The Red Variety of the Eastern Rosella

The following observation concerns a red (erythristic) variety of the Eastern Rosella *Platycercus eximius* near Bendigo (36°40'S, 144°15'E), Victoria. This bird's plumage on p. 227 differed considerably from normal as its rump and underparts were red (not green or yellow) and its back was predominantly red. Whilst identifying this bird, the Crimson Rosella *Platycercus elegans* and the Eastern×Crimson Rosella were taken into consideration. The bird uttered the usual calls of an Eastern Rosella and appeared to have the same undulating flight pattern.

Apparently, the erythristic Eastern Rosella was first described by John Leadbeater as the Fiery Parakeet *Platycercus ignitus* (Leadbeater in Gould 1837). John Gould later considered it either a valid species or a diseased variety of another (Gould 1847). Gould also noted the distinct white mark at the base of the primaries and secondaries and the mark of white on the underwing coverts, both noticeable features of the specimen I have observed.

My experiences with this bird date back to early November 1990, when I noticed a most unusual rosella feeding amongst introduced grasses along the roadside. With it was a male Eastern Rosella in normal plumage. I observed the bird from 12 metres for approximately 20 minutes with the aid of 10 x 24 binoculars while it fed, in company of its mate, on the tips of Dock *Rumex* sp. As the red bird was with the bird bearing normal plumage, direct comparisons of plumage, size and habits were able to be made.

Two days later another bird-watcher, David McDonald, verified this sighting while visiting the same area. This bird is now frequently seen in the area by myself and occasionally by DM.

The bird is definitely a female as it consistently accompanies a male and because it has a white underwing stripe (a characteristic of young, aged earlier than their first moult, and females in Eastern Rosellas: Wyndham & Brereton 1982). The erythristic female is marginally but noticeably smaller than its male companion.

Habitat was a reasonably level tract of open woodland/farmland, where the greater proportion of trees such as Yellow Gum *Eucalyptus leucoxylon*, Grey Box *E. microcarpa* and Yellow Box *E. melliodora* were near the local roads. River Red Gum *E. camaldulensis* was also common along the nearby creek and floodway. The bird's range covered an area of approximately 490 x 510 x 440 metres.

On 23 December 1990, 5 km from the previous location, another red Eastern Rosella was seen amongst a flock of six normal Eastern Rosellas. This bird's plumage was of an orange shade and was far less gaudy than the specimen previously mentioned. It was possibly a younger bird or a duller variation. This bird also had a white cheek patch but its underparts and back were of a yellow-orange tinge in comparison with the definite red colouration of the aforementioned bird. Subsequent visits to the area have failed to relocate this bird.

Also of considerable interest was the sighting of yet another red Eastern Rosella on 27 October 1991, 4 km SSE of the previous location and 1 km from the first location. At 1040 h together with Trifona Tzaros, I closely observed this variant for over 15 minutes during which it fed with a normal male Eastern Rosella on the unripe blossoms of the introduced *Melaleuca armillaris*. The size, plumage, calls and behaviour of the variant were compared with those of the male Eastern Rosella. The red bird was marginally smaller than its male companion and its calls and flight pattern were the

Red variant of Eastern Rosella, near Bendigo, Victoria, 10 November 1991

Plate 34 Photo: C.L. Tzaros

same as those of an Eastern Rosella. Its plumage differed markedly from normal as most of the underparts and rump were red. The head, chest, abdomen and undertail coverts were red, the rump was red mottled with yellow, the vent area was yellow, the cheek patches were white and the back, mantle and wings were identical to those of a female Eastern Rosella. Its central tail feathers, however, were orange-green.

Since the first sighting, the variant was seen a further 13 times until the preparation of this paper.

As I became quite interested in the matter, I notified Mr Walter Boles of The Australian Museum. He commented that the bird I described was rather rare and that he had not heard of any other report of wild variants since Leadbeater's original specimen. He also suggested the bird may be a hybrid Eastern×Crimson Rosella. The Eastern×Crimson Rosella hybrid is definitely not the bird I observed as it tends to have blue and white feathers on the cheek, yellow on the lower part of the rump, a mixture of yellow, green and red feathers on the abdomen and yellow and green feathers on the back (Wyndham 1979).

