



The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

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

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Australian Lorikeets and Their Mutations

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By Stan Sindel

Introduction

Lories and Lorikeets are a specialised group of the parrot family. They have developed physical differences that have set them aside from other parrots. They are distinguished from other *psittacines* by anatomical developments and adaptations evolved to assist them in gathering and digesting their main food sources, pollen, nectar and fruit. Their beaks are long and narrow and the tongue has elongated papillae which form a brush like tip adapted for the collection of pollen and nectar.

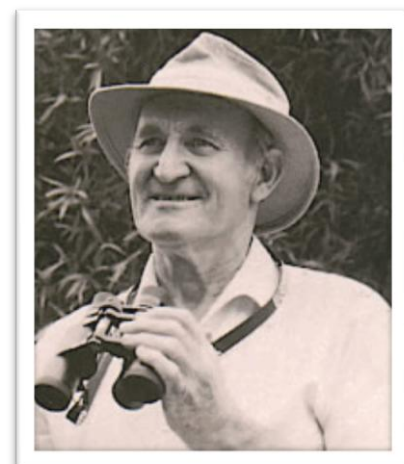
Twelve different genera have developed throughout the Southwest Pacific region, Indonesia, New Guinea and Australia. Of the twelve, three have representatives in Australia. Australian Lorikeets belong to the family *Psittacidae*, subfamily *Loriinae*.

The *Trichoglossus* genus contains some 29 species and subspecies. Three of these range into Australia: The Rainbow Lorikeet, the Red-collared Lorikeet and the Scaly-breasted Lorikeet. *Trichoglossus*, by the way means "hairy-tongued".

The second genus which has representatives in Australia is the *Psitteuteles*. This is a group of quite unrelated lorikeets in my opinion. There are only three members: The Iris Lorikeet; the Varied Lorikeet (the Australian representative) and the Goldie's Lorikeet from New Guinea. This group has been bundled together apparently for convenience. Various authors have recognised this. Joe Forshaw disregarded the *Psitteuteles* genus, including the Varied Lorikeet in with the *Trichoglossus*. He does state in his book 'Australian Parrots' that he does so with some trepidation. Rosemary Low in her book on Lorikeets went in the other direction. She recognised that there was something wrong with the genus and put them all in with the *Glossopsitta*. In my opinion this is just as wrong. I think they are best left where they are until there is more work done on that particular genus.

The genus *Glossopsitta* is a totally Australian genus. The largest is the Musk Lorikeet, the smallest is the Little Lorikeet, and in the middle the Purple-crowned Lorikeet. '*Glossopsitta*' means 'tongue parrot' which is a very unusual name as all parrots have tongues.

When the extent of the Australian continent is considered with its huge climatic and habitat variations it is surprising that the lorikeets evolved are limited to three *Trichoglossus* (the Rainbow, Scaly-breasted and Red-collared); one *Psitteuteles* (the Varied); and three *Glossopsitta* (the Musk, Little and Purple-crowned).



Stan Sindel
Order of Australia Medal
Australia Day Honours List 2003

Rainbow Lorikeet *Trichoglossus haematodus moluccanus*

The Rainbow Lorikeet is possibly the best known of the twenty-one subspecies of the species *Trichoglossus haematodus*, which as an extensive range from Indonesia through to New Guinea, various Pacific Islands groups and Australia.

This lorikeet ranges continuously from Cape York Peninsular down the east coast of Australia with an isolated population in the Perth district of Western Australia. There is considerable colour variation throughout the range, most noticeable in the far north where the birds are smaller and have a brighter more evenly coloured blue head and abdomen.

Like all our Australian lorikeets, the Rainbow is mainly nomadic, moving in search of its food sources of pollen, nectar, fruits, seeds, vegetable matter, and a few insects. Resident populations have been established in good food source areas, particularly around our east coast towns and cities where natural foods are supplemented by the blossom, fruit and seeds of introduced flora.

They are numerous throughout their range, have adapted well to human habitation, and are often seen in the heart of Sydney.

In captivity the Rainbow is particularly hardy and because of this has suffered more abuse at the hands of would-be bird keepers than any other *psittacine*, often being kept for long periods on nothing more than a dry seed diet. Lorikeets fed in this manner are often subject to fits and suffer leg paralysis.

Rainbow Lorikeets are free breeders and have been known to rear four broods per year, each brood taking three months. I use nest boxes in preference to logs as they are easier to inspect and clean. Fine wood shavings are a good absorbent nesting material. Two eggs are laid and are incubated by the female for approximately twenty-three days. The chicks fledge between eight and nine weeks old. Sexes are alike in this species.

