

# Our Diminishing Heritage

If you were lucky enough to have been in the Perenjori district in the early thirties you would have been treated to a breathtaking spectacle that was a common event those days.

In the early mornings a short distance from the homestead one would observe a large tree which appeared to be covered with cherry blossom. A loud noise resulted in the blossom lifting skywards as one enormous cloud of snowflakes reflecting bursts of white and pink as they wheeled to land en masse on a nearby tree or the ground.

The Major Mitchell (*Cacatua leadbeateri*) or Pink Cockatoo, once found in numerous large flocks throughout the west and northern wheat belt of W.A., is declining in numbers. Although sporadically distributed throughout the arid or semi-arid interior of Australia, except in the north east region, it is generally scarce.

The Major Mitchell inhabits sparsely timbered grasslands, semi-arid areas and thickly-timbered mallee scrub. The habitat is never far from water and often bordering cereal crops. The birds are a nomadic species and can be seen today in small groups or individual pairs throughout the remnant stands of York gum east of Mullewa, Morawa and Perenjori. The strongholds are thought to be in the Murchison River district where the birds seek river gum timber, and on the south coast Eucla division in the Salmon and York Gum belts.

The delicate balance of their attitude to nesting and habitat could well be the reason why they prefer the former extremities of range of the prolific populations. Departmental field officers are convinced that the spread of agriculture and the subsequent destruction of habitat is directly responsible for the birds' decline.

The Major Mitchell is normally a rather wary bird and will not allow observers to come close, although, if disturbed fly only a short distance away. They spend most of the day feeding on the ground or among the branches of trees and shrubs, eating fruit, seeds, nuts and roots. The birds drink at local waterholes in the early morning, sometimes before sunrise, and in the later afternoon.

The breeding season is August to December, but it has been observed that the birds will make no attempt to nest if it is a poor season. Even in a good season

they are the last of the cockatoos to go to nest. When courting, the male struts along a branch towards the female and with crest raised, bobs its head up and down and swishes it from side to side in a figure eight movement. The male utters soft chattering notes, then the pair preen each other.

The female lays 2-4 roundish, pure white and slightly glossy eggs in the hole or hollow of a tree or branch. The hollow nest, usually 2-3 feet deep, is lined with wood dust and bark strips. Both parents incubate the eggs, the male during the day and the female at night. The same nesting hollow is often used in successive seasons by the same pair of birds.

The Department knows at this time that the Major Mitchell Cockatoo is scarce; this opinion is quite often expressed by people on the land. It is also known through observations and patrols, that various relict populations are present. However, most known areas of habitation are also known and frequented by illegal nest robbers.

Human predations on the remaining isolated nesting sites are considered despicable acts against a country and its heritage. One such area where hundreds used to nest, accommodated only two pairs the season before last.

Land owners are refusing to allow operators to enter properties specifically to collect Major Mitchells, however, under pretence of trapping common unprotected species, the Major Mitchell nests are still being plundered at night to avoid detection. The result is that the male is left without a mate, the nest site is lost, the chicks are removed from the wild and the adult female usually frets to death.

In all known habitats, evidence has been collected to show ruthless damage and permanent destruction of trees and nests by chainsaws and axes.

The time is upon us when the present knowledge of known populations must be further investigated. The Major Mitchell must now be considered to be a "Vulnerable Species"—likely to move into an endangered category if the casual factors now at work continue operating.

Maybe those "pink clouds" were the beginning of the sunset on another beautiful wild creature.

# MAJOR MITCHELL COCKATOO

*Cacatua Leadbeateri*

## IDENTIFICATION

**Length:** 360 mm

**Male:** Crown white suffused with salmon-pink. Narrow forward-curving crest scarlet, with central band of yellow and tipped with white. Forehead, sides of head, nape, breast, upper belly and under-wing coverts salmon-pink. Lower belly, undertail coverts and upper parts, including tail, white. Undersides of flight and tail feathers strongly washed with deep salmon-pink. Eye dark brown; bill horn-coloured; legs grey.

**Female:** Similar to male but has pale red eye. Central band of yellow in crest broader than in male.

**Immatures:** Similar to adults. Eye pale brown.

## VOICE

Usual contact call, given frequently in flight, a two-syllable quavering cry, similar to, but not as raucous as that of little corella. Alarm call three to four harsh screeches.

## NESTING

Breeds August-December. Nest a hollow limb or hole in a tree. Eggs: two to four, usually three; white; oval, 39 x 30 mm. Incubation lasts 30 days. Both sexes sit, males by day and females by night. Both feed young. Chicks leave nest six weeks after hatching but stay with parents.

## DISTRIBUTION

Sporadically distributed throughout arid and semi-arid interior of Australia, except in north-eastern region.

In Western Australia found in the Murchison District, through the northern and central wheat belt and in the Eucla Division.

