



No.21 Galah

Description

The galah (*Cacatua roseicapilla*), is a small pink and grey cockatoo, 24-40 centimetres in length and 227-380 grams in weight. The sexes look alike, but the eyes of the male are dark brown, while those of the female are pinkish-red (Figure 1).

Birds originating from northern or eastern Australia, subspecies *C. r. roseicapilla* (Figure 2), have a lighter crown and crest, and deep red, slightly wrinkled skin around the eye. Birds originating from western parts of Australia, subspecies *C. r. assimilus* (Figure 2), are slightly larger with a pinker crest, paler underparts and pale grey to white wrinkled skin around the eye.

Immature birds of both subspecies are duller in colour, their breasts and crowns are a mixture of pink and grey feathers and their eyes are brown. They beg for food from their parents using a continuous rasping cry.

Distribution and habitat

The galah is the most widespread and abundant of the Australian cockatoos and is found throughout the interior areas of the Australian mainland. The original habitat of the galah was chiefly inland semi-arid shrublands and drier coastal areas to the north. The birds were typically found along watercourses with suitable nesting and roosting trees.

The clearing of the Wheatbelt for grasslands and cereal crops and the establishment of permanent watering points allowed the western subspecies to expand its range to the south-west.

Galahs are now found as far south as Ongerup, Ravensthorpe and Albany and continue to spread slowly south of Perth where the keeping of horses (which are often fed grain) has provided the birds with a steady source of food. Galahs are now common in many Perth suburbs, due in part, to the escape and release of aviary birds. These birds, of various subspecies from around the country, could pose a threat to the western form through interbreeding.

Diet

Galahs forage mostly on the ground for seeds. In semi-arid shrublands they predominantly eat grass (Poaceae) and Wattle Acacia sp. seeds. In the wheatbelt, cereals (wheat (*Triticum aestivum*), oats (*Avena sativa*), barley (*Hordeum vulgare*)) can make up more than three quarters of the diet. The weed storksbill (*Erodium* sp.), is another important food. It is attractive to galahs about the

time when young birds are hatching (September), because it is still green and it is an easily digestible food.

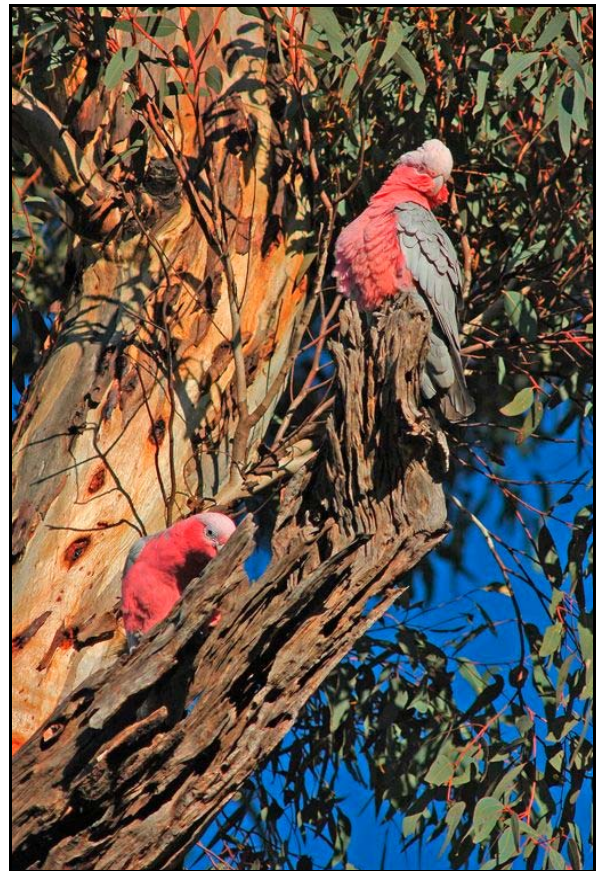


Figure 1 Galah (*Cacatua roseicapilla*), male (left) and female (right) (Photo Tony Kirkby/WA Museum).

Breeding

Hollows in living or dead eucalypts trees near a water source are used for nesting. When hollows are scarce, galahs will also use cliffs or steel pipes used for gate posts. Hollows have two distinguishing features, the bark is usually stripped from around the entrance and the hollow is lined with green eucalypt sprigs that also cover the surrounding ground.

