

A note on Budgerigars in Hamilton, Victoria

PR Bird (1990)

Budgerigars (*Melopsittacus undulatus*) are well-known parrots of the inland which often migrate south to the higher rainfall areas. Flocks regularly appear in the Little Desert National Park in early October and depart after the breeding season, usually in early March (National Parks Service, 1979). They are an occasional visitor to the Grampians area (McCann, 1982). The most southerly records of budgerigars in Victoria are at two points, just east and west of Hamilton (Emison *et al.* 1987).

On 9 January 1982 I first observed a budgerigar wild-type plumage of green and yellow in a River Red Gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) woodland on a 5 hectare block on the northern boundary of Hamilton in SW Victoria. Aviary escapees do occur at times near towns but this bird did not display the signs of a lost bird. I kept a record of sightings and at intervals attempted to record numbers present:

- 9 January 1982 – 1 bird in a River Red Gum on the northern boundary
- 22 November 1983 – 12 birds flew from the edge of the central drive
- 27 November 1983 – 2 birds feeding on seed heads along the drive
- 4 February 1986 – 1 bird in a River Red Gum along the drive
- 26 November 1986 – 3 birds feeding on grass heads along drive
- 6 December 1987 – 4 birds on native grassland on SE fence
- 10 December 1987 – 14 birds roosting in trees near SE fence
- 15 December 1987 – 20 birds in trees and feeding in short grass in paddock near SW fence
- 22 December 1987 – 25 or more birds in the above general area
- 23 December 1987 – 37 birds in the central drive area
- 5 January 1988 – 13 birds on NE fence, near mown native grass
- 14 January 1988 – 15 birds still feeding on the block
- 27 January 1988 – 4 birds counted on the block

An unforgettable day was the spectacle of 37 feathered gems drifting from the trees, through shafts of afternoon sunlight, to alight on long stalks of Spear Grass (*Austrostipa* spp.). The birds usually operated in small groups, feeding actively on the seed heads of grasses. Spear Grass and Wallaby Grass (*Austrodanthonia* spp.) were preferred but they also foraged among introduced species. Two photos are shown below of these birds on the block, one of birds roosting in a wattle and the other of birds feeding on Wallaby Grass seed heads.

Approximately 40% of the 5-hectare property had been ungrazed since 1981 to encourage regeneration of native grasses, including Kangaroo Grass (*Themeda triandra*) and Weeping Grass (*Microlaena stipoides*). Other portions were either slashed or burned (20%) or lightly grazed (40%) for fire control purposes. There were areas of Yorkshire Fog Grass (*Holcus lanatus*), Barley Grass (*Hordeum* sp.), and sparse Onion grass (*Romulea rosea*), Silver grass (*Vulpia bromoides*), Perennial Ryegrass (*Lolium perenne*), *Bromus* spp. and other introductions.

Prior to 1981 the entire area had been heavily grazed by sheep but little fertilizer had been used. The recovery of Wallaby Grass was spectacular after grazing was removed but there was a drastic reduction in this component, and a concomitant increase in Onion grass, on fuel reduction areas that were burned in summer. Frequent mowing also resulted in Onion grass dominance. Themeda was encouraged by annual mowing in early summer, with the cutter set high to avoid crown damage, but no birds were seen feeding on this sparsely-seeded species.

It appears that the habitat had been sufficiently modified to suit ground-feeding birds. That was also evident by the large numbers of Red-rumped Parrots (*Psephotus haematonotus*), sometimes as many as 100 birds, and Eastern Rosellas (*Platycercus eximius*) that congregated on the block to feed.

Another factor was probably the presence of a rather dense (50 or more trees per hectare) population of River Red Gums of mixed age in the 4 ha of wooded area, with adequate access to grassland around, and water available from troughs, gardens or a dam. Neighbouring properties add another 5 or more hectares of trees, rather more sparsely spaced and with more improved pasture, and while the budgerigars did spend some time there (mainly in the trees), they obviously preferred the native pastures.

I have not been able to ascertain whether the birds have reappeared since I left that location in 1988. Visits on one occasion each in the summers of 1989 and 1990 were fruitless, but my previous experience was that they did not spend all of their time during the months of Nov-Feb in that immediate area.

References

Emison W B, Beardsell C M, Norman FI, Loyn RH (1987) "Atlas of Victorian Birds". Ministry of Conservation Forests and Lands and Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union.

McCann IR (1982) "Grampian Birds – an illustrated checklist". Published by Halls Gap Tourist Information Centre.

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