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Rainbow lorikeet

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The rainbow lorikeet (*Trichoglossus haematodus*) was introduced into the wild in Perth, Western Australia, during the 1960s. When lorikeets were first recorded in the wild in Perth no action was taken to remove them. From fewer than 10 escaped or released birds, the population is now distributed over a large part of the metropolitan area and may expand to number over 20 000 birds by 2010.

The bird is now a declared pest here.

Description

The rainbow lorikeet is a small, brightly coloured parrot 26 - 31 cm in length and weighing 120 - 130 g (Figure 1). Male, female and immature birds all look similar, with young birds slightly duller in colour. Lorikeets are quite noisy, continuously screeching while in flight, at a food source or at roosts. They have a swift direct flight with rapid whirring wing beats and display flashes of dark green and bright red.



Figure 1. Rainbow lorikeet (Bird Observers Club of Australia).

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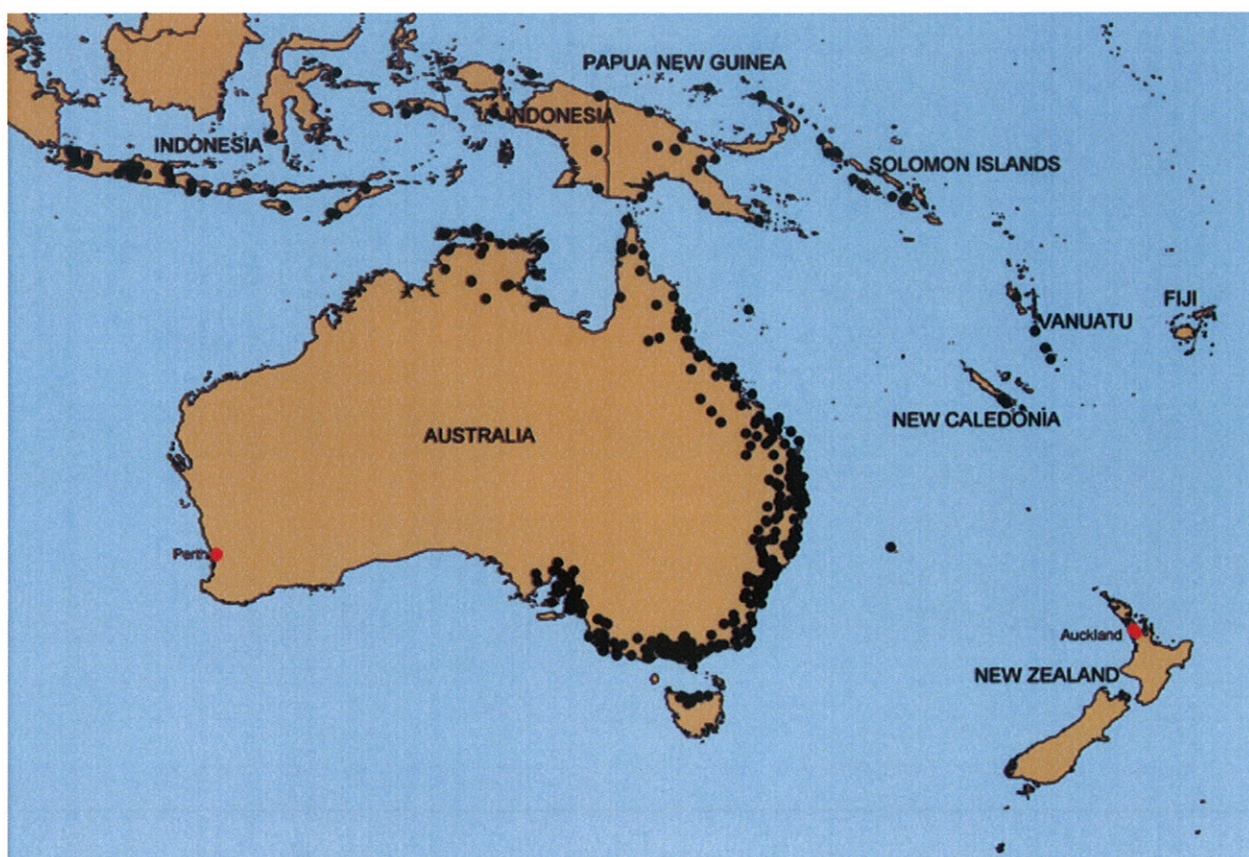


Figure 2. Natural (black) and introduced (red) distribution of the rainbow lorikeet (generated by W. Kirkpatrick using CLIMATE software).