I have an unconfirmed report of a Lutino in a New South Wales aviary, there is a cinnamon mutation established in South Africa, and I know of three yellow birds in New South Wales that don't conform to normal patterns. There is little known about this colour form. I personally doubt that they are of genetic inheritance, and are probably an acquired colour, but they must be worked on for us to know their full potential.

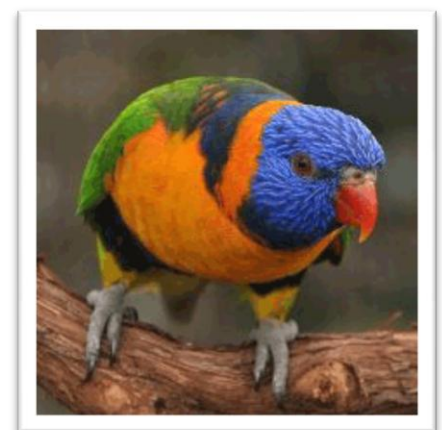
Red-collared Lorikeet *Trichoglossus haematodus rubritorquis*

The Red-collared Lorikeet is the other Australian subspecies of the extensive *Trichoglossus haematodus*. It ranges across the north western section of Australia from approximately the Northern Territory/Queensland border in the east to Broome, Western Australia in the west. On a recent trip to the Northern Territory I found this bird to be common in the extensive dry open forest country and in the monsoon forests of the coastal areas.

Their diet is similar to the Rainbow Lorikeet and they have developed a liking for cultivated tropical fruits such as [mangoes](#). The movement of this lorikeet, as with all Australian lorikeets, is totally dependent on food supply. Resident populations do not appear to have developed as with the other Australian *Trichoglossus*, although I am told that some Red-collared can usually be observed in the Darwin area all year round.



Rainbow Lorikeet



This file is from [Wikimedia Commons](#)
Red-collared Lorikeet *Trichoglossus*
haematodus rubritorquis

The aviculture of this species is similar to the Rainbow Lorikeet, but perhaps they are not quite so hardy or prolific, although the successful rearing of four clutches per year has been recorded. Two eggs are laid and incubated by the female for an average of twenty-three days, and the chicks fledge in eight to nine weeks.

I have no record of mutations occurring in this lorikeet.

Scaly-breasted Lorikeet *Trichoglossus chlorolepidotus*

This is a typical member of the *Trichoglossus* genus which shows no colour variation throughout its entire range, which extends over north eastern and eastern Australia with an isolated population (possibly the result of aviary escapees) in the Melbourne area. This species is mainly nomadic, but like the Rainbow some resident populations have developed around east coast towns and cities. They are numerous within their range but less plentiful at the northern and southern extremities.

Their diet is similar to the other Australian *Trichoglossus* but they appear to show more preference for pollen and some native seeds. They are often seen feeding in the company of Rainbow Lorikeets.

The aviculture for this species is similar to the Rainbow Lorikeet. They are good breeders, often rearing two or three consecutive clutches, but usually stop breeding in the late summer and autumn. Two eggs are laid, very rarely three, and are incubated by the female for an average of twenty-two days. The chicks fledge in eight to nine weeks.

I have recorded more mutations in the Scaly-breasted than any other Australian Lorikeet. They are the Blue Scaly-breasted, which has occurred at least twice but has not been established; the Olive Scaly-breasted which appeared first in Queensland about fifteen years ago, and can now be classed as an established aviary mutation; the Cinnamon which has occurred at least twice, and is currently being worked on by Queensland and New South Wales aviculturists; and a Jade or Laurel-green Scaly which is being worked on in a Queensland aviary.

Varied Lorikeet *Psitteuteles versicolor*

Recent authors have re-classified this species and have included it either with *Trichoglossus* or *Glossopsitta*. I do not believe it has close affinities to either genus, but perhaps should be installed into a monotypic genus of its own, or at least left in its original genus of *Psitteuteles* although I doubt there is any close relationship to other members of this genus. It is the only sexually dimorphic species of Australian lorikeet.

The Varied Lorikeet ranges across the whole of tropical northern Australia and is numerous wherever there is a suitable food source. During my recent trip to Northern Territory I found it to be by far the most commonly seen *psittacine*, and upon reflection possibly the most numerous bird observed on the trip. It is basically nomadic with its movements being dependent on the flowering of native trees and shrubs. In some areas of Queensland the Varieds arrival and departure are so regular that they could be described as migratory. The lack of subspecies or racial variations suggests there is much integration within the population.



