



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

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

*PO Box 248, Panania NSW 2213, Australia*

### **Little Corellas in field and aviary**

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**By John McGrath**

Although I do not hold little Corellas at present I have bred them and will describe the events of a couple of different seasons breeding. In 1981 the old pair, I was able to pick the difference between this pair as I mentioned before by individual characteristics, the cock was much tighter of feather with a neater taller crest, his mate was the opposite in that she appeared larger with loose feathering and a much fuller type of crest. Due to the fact that Little Corellas are nearly always in immaculate feather they make excellent Cockatoos for exhibition, as can be borne out by the Champion ribbons in the cupboard that my pair picked up years ago whilst I was involved in exhibition of caged birds. Observation of the pair at mating time soon taught me who was who. I remember with this pair as the breeding season got closer they could be seen mating more frequently, this took place most often on the front perch, but sometimes at the rear near the nest.

These features made picking the differences in the sexes so much easier when working out which bird was incubating at which time, you see like all cockatoos, Little Corellas share incubation of eggs and early brooding of chicks. The hen does the night and longer shift from about 4:00pm to around 8:00am the next morning, the cock the remainder. They change over with some mutual preening and the outgoing partner goes off to feed.

From my diary notes of that year I note that this pair had three eggs on the 30th September, 1981. On the 5th October, 1981 I compared the shape of the Corella eggs to the Galahs eggs in that the Galahs were more oval and that the Corellas were conical. Then I would have been breeding Eastern states Galahs. By the 13th October, 1981 three eggs had hatched. I do know that Corellas like all Australian Cacatua species hatch with a yellow down. Unfortunately looking at that information I cannot give an accurate incubation period. Since then I have lifted my game a bit and as stated earlier now keep better records. By the 24th October, 1981 two of the chicks were ready for close banding, the third I estimated was still a couple of days off being ready. The 29th October, 1981 to 31st October, 1981 I replaced the band on the smallest Corella and by the 4th November, 1981 the bands were staying in place. Sometimes there is a need to do follow up checks. I noted on the 12th November, 1981 all chicks feathering well. Feathering improved through to the 26th November, 1981 and one chick was out of log on the 5th December, 1981. From my diary I see it had a short square tail. By the 11th December, 1981 all chicks had left the nest. However, on the 29th December, 1981 one of the chicks had a broken leg and the next day it had broken the other leg. I destroyed this bird. I blamed myself twofold because firstly, the fencing wire I used to suspend the perch did not have the loose end turned down and the chick got its leg band over the wire and broke the first leg trying to free itself. These chicks were also calcium deficient, a problem that I would now overcome with Calcium Sandoz to the crop or Calcium Carbonate spread over the sprouts, as well as supplying other forms of calcium supplement like cuttlefish bone and shell grit. Anyway I removed the rings from the other two chicks and I turned the ends of the wire down to stop any further mishaps. Even after the events that unfolded then I still close ring all my cockatoo chicks. I am now much more vigilant and remove any "snag" that may cause a bird with a closed band any harm. I for the most part use stainless steel bands but also some aluminium. As it turned out 1981 was not a good year but that same pair gave me many chicks over a twenty year period.

Now in 1993 I received a pair of Little Corellas from Western Australia. These birds were billed as a breeding pair, but I was forewarned that the cock bird was an "agro bastard". That was a polite description of this little gentleman as it turned out! They arrived a petite pair of Little Corellas and yes the cock bird was not very friendly, as forewarned. I got them through quarantine and into their aviary and that's when the boy could really prove his virtues, coming straight at my face.

Unfortunately often cockatoos are antagonised in a past life and being intelligent don't forget and take out their aggressive frustration on whoever is in line. I have had other Corellas of a similar nature, but I thought I could handle this bird. Plus I had not bred Little Corellas for a decade and the fact these were very small Corellas and that they had a feather structure similar to other Corellas of Western Australian origin spurred me on.

On the 23rd September, 1993 they had one egg and the boy was extra agro. On the 25th September, 1993 they had two eggs and had commenced incubation. By the 27th September, 1993 they had three eggs and on the 29th September, 1993 I noted the pair still only had three eggs. On the 21st October, 1993 the Corellas were calling loudly in the morning. One chick had hatched and other egg well cracked between 7:00 and 7:30am. Both chicks hatched in afternoon, one noticeably larger than other, both well fed, the third egg was gone. The chicks were covered with a lemon yellow down and the cock does not seem as aggressive this afternoon. I am thinking this maybe just what he needs, a family. On the 22nd October, 1993 one young Corella disappeared, other chick well fed. I fed the parents corn on cob and sprouted mung beans twice. On the 23rd October, 1993 second young Corella chewed up by parents, I was disappointed to say the least, I had really hoped for better. In light of the aggressive nature of the cock and their attitude to their chicks I parted with this pair.

From my notes then it is apparent that incubation took 27 to 28 days! Three eggs seem to form the normal clutch, but I have had them lay two, and eggs are laid every second day.

## Field observations and thoughts on out of range Corellas.

I do not live in the normal range of the Little Corella and it was not until 1975 whilst on a working holiday in South West Queensland that for the first time I saw Little Corellas in the wild, not exactly sure where it was but I saw a pair feeding by the road West of Eulo, and at that time was my only sighting of this species in the wild.

But lately this species has moved into this district and beyond, whether the flock that appear here as mentioned near my aviaries last year are natural or escapees, but that is only one example. Several years ago we had five birds in our back yard in a pine tree very early one morning. I have also witnessed small flocks flying past our house on other different occasions.