Two to eight (average of four) white eggs are laid between July and October in the south and between February and August in the Kimberley. Both parents incubate the eggs and brood and feed the

nestlings. The incubation period is approximately 23 days and the young leave the nest 45-50 days after hatching. After fledging, young birds join others to form temporary groups or 'crèches'. They are dependent on their parents for food for the next six to seven weeks - a much shorter period of time than that of other cockatoos. For example, the young of western long-billed corellas (*Cacatua pastinator ssp.*) remain with the parents for about six months. The average number of young that leave each nest has been measured at 1.9 birds, but only about 20 per cent of these birds survive to breeding age. It is likely that birds must be at least 2-3 years of age before they can breed and on average a breeding pair would have to breed for five years to replace themselves in the population. Longevity data for galahs in the wild are scarce but one tagged bird is known to have lived for at least 20 years.

Hollow availability

At present there are sufficient eucalypts capable of providing hollows for galahs. However, few new trees have grown in the Wheatbelt for over 50 years due to grazing by livestock and rabbits and many of those that remain are dead or dying. Establishment of new trees is urgently needed in reserves and shelter belts so that future generations of galahs, and other cockatoos, have hollows to breed in.

Behaviour

Galahs are sociable birds, often seen in flocks of more than 100 individuals. Flocks of up to 2,000 have also been recorded.

Breeding birds generally pair for life and show a strong interest in the breeding hollow throughout the year, roosting nearby in dense timber each night. This gives the species an advantage over other cockatoos that do not maintain contact with a hollow and are thus out-competed by the galahs.

Pairs secure a suitable hollow and become part of local breeding populations, while juveniles move to colonise new areas and older non-breeding birds wander over large areas. It is estimated that young galahs spread into new areas at a rate of more than 7 kilometres per year.

Damage

In Western Australia, galahs eat the sprouting shoots of grain crops including wheat and oats but this is generally of little economic loss to farmers. The birds have the potential to cause significant levels of damage to sunflower and sorghum crops and have been reported damaging nut crops.

In some areas, galahs can become a nuisance around settlements by defoliating trees. They dig up roots for food on ovals and race tracks, chew wiring and other household fittings and create a nuisance with their loud calls.

The habit of removing bark from around the nest hollow can result in the ring-barking of the nest tree, which can kill the tree.

Galahs have been observed excluding the Australian ringneck (*Barnardius zonarius*) and Carnaby's cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus latirostris*) from nesting hollows on several occasions.

Status and damage reduction measures

The galah is a declared pest of agriculture under the provisions of the *Agriculture and Related Resources Protection Act 1976*, administered by the Western Australian Department of Agriculture and Food. This declaration allows for the approval and implementation of a management program in various areas of the state.

As a native species the galah is protected under the provisions of the *Wildlife Conservation Act 1950*, administered by the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC). Under this Act, galahs can be shot on private land in accordance with an open season notice without the need to obtain a damage licence from DEC. The area covered by the notice comprises the municipal districts of Westonia and Yilgarn, the Eucla division, and the south-west division excluding the Perth metropolitan region and the districts of Bunbury and Mandurah. In these open season areas galah populations are secure and damage to agriculture is likely to be an ongoing problem.

Outside the open season area, a damage licence must be obtained from DEC prior to shooting. For more information contact DEC and refer to Fauna note no. 9. Destruction of birds to reduce damage. DEC, Western Australia.

Destruction should be viewed as a last resort after all other control options have been attempted. For other management options see the notes listed under further reading. A strategy comprising a number of techniques will probably be needed to reduce damage caused by Galahs.

Further reading

- Fauna note no. 2. Scaring and repelling birds to reduce damage. DEC, Western Australia.
- Fauna note no. 3. Netting to reduce bird damage. DEC, Western Australia.
- Fauna note no. 9. Destruction of birds to reduce damage. DEC, Western Australia.
- Fauna note no. 11. Limiting access to food to reduce bird damage. DEC, Western Australia.
- Fauna note no. 13. Decoy feeding – providing alternative food to birds to reduce damage. DEC, Western Australia.
- Fauna note no. 15. Options for corella, galah and cockatoo control. DEC, Western Australia.

References

- Johnstone, R.E. and Storr, G.M. (1998) Handbook of Western Australian Birds. Volume 1. Non-passerines. Western Australian Museum, Perth.
- Rowley, I. (1990) Behavioural Ecology of the Galah. Surrey Beatty and Sons, NSW.
- Long, J.L. (1989) Breeding biology of four species of parrots in the south of Western Australia. Tech. Series No. 6. Agriculture Protection Board, South Perth.