Scaly-breasted Lorikeet
Trichoglossus chlorolepidotus



This file is from [Wikimedia Commons](#)
Varied Lorikeet *Psitteuteles versicolor*

This Lorikeet's basic diet is pollen, vegetable matter and a few insects and it is doubtful if any type of seeds are ever eaten.

I consider the Varied Lorikeet to be the most difficult of the Australian Lorikeets in captivity. It is prone to obesity and can become lethargic, therefore particular care is needed with this lorikeet's diet to keep it in trim healthy condition.

A clutch size of three to five eggs are usually laid in the winter or early spring although very occasional summer and autumn breedings have been recorded. The eggs are incubated by the female for an average of twenty-one days and the chicks fledge in five to six weeks.

I can find no record of mutations occurring in this species.

Musk Lorikeet *Glossopsitta concinno*

This is the largest member of the exclusively Australian genus *Glossopsitta*. The size of this lorikeet and its slender black, bright orange tipped upper mandible, sets it apart from the other members of the genus.

The Musk Lorikeet ranges through eastern and south eastern Australia and Tasmania from Bowen in North Queensland to Spencer Gulf in South Australia. It is totally nomadic with its search for pollen, fruits, vegetable matter and insects governing its movements.

Musk Lorikeets are in no danger in the wild, although they are not usually seen in the same numbers nor as regularly as the *Trichoglossus* lorikeets, except in the southern parts of the range, where they are more numerous.

In aviaries this species breeds in late winter and spring, when two eggs are laid and incubated by the female for an average of twenty-two days, although quite variable incubation periods have been recorded. Chicks usually fledge in about seven weeks.

I have been unable to record any mutations in this species, although I have produced an Olive Musk Lorikeet through a hybridisation program with the Olive Scaly-breasted Lorikeet.

Little Lorikeet *Glossopsitta pusilla*

As the name implies this is the smallest member of the Australian lorikeets. The range extends over eastern and south eastern Australia from Cairns in north Queensland to York Peninsular in South Australia and occasionally into Tasmania. This species is extremely nomadic and has kept constant in colour and form due to the integration throughout its range. Their diet consists of pollen and nectar, usually from [Eucalypt](#) and [Melaleuca](#) blossom, vegetable matter and insects.

Little Lorikeets are plentiful within their range wherever a suitable food source is available, but they have not adapted well to human habitation and are seldom seen within our cities.



Musk Lorikeet
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Although not extensively kept in aviaries it has proven to be a reasonable breeder. I had three pairs nest last season (1985) rearing two clutches of four and one of three, and this season the same three pairs have reared similar clutches, and two of these pairs are in the process of rearing second nests. They lay three to five eggs which are incubated by the female for an average of twenty days, and the fledgling period is approximately six weeks. Breeding usually occurs during winter and spring.

I have been told of a Lutino Little Lorikeet being held in a north Queensland aviary, although this is not fully confirmed.

Purple-crowned Lorikeet *Glossopsitta porphyrocephala*

The Purple-crowned is also a small lorikeet being only slightly larger than the Little Lorikeet. Again there is little colour variation throughout the extensive range of this extremely nomadic species, which suggest considerable integration within this range. The colour variation of the frontal band, from red to yellow, seen in this species, is purely individual and has no bearing on age, sex, diet or area from which they come.

This lorikeet's diet is similar to that of the Little Lorikeet, but a marked preference is shown for pollen from flowering eucalypts. Purple-crowns are often seen feeding in the company of Little and Musk Lorikeets in the eastern half of their range. They are plentiful throughout their range, and population explosions have often been recorded in particular areas with this species.

The Purple-crowned Lorikeet is becoming a successful aviary bird, as they breed freely and will nest at any time of the year. Three or four eggs are laid and incubated by the female for an average of twenty days and fledge around seven to eight weeks of age.

I have recorded one mutation in this species of lorikeet from a description of a mutant bird seen in a nest in South Australia in 1927 and duly recorded in "[The Emu](#)" Vol 59. From this description I believe the bird to have been a cinnamon yellow.

Housing

The major consideration for the housing of lorikeets must be the soiling effect of the liquid nature of lorikeet droppings.

