

urban antics

by John Hunter



Flashes of green and yellow

While a ringneck is a local parrot, it was also a colloquial term for what my mum used to say she'd do to me if I didn't come straight home from school.

In the 1950s there was no real rush to get home from school. There was also no TV, no telephone (in my house), no portable radio and no real homework anyway. And so the old tuart down the lane was where my mates and I headed after the bell. Here, some 20 feet (there were no metrics either) up on a pinewood platform hidden among the thick foliage we could look down on suburbia. In seclusion we could discuss the day's events, compare classroom love notes from who knows who, and be entertained by resident ringneck parrots. How about that for nearer to nature ... they were the days my friend, I thought they'd never end.

The nearly all-green Australian ringneck parrot (*Platycercus zonarius*) is locally called a 'twenty-eight' or, if you're from the eastern states, a Port Lincoln parrot. The local name is taken from its main two-noted continuous whistle of 'twenty-eight twenty-eight' followed at times by 'too too too too'.

As a long-time common resident of the Perth suburbs the ringnecks attracted little or no attention from the plebs. But they could actually be any one of three subspecies:

a south-western *P.z. semitorquatus*, or a northern *P.z. zonarius* or, because the Perth area is a transition zone, a hybrid of both. Perhaps my dad was smarter than I figured when he called them 'little bastards' every time they pilfered from our backyard almond tree.

The colouring of the two major subspecies is very similar, with the larger southern animal having green belly feathers and a red forehead patch as opposed to the northern's yellow belly, little or no red on the forehead and a different call of 'plink plink' or 'kwikee'.

In the Perth region, the additional hybrids probably have duller colours, yet the distinctive yellow band on the back of the neck and some blue on the wings and cheeks usually persist. And the vocals ... well who knows, if you hear one singing 'Advance Australia Fair' give me a quick call and we'll set up an agency for bookings.

The status of the twenty-eight parrot in the metropolitan area doesn't seem to have changed a lot over the past 50 years but it is fair to say that with new 'freeloaders'

like galahs, corellas and rainbow lorikeets now in the suburbs, there is relentless pressure on food stocks and nest sites. Where there were once dozens of small groups of twenty-eights, there are now probably sporadic family groups. They appear scarce to very common in parks and backyards where they can still be seen making use of exotic herbs, fruit trees and seeds, buds and flowers of lawns and grasses.

It is sad that the giant tuart and other eucalypts are being further decimated within the metro area as people now race to subdivide and rebuild. But for now anyway, I still get a kick out of watching the undulating flight and flashes of green and yellow parrots as they race alongside my vehicle and swerve past my windscreen.

If you bother to look around, you may see a bunch of parrots in a big old tuart where they will tail-wag, head bob and chatter incessantly. If you listen further, you may even hear the laughter of little boys ... or is that just the wind?

DID YOU KNOW?

- Like most parrots, the twenty-eight is monogamous and mates for life.
- The birds are partial to feeding on spilt grains and at times fancy insects and their larvae.
- They are related to the mallee ringnecks (*Barnardius barnardi*) of the arid interior.

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