

FAUNA

THE WEED WITH WINGS: RAINBOW LORIKEETS

by David Lamont

IN recent years there has been concern about the increasing population of rainbow lorikeets in Perth. Post-graduate research, completed in 1997, investigated the impact of this bird on the conservation and agricultural areas of south western Australia.

This research found that critical elements for their successful establishment in Perth have been:

- ◆ the existence and continued expansion of an under-utilised and evolving niche, consisting of a mosaic of mature exotic and native vegetation
- ◆ the generalist tendencies of rainbow lorikeets with regard to diet and nest requirements and their aggressive nature
- ◆ their 'native' status and colourful plumage which has evoked ready community acceptance
- ◆ inaction by government agencies whilst their population numbers were low.

Rainbow lorikeets are now well established in the Perth urban area, being found within a coastal strip from Fremantle to Mullaloo, ~50 km south to north. They are also present along the Canning River at Kelmscott and nearby at Armadale. Areas adjacent to the Swan River from Perth to Midland and also along the Helena River to Hazelmere, ~30 km from the coast, have also been colonised. Based on sightings from previous years there appears to be a contraction of the range, in some locations. In 1992 rainbow lorikeets were noted at Gooseberry Hill, Darlington and Middle Swan but despite concerted attempts to locate rainbow lorikeets at these localities none were observed during my survey. Earlier this year (2000) there has been a sighting of rainbow lorikeets at Darlington and at Northam feeding amongst marri blossom. The extent of their



establishment is still being defined and it may well be a number of years before this becomes apparent and stable.

The range of foods used by rainbow lorikeets in Perth appears to vary little from that described for the bird within its natural range in eastern Australia. Blossom from eastern states Eucalypts such as *E. maculata*, *E. citriodora* and *E. cladocalyx* were highly favoured and have been a significant factor in rainbow lorikeet establishment in Perth. The blossom of local Eucalypts, e.g. tuart, marri, flooded gum and jarrah are also taken freely. During field observations rainbow lorikeets were noted feeding from more than 20 species of plants, with seeds, fruits, nectar, pollen and flower parts being eaten. A high proportion (77.1%) of the food taken was of an exotic origin, i.e. not native to the Perth region.

Implications for Agriculture

Parrot damage to commercial fruit crops by parrots has occurred in WA for more than 50 years, with annual cost being estimated at more

than \$1 million in years of severe damage. The establishment of rainbow lorikeets in the prime fruit growing areas of south western Australia could exacerbate these losses. However until recently reports of the Perth population of rainbow lorikeets actually eating fruit have been virtually non-existent.

It may be that we are about to see the threat to agriculture realised. In early January of this year a householder in the northern beach suburb of Trigg, reported rainbow lorikeets to have eaten his entire crop of red seedless grapes. Although well known in the Trigg area for a number of years, this is the first known report of rainbow lorikeets eating grapes in Perth. Having now learnt that grapes can be utilised as a component of an already diverse diet, it may be only a matter of time before commercial grapes growing near Perth are utilised. Reports from South Australia suggest that rainbow lorikeets are quickly developing as the principal pest species of commercial orchards there.

Rainbow lorikeets have been gazetted as an unprotected species under the Wildlife Conservation Act, 1950, and as such may be taken by prescribed methods. However they have not been gazetted as a declared species under the Agriculture and Related Resources Act, 1976, and this can not occur until it is demonstrated that they are a threat to agriculture.

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