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AN HISTORICAL REVIEW OF PARROTS BRED IN ZOOS IN THE USA

by Josef H. Lindholm III

Compiling records of *Wild Birds Bred in Captivity in the Eastern United States*, Beebe and Crandall (1909) were aware of only four taxa of parrots reproduced at that time. The first breedings of the Cockatiel *Nymphicus hollandicus* and Black-cheeked Lovebird *Agapornis nigrigenis* (misattributed as the Masked Lovebird *A. personata*) were achieved by private aviculturists. The Budgerigar *Melopsittacus undulatus* is credited to the New York Zoological Park. The final species was the Carolina Parakeet *Conuropsis carolinensis*, for which Beebe and Crandall (1909) provide the record of 'one bird... hatched from an egg which had been placed under a Turtle Dove' on September 9th, 1885 at the Philadelphia Zoological Garden.

While the Carolina Parakeet was bred repeatedly in Germany as early as 1881 (Hopkinson, 1926; Kolar, 1972), I am aware of only two other North American facilities breeding this species. The Smithsonian ornithologist, Robert Ridgeway maintained a pair, collected in Florida in 1896, in his house. Several young were hatched of which one, produced in 1902, and partly hand-raised due to parental neglect, died in the possession of the malacologist, Paul Bartsch in 1914 (Bartsch, 1957; Peterson, 1957).

The Cincinnati Zoo purchased 16, collected in Florida in 1886 (Fuller, 1987; Ehrlinger, 1993). Ehrlinger (1993) records that 'a number... were hatched and raised... Generally, however, the birds were inattentive parents and often tossed their eggs out of their nests'. By 1917 only a single pair of Cincinnati's birds (both from the original shipment) was still alive. The female died late that year. The male, the last in captivity, died on February 21st, 1918. A pair from the 1886 group was given to the New York Zoological Park in 1911, but both were dead in less than two years (Bridges, 1974).

When Crandall (1927) produced a second revision of the 1909 list, there was only a single parrot species to add to the original four: the Peach-faced Lovebird *A. roseicollis*, credited to the New York Zoological Park. By that time there were a number of comprehensive parrot collections in zoos in the USA, but reproduction was almost non-existent. In its first 40 years, from

1888 through 1928, the National Zoological Park obtained 104 taxa of parrots (Mann, 1930a), yet total parrot breeding results for this period amounted to only five Budgerigars (Mann, 1930b).

San Diego Zoological Garden

Crandall (1930) was able to add a further 11 species of parrots in his final revision of *Records of Birds Bred in Captivity in the United States*. All had been hatched from 1926 through 1929. Ten of these first breedings in the USA were the achievements of private aviculturists. The record for Swainson's Lorikeet *Trichoglossus haematodus moluccanus* was credited to the San Diego Zoo.

Founded with exhibits remaining from the 1916 Panama Pacific Exposition, and relocated to its present site in 1922, the San Diego Zoological Garden had, by the late 1920s, attained the status it has held ever since as having one of the world's leading parrot collections. Through 1929, 60 taxa were obtained (Dolan and Moran, 1970). In 1925 and 1927, exchange shipments arrived from Australian zoos. A collection of lories and lorikeets was received from the Surabaya Zoo in 1929. Various species were presented by military personnel in Central America. Belle Benchley (1930a), Executive Secretary of the Zoological Society of San Diego, wrote: 'The bird collection at the zoological garden, more particularly the parrot group, is now so large that it has been decided to center our efforts upon adding only the very rare, or the especially beautiful or spectacular, to this group'.

Through 1930, 14 species were hatched at the San Diego Zoo (Dolan and Moran, 1970). While many of the records for this period and the early 1930s appear to have been lost, there exists very interesting documentation. Belle Benchley, Director of the San Diego Zoo from 1941 through 1953, is best remembered for her work with primates. However, I was informed by K.C. Lint (Curator of Birds from 1946 through 1976) that she was a highly competent aviculturist, personally caring for many of the birds during the Second World War.

From 1929 through 1932 she contributed a number of notes and articles to *Aviculture*, the journal of the Avicultural Society of America. These included detailed discussions of the breeding of Edward's Lorikeet *T.h. capistratus* in 1931 (Benchley 1932c), Red-sided Eclectus *Eclectus roratus polychloros* in 1929 (Benchley 1929a&b, 1930a) and Blue-winged Grass Parrakeet *Neophema chrysostoma* in 1930 (Benchley, 1930b), as well as, in 1931 hybrids between the now severely endangered Red and Blue Lory *Eos h. hystrio* and Eastern Violet-necked Lory *E.s. squamata* (Benchley 1932a&b). Accounts of two unsuccessful nestings of the Purple-crowned Lorikeet *Glossopsitta porphyrocephala* in 1930 and 1931 (Benchley 1930b, 1932a), where in both cases eggs were eaten near hatching, are most

interesting. These are apparently the only Western Hemisphere breeding attempts for this species on record; they were alluded to by Rosemary Low (1977) who was aware of no details.

