how inbred they are, yet there are hundreds of them in their enclosure now.
- Terry Atkinson**      **I have heard that you can breed brother to sister for nine generations and the only problem you will have is that the clutch size will decrease. What do you think?**
- Les Clayton      Yes, I would agree with that. You won't lose size or colour but if the normal clutch size is five you may end up with clutches of two or three. At present we are having trouble with [Rheas](#), we will have five or six good ones and then we will have one come out of the egg with no top beak. If I can get them over the next couple of years they will be right again.
- Joelle Dunbar**      **Les we are standing in a bank of aviaries that are not open to the public.**
- Les Clayton      Yes, these are kept for breeding. We have Macaws, [Glossy Black Cockatoos](#), [African Grey Parrots](#) and so on.
- Since we have so few aviaries available for our own breeding programmes, we have to be very selective of those we use. For instance, we colony breed the Indian Ringnecks. This is quite successful and does not tie up as many aviaries. As well we don't have a suitable aviary to keep them out on the display section. We sell their offspring if they build up too much.
- Joelle Dunbar**      **Are you given a free rein as to what you purchase for the section you run?**
- Les Clayton      Not really. There is a lot of red tape for any purchase such as incubators and the like. The whole Zoo runs on a strict budget and so all purchases must be justified. The breeding section needs to be built up particularly the area of incubating and hand rearing.
- Joelle Dunbar**      **Do you have many Asiatic or other foreign birds at the Zoo?**
- Les Clayton      No, not really. We have some Macaws and the African Greys. There are two Green-wing Macaws (both are males), a pair of breeding [Blue and Gold Macaws](#) and some odd other types. Mainly we have Australian birds. It is a shame really that there are so many odd birds spread throughout all the Zoos in Australia. What we need to do is gather them all together and then we would have a good chance of breeding them. I hope this will happen in the future. There are certainly moves in this direction. Graeme Phipps is in contact with all the Zoos and we are trying to organise what we can. We are also hoping that private aviculturists can join us in some of this work as the numbers we have of exotic species is at a critical level. It is a shame we can't get males to lay eggs.
- Here we have a pair of breeding Blue and Gold Macaws. They are Aleni's parents and I hope they will go down to nest again this year. Last year they laid their eggs on the ground. I placed some shavings there but the only fertile egg was accidentally broken. There were two other eggs but they weren't fertile. This is a pair where I think artificial insemination may be able to help improve the number of fertile eggs. We breed these Macaws in a large brick nesting box. It is constructed from brick and plastered over. The bottom consists of 2' of ashes covered with 1' of peat moss and bark. There is an inspection plate on the side.

**Joelle Dunbar**      **Is the mortality rate of birds very high here?**

Les Clayton      Some of the exotic birds have been here for years, we do have some mortality, but it is not that great. Any bird that dies is given a post-mortem examination by our Vet to see if we can prevent any more happening.

**Joelle Dunbar**      **Do you have much assistance with the hand rearing section?**

Les Clayton      No, I try to do it all myself. I find this is more successful. I wake up every two hours, especially when I have baby parrots. Much of the time I find I am walking around here half asleep. It is quite a strain on my family. I have seven children and my wife is very tolerant, but she does get fed up at times. Whenever I go home there is always at least one bird in the truck with me.

**Joelle Dunbar**      **Les, I have heard a story about your glasses and a Pelican?**

Les Clayton      Once I was helping to trap some [Pelicans](#) and [Cormorants](#) on a lake that was calm until a wave suddenly came up and the boat began to sink. The Pelicans kept hitting me in the face and so I was wearing glasses to help see through the blood on my face. When the boat rocked my glasses fell into the water. A Pelican swooped down on them and ate them. I was cold and wet and without glasses when I went back to the homestead, but I had the bird that swallowed my glasses. All the way back he was pecking me on the face and there was blood everywhere. I was so angry with him that I gave him a kick in the backside. He then vomited and up came my glasses. I washed and used them straight away.

**Joelle Dunbar**      **Les, thank you very much for participating in this interview. It's been a great thrill for me.**

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