The bird I observed lacked all of these combinations. Also, hybrid birds are usually intermediate in size between the two parent species. Therefore, if this bird was a hybrid, it should have been equal to or larger in size than its normal male Eastern Rosella companion. Furthermore, according to Rogan (1966), young hybrid Eastern×Crimson Rosellas were similar in appearance to the Eastern Rosella.

In a bid to confirm the identity of this bird as a definite example of the red variety of the Eastern Rosella, a visit was made to the Museum of Victoria in Melbourne. The museum's Ornithology Department possessed several Eastern Rosella skins, but of particular interest to myself were two, one of an Eastern×Crimson Rosella hybrid and the other of a red variety Eastern Rosella. The hybrid and the variant were compared together, along with detailed colour photographs of the first bird observed near Bendigo.

A plumage description of the hybrid and the red variety follows. Hybrid: crown of head, nape, forehead, throat, lesser wing coverts, chest and undertail coverts red; upper part of rump green, lower part red mottled with green-yellow; abdomen red-green; vent area yellow-red; cheeks blue (slightly paler than those of a Crimson Rosella); neck red; feathers of mantle black edged with red; upper back feathers black edged red, lower back feathers black edged green-yellow; wing coverts blue with a large black shoulder patch; flight feathers dark blue; central tail feathers dark blue; laterals blue, paler at tips. Red Variant: head, throat, lesser wing coverts, chest, abdomen and undertail coverts red; rump red faintly and sparsely mottled with yellow; vent area pale red-yellow; cheeks white; neck red; feathers of mantle black edged with red-yellow; upper back feathers black edged with red, lower back feathers black edged green-yellow; wing coverts blue with a large black shoulder patch; flight feathers grey-blue; central tail feathers orange-green; laterals blue, paler at tips.

It was noticed that not only was the plumage colouration of the two variations different from that of the hybrid, but there was also considerable difference in the size of the birds, the Eastern×Crimson hybrid being larger than the red variant.

Another item of interest was that the red variant was collected in 1899 from the district of Kyneton, Victoria (37°16'S, 144°27'E). Recently, a red variant Eastern Rosella was seen near Kilmore, Victoria (37°25'S, 144°53'E).

The red Eastern Rosella variant is now established in captivity. Brothers R.J. and S.J. Smith of Melbourne have at least 10-15, including males, in their aviary collection. They have found the variation to be sex-linked and recessive (Smith & Smith 1991), hence my observation was of a female. A photograph of Smith's captive bird and my specimen were compared and no obvious plumage differences were noted. This, therefore, leads me to believe that the bird is a red variant of the Eastern Rosella.

The red Eastern Rosella and its mate were found to feed on a variety of exotic plant species such as Dock, Onion Grass *Romulea* sp. and Hawthorn *Crataegus* sp. They also fed frequently on the green seed capsules of Drooping Cassinia *Cassinia arcuata*. Of the various food types eaten, seed material comprised the major component (67.0%). Leaves and blossoms from various *Eucalyptus* spp. were also consumed.

Owing to its colour, the presence of the red bird enabled me to identify movements of the rosella party, as it is incorporated in a group of approximately eight Eastern Rosellas. Most sightings and observations were made between 1600 and 1730 h while the bird fed and was thus more approachable. Of the total 7 hours spent observing the bird from November 1990 to July 1991, 34.5% of the time it was seen perched (including preening and resting) or feeding in *Eucalyptus* spp. or Drooping Cassinia. It was observed flying for various distances from one site to another 42.0% of the time and was seen feeding on Dock and Onion Grass (and Hawthorn to a lesser extent) 23.5% of the time.

A brief description of the bird, based on field observations and photographs, is presented below. Head, neck, chest, abdomen, rump and undertail coverts red; flanks paler red; cheeks white; back red, intermingled with orange-green and yellow on lower back; feathers of mantle black, edged with red; a distinctive white wing stripe can be seen above and under the wing extending from near the fourth to approximately the tenth primary; wing coverts mainly blue with a large black shoulder patch; central tail feathers orange-green, others blue, paler at tips.

In concluding, assuming that this variety is rather rare, I would be interested

to know if any readers have known of this bird before in the wild. If so, I would appreciate any replies to the address below.

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