Distribution

Various colour forms of the rainbow lorikeet occur naturally in south and east Indonesia, New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and the north and east of Australia (Figure 2). Populations are expanding in Australia's major cities because of the year-round supply of food from native and exotic plants. As well as the introduced population in Perth, intentional releases have occurred in Auckland, New Zealand. A group of around 200 birds in Auckland has now been reduced to very low numbers.

Habitat

In Perth rainbow lorikeets occur in open woodlands with mature exotic vegetation, often in association with rivers or lakes. The trees common to the long-established suburbs in which rainbow lorikeets thrive include the lemon-scented gum, coral tree, fig, date palm, cotton palm and Norfolk Island pine.

Reproduction

Lorikeets nest in the hollows of eucalypts in Perth, but they also commonly nest on the platforms at the base of palm fronds, where they sometimes excavate a nest (Figure 3). Breeding takes place from June to December and the majority of nestlings fledge in August. Pairs may breed twice per year when conditions are favourable.

Diet and behaviour

A study of rainbow lorikeets conducted in Perth in 1995 showed that the birds were eating seeds, fruits, nectar, pollen and flower parts from more than 20 plant species. They were most frequently observed feeding from exotic lemon-scented gums, spotted gums, cotton

and date palms, coral trees, and figs. They were also observed feeding from native jarrah, marri, and she-oak. Lorikeets also feed on lerps (scale insects covered in a sweet exudate).

Rainbow lorikeets roost in large, noisy groups which leave the roost at dawn, breaking up into foraging flocks of 10 to 50 birds that can travel more than 50 km to feeding sites. Lorikeets fly high and rarely go to ground, spending most of their time in the outer foliage of tall trees.

Damage

The rainbow lorikeet is a major pest of agriculture in the Northern Territory, Queensland and the fruit-growing regions of the Adelaide Hills in South Australia.

The West Australian public have reported a number of problems caused by lorikeets including noise, damage to fruit, fouling of outdoor areas and vehicles with droppings, and competition with other species (Figure 5 - 9). The large flock that often roosts at Perth Airport may also pose a bird-strike risk to aircraft. Lorikeets have been reported feeding on backyard grapes, figs, pears, apricots, nectarines, loquats, mulberries, mangoes, passionfruit, cherries, apples, peaches, plums and guavas in Perth suburbs. They have now also found their way to commercial fruit-growing areas in the Swan Valley, causing significant damage to table grapes. They have also been reported in hills orchards damaging a range of fruits.

Rainbow lorikeets aggressively protect feeding and nesting resources, potentially excluding native species. They also pose a potential disease risk to wild and captive parrots because they are carriers of Psittacine beak and feather disease.

Risk assessment

A scientific risk assessment conducted by the Department of Agriculture and Food indicates that the rainbow lorikeet poses an extreme threat (the highest of four categories) to Western Australia, and is highly likely to establish further, more widespread free-living populations (Figure 4) and become a significant pest.

Status

Under legislation administered by the Department of Agriculture and Food, rainbow lorikeets are declared pests in the southern parts of the State including the Perth metropolitan area.

They are listed as 'acclimatised fauna' under legislation administered by the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC). Rainbow lorikeets can be shot or live-trapped on private land in the south-west land division, in accordance with an open season notice under this legislation, without the need to obtain a damage licence from DEC. The notice requires that in shooting or trapping birds no damage is to be caused to any trees, and traps can only be used by persons licensed under DEC legislation.