Of particular interest in these *Aviculture* articles are statements of collection policy at that time. Regarding the *Eos* hybrid, Mrs Benchley (1932a) wrote: 'The San Diego Zoo does not exhibit hybrid species nor freaks of any kind. We will probably send it, therefore, to some one of the aviculturists who is interested in carrying out such experiments'. (The only parrot specifically noted by Delacour (1937) in his discussion of a 1936 visit to San Diego was 'a hybrid *E. histrio* x *E. bornea*').

Prior to eventual success with this species, Benchley (1929b) noted '...the failure of our Blue-wing Grass Parrots to make any serious attempt to breed. These latter have been in the garden now for two years and they will be sent to Dr Patrick, who has been doing such interesting things with some of the rare parrots in the breeding way. In a large public collection the chances for breeding are less and the time of the bird man has to be devoted to a large extent to the routine cleaning and caring for the collection. Primarily, the object of a zoological garden is to maintain a comprehensive and interesting exhibit from the standpoint of public interest. Few visitors truly appreciate the rarity of a Blue-wing Grass Parrot and find the Red-rump or Chattering Lory in the adjoining cages much handsomer and more fascinating. On the other hand, those directly responsible for the development and maintenance of the zoo could not keep their interest at the necessary standard nor their zeal sufficiently intense to offset the drudgery of the hard work if it were not for the opportunity offered in such a sphere to contribute towards the scientific knowledge of the world and to do their share towards the preservation of the disappearing species'.

As it happened, only one of the two pairs of Blue-winged Grass Parrakeets imported in 1927 was sent to Dr Leon Patrick in 1929 (Benchley, 1930b). Dr Patrick, of Orange, California, was one of the pioneers in what was to become the widespread propagation of Australian parrots in southern California. Prestwich (1930) cited Dr Patrick as '... the first American to make a serious attempt to save some of the fast disappearing species of Australian parrakeets (sic), and it is mainly through his untiring efforts that others have become interested; and what was considered a doubtful experiment three years ago now gives promise of success. In 1928 he successfully bred and brought to maturity one of the most difficult species - the Pileated Parrakeet *Purpureicephalus spurius* - as well as some Blue-winged Grass Parrakeets'. Throughout its history the San Diego Zoo has continued to maintain a close relationship with private aviculturists.

Belle Benchley (1932a) observed: 'We have been unusually busy this year due to doubling up on work and sometimes I wonder that we have done

as well as we have. We have about 68 species of the parrot family in almost as many cages. As our cages are large, it means a lot of work just taking care of that part mechanically without the fussing necessary for little birds'. The year 1932 nearly proved disastrous. In August, the San Diego County Tax Assessor attempted to auction off the holdings of the Zoological Society, including all animals, to collect \$6,358 in back taxes. The auction was thwarted by local police officers who announced that the 200 potential bidders would be prohibited from removing animals from the premises (Morgan, 1990). Despite general depression conditions, the resulting public outcry led to an unambiguous tax-exempt status for the society and in 1934 a property tax levy of two cents per every hundred dollars. That year the zoo's holdings included 11 taxa of lorries and lorikeets, 10 of cockatoos and eight of conures among the extensive parrot collection (Benchley, 1934).

By March 1st, 1951, 140 parrot taxa had been maintained at one time or another at San Diego and 69 were present at that date (Stott, 1951). Ken Stott Jr. (1951) then General Curator, listed 35 taxa of parrots hatched to that point, as well as five hybrids. Two species stand out in this list for sustained propagation. Leadbeater's Cockatoo *Cacatua l. leadbeateri* commenced breeding in 1935, and roughly 30 were reared to maturity by 1951 when three generations were represented in the collection. A single pair of Southern Bare-eyed Cockatoo *C.s. sanguinea*, which produced its first chick in 1929, had hatched 'approximately 50' by 1951. Dolan and Moran (1970) document hatchings every year from 1933 through 1953, which produced at least 44, as well as 12 hatched from 1955 through 1960, again without missing a year, and single specimens hatched in 1964 and 1966.

By the end of 1968 the historical total of parrot taxa hatched at San Diego Zoo had grown to 69. As of December 31st, 1968 176 taxa of parrots were present (Dolan and Moran, 1970), while the total number of bird taxa at the zoo was 1,076. The year-end total for bird taxa peaked on December 31st, 1969 with 1,126 (represented by 3,465 specimens). The total number of birds raised to maturity in 1970 (as reported to the *International Zoo Yearbook*) was 101 of 34 taxa (Lindholm, 1993). Eighty-three of these birds were parrots, representing 25 taxa, all Old World. Of these, 29 were lorries or lorikeets, representing 10 taxa.

For several years in the early 1970s, roughly 200 taxa of parrots were held at the San Diego Zoo and parrots - especially lorries and lorikeets, Australian endemics, and *Psittacula* species - continued to predominate in the annual tallies of birds bred. As will be discussed later, this situation would be altered by the mid-1980s.



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