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## SAVING THE PARRAKEETS

By C. T. METZGER

FOR SOME YEARS the writer has noticed with alarm the ever decreasing numbers of certain species of foreign birds that had been more or less common in the past, especially the Australian parrakeets which at one time were fairly plentiful in the American market. Many species that were common twenty years ago, today are never heard of, or at least very seldom and then at prices that are staggering.

Some four years ago I began an inquiry, to learn, if possible, the cause of this decrease. The investigation included such species as: The Blue-wing Grass Parrakeet (*Neophema venusta*), the Bourke Grass Parrakeet (*Neophema bourkei*), the Elegant Grass Parrakeet (*Neophema elegans*), the Yellow-rumped Parrakeet (*Platycercus flaveolus*), the Turquoise Grass Parrakeet (*Neophema pulchella*), and the Pileated Parrakeet (*Porphyrocephalus spurius*). These species and a number of others while not common were usually to be had as late as 1910; now it is almost impossible to obtain even single specimens.

Many letters were exchanged with aviculturists, dealers and fanciers in all parts of the world, and I finally came to the conclusion that, like our own Carolina Parrakeet and the Passenger Pigeon, they were fast becoming extinct for various reasons and that unless steps were taken for their preservation it was only a question of a short time before they would be only a memory.

About this time I was fortunate enough to get in touch with the Marquess of Tavistock, Havant, England, who was also interested in this subject and who had been conducting experiments with Parrakeets for several years. He assured me that there was still a chance of saving some of these species if enough people could be interested who were willing to give their time and money to the undertaking. His idea was to collect as many pairs as possible and endeavor to breed them in movable outdoor aviaries, in a suitable climate and under the supervision of experienced aviculturists. At the same time he offered to donate for this purpose a certain number of birds from his own aviaries and, later, to add others as they appeared on the market.

The present writer lived for many years in California and, having bred nearly all the fast disappearing species at one time or another with considerable success, decided that if he could locate a few people who were interested sufficiently to give the experiment their time and attention there was at least a fighting chance of accomplishing something worth while. While California, especially the southern part, was selected by Lord Tavistock as ideal for the experiment, I am satisfied that there are many other states in this country equally suitable. Parts of Florida, Alabama, Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and certain localities in Texas, cannot fail to prove

equally suitable. California was chosen for the reason that I had lived there for a number of years, and had bred many kinds of foreign and some native birds with considerable success.

An advertisement was accordingly inserted by Lord Tavistock and myself in two newspapers, explaining the situation. Unfortunately we made the mistake of saying that breeding stock would be furnished free of charge to those interested. The result was that letters began to pour in from people who had bred anything, from canaries and budgerigars to all kinds of foreign finches. Few seemed to know anything of the rarer Parrakeets, and it was quite a task to locate even a very few who could qualify. We finally selected half a dozen people, who appeared to measure up to our expectations; and I think no mistake was made in their selection.

The first birds reached Chicago from England in 1926, and after a few days rest, were forwarded to California. Since that time his Lordship has sent over some fifty birds. Every individual reached Chicago in first class condition excepting one, a male Turquoise, that, unfortunately, died two days after arrival. The others were delivered in California safely and were at once distributed to the proper people. Since that time there have been some losses, as was to be expected, but not enough to prove discouraging. All losses, whether large or small, are disconcerting, especially when one considers the small available supply of birds and the expenditure involved. Lord Tavistock paid for some species more than three hundred dollars per pair.

Allow me further to explain the Marquess' scheme and how he thought it might be brought to a successful issue and thus save for future generations some of the most beautiful avian treasures the world possesses. The instructions given recipients of birds are as follows: Each breeding pair is to be placed in an individual aviary about 8 by 8 by 24 feet (or even larger), with suitable nesting logs, resembling those used by the birds in their native habitat, and fed as per instructions sent out by the Marquess. If Lord Tavistock's experience counts for anything (and he has spent more than fifteen years in experimenting with these birds) the best results are obtained by moving the aviaries to new soil once each year. It was also impressed upon recipients of the birds that none was to be sold under any consideration until at least the fourth or fifth generation had arrived; but young could and should be traded back and forth to prevent inbreeding; or young could be placed in the hands of new members of the organization for further propagation. After the fourth or fifth generation it is thought a sufficient number will be on hand to insure permanency of the species.

