

Our Diminishing Heritage

The world distribution and evolution of parrots has availed Australia and tropical America the privilege of having the greatest number of species in the world. Because of this, the international demand for birds from these two countries is intense. In Australia one such parrot under environmental and poaching pressure is the Blue Bonnet.

There are four sub-species of Blue Bonnets, three of which are found in south-eastern Australia. They are *Psephotus haematogaster haematogaster*, *P.h. haematorrhous* and *P.h. pallescens*.

The little known, W.A. sub-species *P.h. naretha* is a smaller bird with slightly different colouring and is geographically separated from the eastern forms by 600 km of barren, waterless desert.

The Naretha Blue Bonnet has a very restricted distribution in W.A., being confined to the myall (*Acacia sowdenii*) country which fringes the western edge of the Nullarbor Plain. Narethas have been seasonally observed in the myall country south of the Nullarbor from Mundrabilla to Eucla on the W.A./S.A. border.

The Naretha Blue Bonnet differs markedly from the typical race and is best described by a full description of the male (see opposite page).

The hen is much duller with greatly reduced colours on the wings, ear-coverts and abdomen. The female is also smaller.

In its habitat of arid and semi-arid areas the bird can be observed flying low over heath, saltbush or spinifex plains. The birds generally fly quite close to the ground, rising over the higher bushes and dropping down immediately to the lower level again. A small flock of birds in flight can often be seen to part on coming to a tree, some going right, others to the left and rejoining once the tree has been by-passed.

While in flight the call is nearly always used. If alarmed, a loud *ack-ack-ack* is heard, but *P.h. naretha* is capable of a soft flute-like *cloote-cloote* when perched.

The food of Blue Bonnets consists mainly of seeds of grasses, bushes and herbaceous plants. Pieces of charcoal are also eaten, presumably to aid digestion. The seeds are procured on the ground and, as the birds usually feed under a tree or bush, an observer is not aware of their presence until they are flushed from the ground. When running over the ground the bird has a curious upright stance and appears to stretch itself to its maximum height.

(continued on page 50.)



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NARETHA BLUE BONNET

Psephotus haematogaster narethae

Distribution

Western edge of the Nullarbor Plain centred around Naretha siding from Zanthus in the west to east of Rawlinna on the East/West Trans Australia Railway line.

Habitat

Myall (*Acacia sowdenii*) country, arid semi-arid salt bush, blue bush and spinifex plain. Lightly timbered. Wholly depends on desert sheoaks (*Casuarina*) for nesting.

Description

Colour description of the male:—

The general colour above, including the greater portion of the head, the fore-neck and chest, pale brown, becoming a greyish-olive on the back. The rump and upper tail-coverts are a rich olive yellow. The nape, hind-neck, throat and upper breast are mottled with a light buff. The forehead and upper ear-coverts are a greenish-blue, changing to a deep purplish-blue on the lower ear-coverts, which have an edging of very pale yellow. This two-tone extensive facial colouring is markedly different from that of the typical race. The abdomen is very deep yellow with no red patch, while the flanks are washed with greyish olive. The under tail-coverts are vermilion. Greenish-blue is the colour of the lesser wing-coverts and shoulders. The outer median wing-coverts are scarlet, while olive yellow is the colour of the inner median and greater wing-coverts. The inner secondaries are also olive yellow, while the outer secondaries, primary coverts and primaries are ultramarine blue. The central tail feathers are dull olive-green washed with blue, while the secondary tail feathers are dull deep blue with white on the outer edges. Under the tail feathers is white washed with blue.

Length

Adult male—28.5 cm (average)

Adult female—26 cm (average)

Wing Length

Adult male—122.8 mm (average)

Adult female—112.8 mm (average)



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Nest

A hollow in the trunk or limb of the desert sheoak.

Eggs

4 to 6—22 x 18 mm, white colour, rough.

Food

Seeds of grasses and other plants and shrubs.