There seems to be a well established small flock on the Yass River toward Yass from here where I saw them feeding in a mixed flock with both Sulphur Crested Cockatoos and Galahs on Saffron Thistle seed late last Winter. There is another population to our north along the Boorowa River and at a recent avicultural meeting in Canberra a fellow member told me he had recently seen a flock fly over Braidwood that appeared to be heading for the coast from there.

Some years back we spent Christmas with our relatives in the Canberra suburb of Narrabundah, we stayed the night and Boxing Day morning I woke to the calls of Corellas. Nothing unusual in that as my birds will often wake me ... but hang on I thought ... this is not our room, "Bloody Hell" where am I? Out of bed and outside I shot, just in time to see the tail end of a flock of Little Corellas coming off Redhill, above and behind where we stayed and where they apparently roost, disappearing towards the Fyshwick flats to feed. There appears to be two distinct feral populations in the nation's Capital. One as I had witnessed and one further West in Belconnen. I have not seen this particular flock but have seen a pair that fed together each morning in the switch yard of the Trans Grid Canberra Substation, where I once worked, a little further West again. After they had finished feeding they would depart in the direction of the Murrumbidgee River.

There are other city type populations especially in and around Sydney, Gosford and the Brisbane area. Often these are combined with Little Corellas and Eastern Longbilled corella flocks with apparently some hybridisation occurring between the two species.

Earlier this decade as a family we visited the island state of Tasmania and there I saw Little Corellas in a mixed free flying flock with another of the island introduced Cockatoo species, the Galah. Included in this flock were also hybrids of the two species. This combined flock were located near the East Coast town of Bicheno. One of these hybrids was on our own property years ago with a flock of Galahs. Digressing a little, other captive hybrids I have seen are Little Corella x Sulphur Crested Cockatoo (*C. galertia*) and also hybrids with Major Mitchells (*C. leadbeateri*).

I know of other small local flocks and one that is combined with Eastern Longbilled Corellas on the Barton Highway between here and Canberra. Here the flock have a perfect spot as there is a local horse stud and the birds, like the horses, have their heads in the horses feed box for an easy feed. Also to their suiting are large old eucalypts for them to breed. It is this smorgasbord of food that can result in the congregation of large numbers of Corellas, a bit like putting up the Golden Arches does to the Human animal. I know of a small private feed lot at Coonabarabran that certainly has its resident population of Little Corellas.

During my employment with the NSW Electricity Commission one of my Engineers was put in charge of a problem with Little Corellas at the Broken Hill Substation. Now this gentleman was from Zimbabwe and had not seen our Corellas. He was directed to me for advice, which was a bit of an honour considering my lesser status in the establishment. He was told, McGrath keeps cockatoos, ask him. Initially I had to explain what the bird was to him and he failed to understand how a bird as I described could reek the havoc that the birds were.

Apparently a feedlot had been set up right alongside the substation attracting the birds to feed, but these particular birds were not only interested in the grain but were spending a large amount of their free time actually in the substation chewing plastic sheathed control cables and causing equipment to operate at inopportune times. This often resulted in sections of the substation being blacked out. They were also opening the drain valves on the smaller transformers allowing the insulation oil to escape causing further power failures. The engineer was bewildered even though I had explained the playfulness, strength and determination of the Corellas, to him. Illustrating my knowledge of the birds with examples of how my Corellas could undo dog clips on their cage door, as well as letting themselves out of their own cages, even learning to undo nuts, it seems once learned they don't forget. I can remember he kept asking, "But how can they do such things?" The next day I took to work a section of flat iron that a pair of my Eastern Longbills had cut out of the bottom of their nest log base, but I think I only confused the man even more, shaking his head he only repeated the same question above.

Relating to the Little Corella populations I have seen, given that the birds in South-West Queensland and those at Coonabarabran were within their natural range, as would be the birds in the Broken Hill region, most other populations are usually put down to escaped feral populations. For the city based groups I may be willing to accept that explanation, considering that a lot of Corellas were trapped in the early seventies and possibly late sixties, and that these very birds are often passed off as young birds with the label of easy to tame by the unscrupulous. Mostly yes they once had been young, most birds had long since forgotten mum and dad, and no they were not going to make ideal pets for Mr and Mrs Average. One, because they did not have the expertise to tame the bird, and two, did that new bird make a lot of noise, so captivity for some of these Corellas was short lived. Also it is very likely that once the "pet market" became saturated, as it seemed to very quickly twenty years ago, with these wild corellas, that there may well have been mass releases of unwanted birds. I mean there must have been literally thousands trapped as I can remember a Semitrailer load of Eastern Longbilled Corellas passing through Yass, out on the back in cages like "chooks" (chickens). That explains the outer range city based populations, but what about these smaller groups in the country? I often think to myself it maybe these isolated introduced populations that could prove to be the salvation for their species in general, if not persecuted as on their "home turf" and particularly if isolated from Psittance Circovirus Disease (Pbfd).

Fact! The Galah moved to this area around sixty years ago in small groups and stayed on and multiplied, then continued on to the East and South, as did the Red Rumped Parrot (*Psephotus haematonotus*) and the Crested Pigeon (*Ocyphaps lophotes*) during the drought thirty years ago.

*If you would like another perspective on this Cockatoo have a look at some of the following:*

**VIDEOS:**

*White Cockatoos part of The Land of Parrots set,  
and its derivative Cockatoos of Australia, a Geo production.*

**BOOKS:**

*Australian Cockatoos by Stan Sindel & Robert Lynn.  
Joseph M Foreshaw's publications - Australian Parrots and Parrots of the World.  
The World of Cockatoos by Karl Diefenbach.  
Parrots Their Care and Breeding by Rosemary Low.*

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