



No.24 Western rosella

The western rosella (*Platycercus icterotis*) is endemic to Western Australia and is one of a number of medium-sized parrots found in the south-west of the state. It is occasionally blamed for damaging soft fruit crops but most of this damage is caused by other parrot species.

Description

The western rosella is 24-30 centimeters in length and weighs 54-65 grams. Adult males have a scarlet head and body with yellow cheek patches and the feathers on the back are black with green margins (Figure 1). Females are generally less brightly coloured with duller cheek patches and the head and breast are mostly green (Figure 1). Immature birds have more green than females and they do not have a distinct cheek patch.

The colour of this rosella differs between coastal and inland areas. In the south-west subspecies (*P. i. icterotis*), the feathers of the upper back are black with green margins and in the inland subspecies (*P. i. xanthogenys*), the feathers of the upper back are black with red margins. The western rosella is generally a quiet bird but when calling it gives a melodious 'pink pink' or 'ching-ching' call.

Similar birds include the red-capped parrot (*Purpureicephalus spurius*) and the Australian ringneck (*Barnardius zonarius*). The red-capped parrot has a yellow rump, while the western rosella has a green rump. The Australian ringneck has a black head and blue cheeks, while the western rosella has a green or scarlet head and green or yellow cheeks.

Distribution and habitat

The south-west subspecies is found in eucalypt forests and woodlands among the wetter areas of Jurien to Green Range including areas containing flooded gum (*Eucalyptus rudis*), karri (*E. diversicolor*), marri (*Corymbia calophylla*) and paperbark (*Melaleuca* spp). The inland subspecies is found in eucalypt and sheoak woodlands and scrubs, especially those containing wandoo (*E. wandoo*), flooded gum, salmon gum (*E. salmonophloia*), tall mallee and rock sheoak (*Allocasuarina huegeliana*). Hybrid birds, with characteristics of both subspecies, are found in areas between the two subspecies (see Figure 2).

The western rosella has undergone a significant change in distribution and status and since 1970. It has declined or become extinct from more than 25 per cent of the shires where it was once found. It appears to be locally extinct in the shires of Coorow, Dandaragan, Moora, Dalwallinu, Merredin, Quairading, Serpentine-

Jarrahdale and Murray and has declined in the Swan, Kalamunda, Northam, York, Armadale-Kelmscott, Capel and Dumbleyung shires.

This parrot has disappeared from the northern and eastern parts of the Wheatbelt because of the removal of its feeding and breeding habitat. There are no shires in Western Australia where the western rosella is thought to be increasing in number but it remains relatively common in the lower south.



Figure 1 Western rosella south-west subspecies (*Platycercus icterotis icterotis*) mature male (above) and immature bird (below) (Photos Robin Knox, Agriculture Protection Board of Western Australia).