Aviaries being designed to house lorikeets exclusively should have a minimum of solid wall shelter and partition areas and a maximum of wire meshed areas, so reducing the walled areas that will become soiled. Such walled areas that are unavoidable because of the necessity to provide protection from prevailing winds, etc., should be constructed of an easy to clean impervious material such as colour bond iron wall cladding. Floors should also be constructed of a material that is easy to clean and maintain such as concrete, pebble or lucky stone (providing a suitable drainage system is installed), or sand filled, which also requires suitable drainage.

Large planted aviaries provide pleasing accommodation for the smaller species, and providing they are not overcrowded, soiling and plant damage is usually minimal. Suspended wire cages housing single pairs of lorikeets has proved to be a most successful and controlled method of breeding. When the cages are situated in a sheltered, roofed or semi-roofed area they may be constructed entirely of wire, but when situated in an exposed position some shelter must be provided either on one or both ends of the cage, and over the nest box, if fitted externally.



Purple-crowned Lorikeet at [Rainbow Jungle Kalbar WA](#)
File courtesy [Wikimedia Commons](#)

A suggested minimum aviary size suitable to house one pair of lorikeets is 3m long, 90cm wide and 2m high, and I have found a cage size of 2.5m long, 60cm wide and 90cm high suitable for one pair.

Diet

Lorikeets have received more dietary abuse at the hands of aviculturists than any other avian group. This applies particularly to the Australian members of the *Trichoglossus* genus, which are particularly hardy and seem able to survive for long periods on inadequate diets.

In Australia, lorikeet diets have been historically associated with nectar, so hence various wet sloppy diets have been developed that bear no resemblance to a natural diet, either in consistency or composition.

By combining the information obtained from the limited studies carried out on Australian lorikeet diets, the suggestion of a split diet, made by Brian Rich, and the ingredients of proven lorikeet diets, I have developed a diet which has proved to be most successful in providing for the needs of my lorikeets.

Firstly, I feed a small quantity of a nutritious vitamin, mineral and animal protein enriched nectar daily, which is consumed within an hour or two, thus not standing to sour or become contaminated. A dry powder mix of rice cereals, egg and biscuit, vitamin and mineral supplements, etc., is available at all times, and because it is fed dry it does not deteriorate. Added to this basic diet each pair is fed half an apple and [silverbeet](#) daily. This constitutes the daily maintenance diet which is designed to keep lorikeets in a healthy, trim condition without inducing weight gains. When a pair is rearing young the quantity of nectar is increased four times, and a 12ml slice of "[Madeira](#)" plain cake is added to the diet, together with all the silverbeet they can eat.

This "split" diet more closely resembles a natural lorikeet diet where liquid (nectar), dry food (pollen), and vegetable matter and insects are consumed. The ratio of liquid, dry food and vegetable matter can be adjusted by the bird to suit its requirements.

Management

The most important aspect of lorikeet management is cleanliness. Lorikeets are subject to a wide range of fungal and bacterial diseases, the origins of which can usually be traced to dirty conditions or stale food. Clean nectar and soft food dishes should be used every day, and all food and water dishes must be positioned to avoid fouling from the bird droppings.

Perches must be positioned to avoid fouling food and water containers and should be cleaned regularly, particularly if not exposed to sun and rain.

If a total soft food diet is fed, it is usually necessary to feed twice a day, at least in the summer months, to avoid souring or contamination.

All surfaces subject to soiling, such as aviary walls, floors and wire mesh, should be cleaned regularly and washed with disinfectant. Feeding stations are best constructed of wire mesh so that all discarded and wasted food falls through to the floor, thus avoiding possible contamination.

Worming of lorikeets housed in aviaries is necessary, whereas it is not needed when they are housed in wire cages.

The worming agent can be administered to lorikeets by placing it in their nectar or soft food.

The sexing of the Australian lorikeet, with the exception of the Varied, can be most difficult, and much time can be saved by having them surgically sexed, thus ensuring true pairs are placed together for breeding.

Regular inspection of your birds and of nest boxes containing young, will usually solve problems before they become too serious.

Colony breeding (where two or three pairs of the same species are housed together) and flock breeding (where several pairs of different species of lorikeets or even different families of parrots are housed together) is often practiced with good to fair or even bad results, depending on the number, temperament, and species of the birds held together. In almost all instances the overall breeding results will be increased if the pairs are housed individually, and troubles such as fighting, egg breaking, and the maiming of young will be eliminated.

For further reading there are a couple of related articles that were added to our website in 1999 (contributed by Glenn Matheson) with colour plates of the mutations listed.

[Rainbow Lorikeets and their Mutations](#)
[Scaly-Breasted Lorikeets and their Mutations](#)

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