Risk management

Given the current size of the lorikeet population in Perth, eradication is very unlikely to be achieved, but a reduction in the numbers at key locations may be possible. To do nothing will lead to further damage from a spreading population, more complaints and even less chance of managing the problem in the future.

To prevent satellite populations becoming established in the wild, small groups of lorikeets originating from escaped or released birds have been retrieved or removed from many country locations.

It is also essential that any lorikeets in the wild outside the existing Perth range be immediately reported so they can be safely retrieved or removed.

Many lorikeets are kept as pets and as they are so common, most have little monetary value. To guard against escapes and releases, lorikeets must be maintained in secure double-doored aviaries under DEC licence and unwanted birds should be surrendered, not released.

Further information

Contact any office of the Department of Agriculture and Food or the Department of Environment and Conservation or telephone Freecall 1800 084 881 or email info@agric.wa.gov.au. Additional publications on rainbow lorikeets can be obtained by visiting the website: www.agric.wa.gov.au



Figure 3. Rainbow lorikeets nesting in a palm tree in the Perth suburb of Belmont (M. Massam).

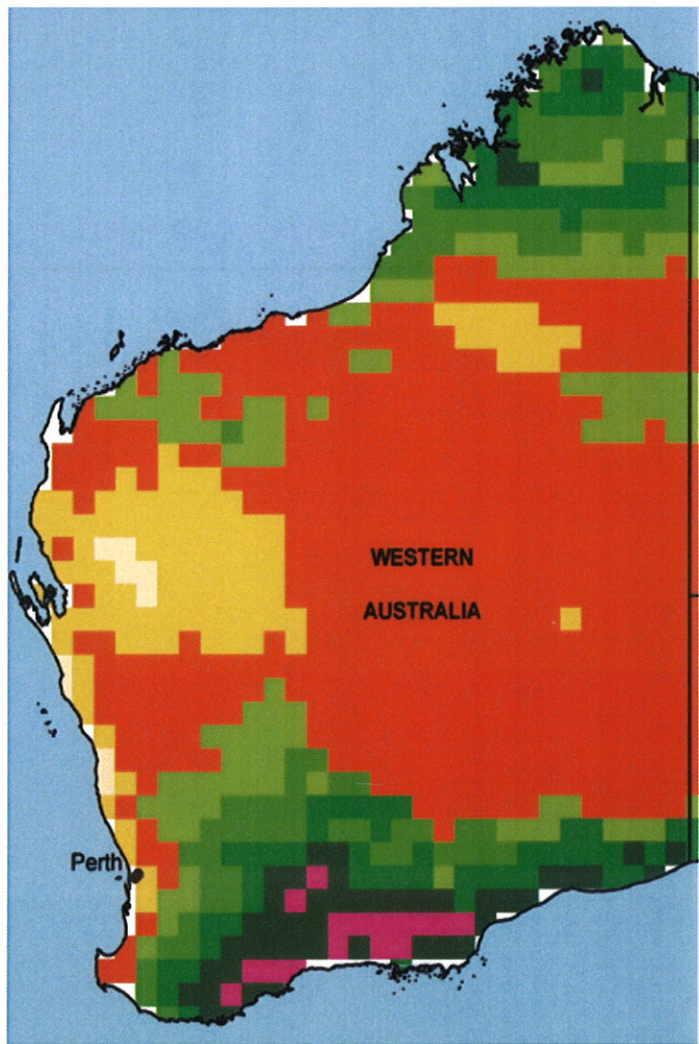


Figure 4. Map showing the similarity in climate between the rainbow lorikeet's overseas distribution and Australia; the red and green areas are where there is a high degree of overlap (generated by W. Kirkpatrick using CLIMATE).



Figure 5. Damage to car by lorikeet droppings (G. Gray).



Figure 8. Damage to commercial fig crop (C. Gordon).



Figure 6. Damage to commercial grape crop (Courtesy, R. Sinclair).



Figure 7. Damage to loquats (G. Gray).



Figure 9. Lorikeets feeding on commercial fig crop (C. Gordon).

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