Saunders, D.A., Rowley, I., and Smith, G.T. (1985) The effects of clearing for agriculture on the distribution of cockatoos in the southwest of Western Australia. In 'Birds of Eucalypt Forests and Woodlands: Ecology, Conservation, Management.' (Eds. Keast, A., Ford, H. and Saunders, D.) RAOU and Surrey Beatty and Sons, NSW.

Further information

Contact your local DEC office.

See the department's website for the latest information:

www.dec.wa.gov.au.

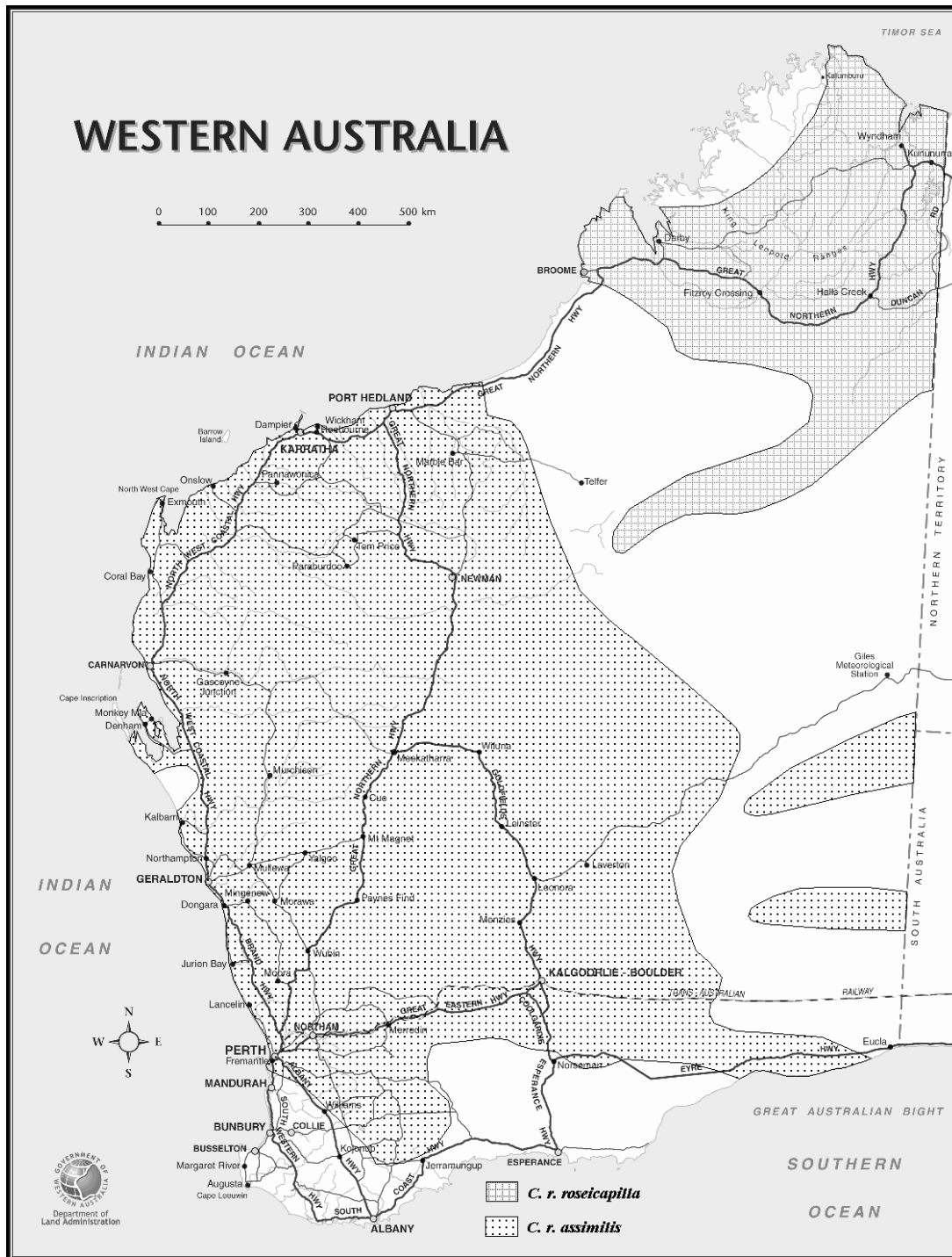


Figure 2 Distribution of galah subspecies (*C. r. roseicapilla* and *C. r. assimilis*) in Western Australia (Adapted from Johnstone and Storr (1998)).

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Further Information

Contact your local office of the Department of Environment and Conservation.
See the Department's website for the latest information: www.dec.wa.gov.au.



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