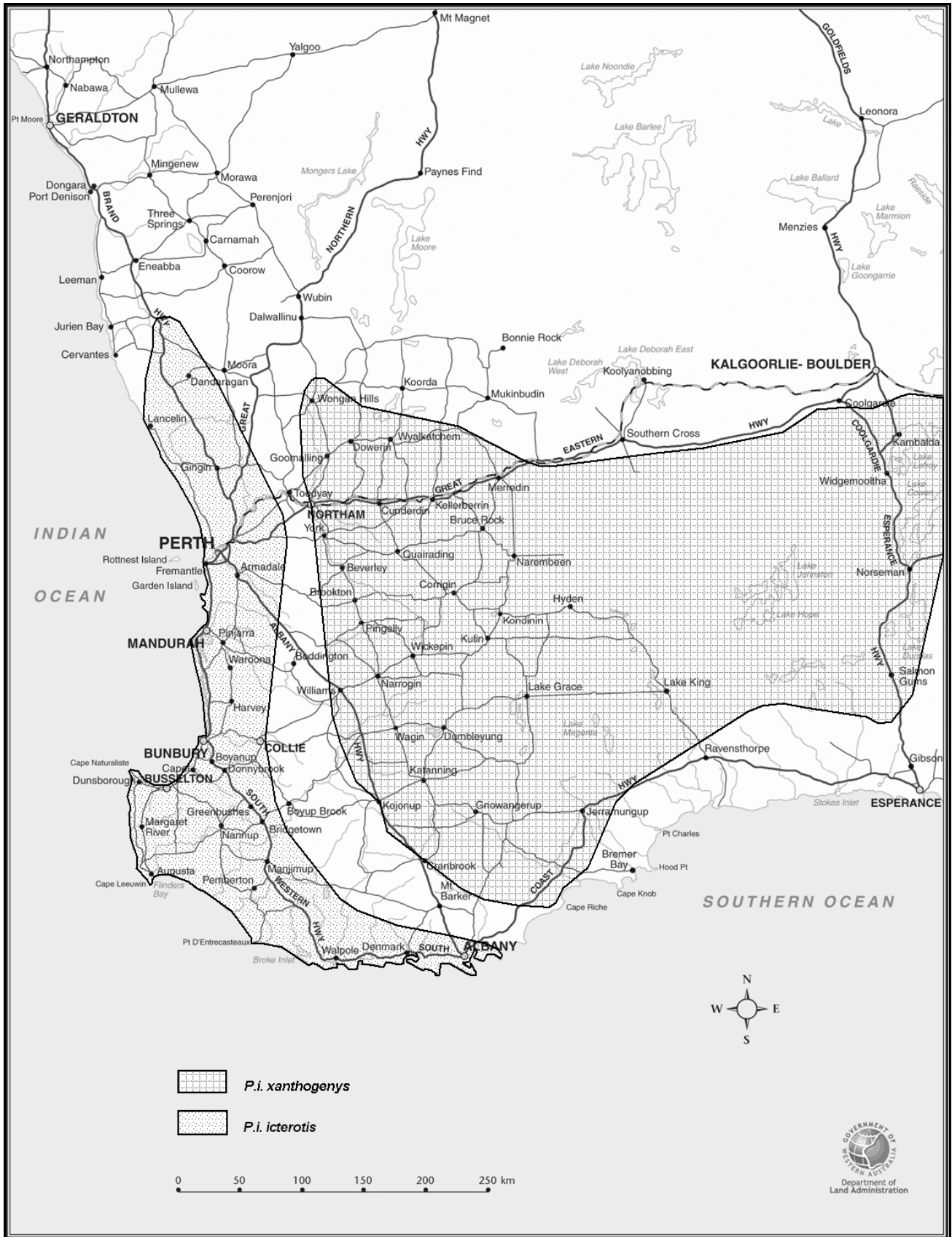


Figure 2 Distribution of the western rosella in Western Australia showing the inland subspecies (*P. i. xanthogenys*) and the south-west subspecies (*P. i. icterotis*) (Adapted from Johnstone and Storr (1998)).

Diet

To some extent, the western rosella has been able to adapt to environmental change by incorporating introduced plant species into its diet. However, it feeds on a much smaller range of seeds than the Australian ringneck, for example, and this is probably why the rosella has a more limited distribution.

Common food items include the seeds of subterranean clover (*Trifolium subterraneum*), sheoak (*Casuarina* spp.), capeweed (*Arctotheca calendula*), thistles (*Carduus* spp.), flatweed (*Hypochaeris* spp.) and other weed species. The seeds of eucalypts and a variety of other native plants are also eaten and nectar also forms a part of the diet. Insects are consumed, particularly in winter and spring, and these are also fed to nestlings.

Breeding

Western rosellas nest in hollows, mainly in marri, wandoo, york gum (*E. loxophleba*), flooded gum and salmon gum. A study of the breeding biology of rosellas at wickepin and dudinin showed that the birds first enter hollows in July. One week before eggs are laid, the birds spend a considerable portion of the day in the hollow. The male feeds the female while she is incubating eggs in the hollow.

Between August and November, two to seven eggs (average of six) are laid and the eggs are incubated for 23-25 days. The young leave the nest between October and December, five weeks after hatching. Breeding success (the percentage of eggs that yield independent birds) has been measured at 72 per cent but this figure is likely to vary with the quality of the season.

Behaviour

Rosellas are usually found in pairs or small parties and occasionally in larger flocks of up to 30 individuals at drinking or feeding sites. They forage both on the ground and in trees and shrubs.

Damage

Western rosellas have been recorded feeding on apples and stone fruit but mostly appear to eat fruit that has already been damaged by other parrot species.

Rosellas also cause a small amount of damage to protea crops but most of the time they are seen in Protea flower crops, they are foraging on the ground for weed seeds.

Status

Until 1998, the western rosella was a declared pest of agriculture under the provisions of the *Agriculture and Related Resources*

Protection Act 1976. It has now been removed from the list of declared species because the damage it causes to fruit crops is low and this parrot has declined or become locally extinct in some areas.

The western rosella is a protected native species under the provisions of the *Wildlife Conservation Act 1950*, administered by the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC). The inland subspecies (*P. i. xanthogenys*) is a rare threatened species that is likely to become extinct. It may not be destroyed under any circumstances.

Damage licences must be obtained from DEC before rosellas can be destroyed - contact the local DEC office for more information. For management options see the fauna notes listed under further reading

Further reading

- Fauna note no. 18. Options for parrot control. DEC, Western Australia.
- Fauna note no. 22. Australian ringneck. DEC, Western Australia.
- Fauna note no. 23. Red-capped parrot. DEC, Western Australia.

References

Johnstone, R.E. and Storr, G.M. (1998) Handbook of Western Australian Birds. Volume 1. Non-passerines. WA Museum.

Mawson, P.R. and Long, J.L. (1995) Changes in the status and distribution of four species of parrot in the south of Western Australia during 1970-90. *Pac. Cons. Biol.* 2 (2): 191-199.

Massam, M.C. (1990) Protea yields are reduced by native birds in south-west Western Australia. Agriculture Protection Board unpublished report.

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Long, J.L. (1985) Damage to cultivated fruits by parrots in the south of Western Australia. *Aust. Wildl. Res.* 12: 75-80.

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Further information

Contact your local DEC office.

See the department's website for the latest information: www.dec.wa.gov.au.

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