For a long time I was at a loss to account for the rapid disappearance of some of the species, but I think I can explain this fact by setting down certain conditions now existing in Australia. It may also be asked why America or some place other than Australia has been chosen for the experiment. In the first place, encroaching civilization is, in Australia as everywhere else, a big factor in the depletion of certain species; but the general opinion of people who live there is that this cause alone would not have been effective for many years to come, and only after a decided increase in population. This factor alone might not do more than drive the birds farther into the interior. It was also believed that some species might accustom themselves to the changed conditions and, though reduced to a certain extent, they would be in no immediate danger of extermination.

The chief cause of the threatened extinction of the Parrakeets under discussion is, first of all, destruction of the birds' natural food—seeds of grasses and other plants—by flocks of sheep which as every one knows destroy as much with their sharp hoofs

as they eat. Next in order are imported foxes and domestic cats running wild, the poisoning of grain by farmers (to rid themselves of the cockatoos that raid their crops) and the wanton destruction of hundreds and even thousands of Parrakeets by laborers on the railroads as a change of food from the constant diet of mutton. Brush fires are also responsible for many losses, while the European Starling, like the English Sparrow in this country, appropriates the best nesting sites.

Other enemies of the Parrakeets are the numerous birds of prey, such as hawks and owls. Every ornithologist knows that the "natural" enemies of the smaller birds rarely bring about their extinction. They merely maintain the so-called "balance of nature"; but once a species is reduced by any but natural causes, its fate may be sealed at the hands of its hereditary foes. Then again, a number of Parrakeets are largely terrestrial, especially some of those inhabiting the islands adjacent to Australia. Here rats, introduced from ships, have created havoc among these ground-living birds. Later, the mongoose, brought from India to destroy the rats that attack sugar cane and other farm produce, finished the lethal work begun by the rats.

Many people with whom I have corresponded and conversed seem to think that Australia is an ideal place for the aviculturist; but I have reason to doubt it. So far as I can learn climatic conditions are in many parts of that immense continent far from favorable for the raising of caged birds. Either the coldest weather or the hottest summer (with its suffocating dust-storms) kills off the choicest stock; or gales accompanied by cloud-bursts blow down trees onto the aviary roofs and crush or drown any birds that have not been liberated. I am also informed that at certain seasons of the year hawks arrive by the dozen and so terrify birds in the aviary that they break their necks or crack their skulls by dashing against the wires of the enclosures. Recently a measure has been adopted by the legislature prohibiting the exportation of birds as a protective measure, and yet the Australian government makes no serious effort to preserve at home those birds whose death rate seriously exceeds the birth rate.

While Lord Tavistock and I have so far confined our efforts to preserving a few Australasian and Fiji Island species, we can see no reason why the experiment could not be extended to many of our American species that are fast disappearing. I quote from a recent letter from his Lordship: "I do not think any country can possess a more priceless scientific treasure than a flourishing, breeding stock of interesting and beautiful creatures long vanished from their native haunts and found nowhere else in the world. . . . Americans have allowed the Passenger Pigeon, the Carolina Conure, and the Whooping Crane (the first of which certainly and the last two probably) to disappear, all of which could have been saved in confinement. It would be a fine thing if Americans could make amends for this mistake by saving what other countries are about to lose."

While the experiment with the Parrakeets has not been a failure by any means, even though no great results can be recorded so far, yet unless more people join us who are able and willing to assume a part of the burden, either in an active capacity, by the donation of birds, or by direct financial assistance, I am afraid all our efforts and Lord Tavistock's outlay will count for nothing. In three instances particularly has the lack of funds proved a handicap and hardship. Of the Turquoise Parrakeets we have been able to secure only two male birds, and one of these has died. Of the Bourke we have one pair, but the hen is far from a satisfactory breeding individual and it is doubtful if she will ever breed. Of the Elegant, we have only two, one splendid cock and one hen which appears to be a cross of some kind and

hardly a fit mate for the cock. A few Bourkes reached England the other day (six birds I think) at five hundred dollars a pair, a price beyond our reach. Also a pair of Elegant was offered by an English dealer for six hundred dollars, and two pairs of Turquoise at seven hundred and fifty dollars per pair, but even at these prices they would be cheap. I consider no bird "dear" unless it is in poor health. It must be remembered that the Bourke and Blue-wing Grass Parrakeets have hatched from three to five young at a sitting, and they usually have two and even three broods in a season. They may thus prove very profitable as an investment. As late as 1908 the writer raised seven birds from one pair of Turquoisines in one season and nine from the same couple the following year. Other species have done equally well.

But aside from the financial returns from the investment, what more can an enthusiastic aviculturist ask than the satisfaction of knowing that he or she has helped to preserve for posterity some of our most beautiful of birds?

I wish here to thank Dr. Casey A. Wood for his valuable assistance in preparing the present article.

*Chicago, Illinois, March 27, 1928.*