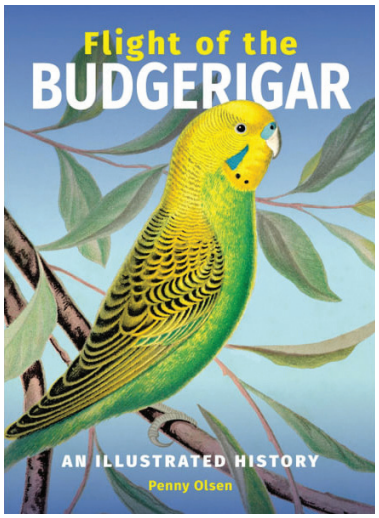
Book Review



Flight of the Budgerigar: an illustrated history. Penny Olsen 2021. NLA Publishing. Soft-cover. 272 pp., colour and black and white illustrations. ISBN: 978-642-27960-6. RRP $A 49.99.

Penny Olsen AM, an honorary professor at The Australian National University, will be well known to most *Corella* readers as the highly-accomplished author of many books on Australian natural history and the scientists and artists who have recorded it. Bird species that have captured her attention include the Paradise Parrot, Night Parrot and Wedge-tailed Eagle, and bird artists whose careers and work she has documented include Neville Cayley and William T. Cooper. This book focuses on a native Australian parrot whose natural history is not very extensively documented, but which has become known and loved as a pet and show bird around the world. It is the history of this domestication that forms the core of this work. The book is meticulously researched, engagingly and lucidly written, wide-ranging yet focused in its scope, and excellently illustrated.

Olsen starts by summarising the natural history of wild Budgerigars. However, as indicated above, perhaps partly because of their great mobility and the harsh, arid environment that they inhabit, our knowledge of their ecology and behaviour is rather sparse. This granivorous species has a huge geographic range in arid and semi-arid Australia and occurs in open woodlands, grasslands and shrublands. It seems that budgies can be nomadic, resident or migratory and undertake long movements regularly or irregularly, depending on the prevailing circumstances. They are certainly opportunistic breeders and there are spectacular irruptions of millions of birds from the inland to the coast when periods of intensive breeding during high food abundance in the interior are followed by drought. Budgies usually nest colonially in tree hollows and can breed when only 3-4 months old, although some pairs only reproduce every few years during dry periods. Their predators include exotic cats and native reptiles and raptors. Possibly the most striking feature of their social behaviour is their gregarious nature: they can form flocks of tens of thousands or possibly even millions when food is very abundant. Olsen also points out that the Budgerigar was a totem animal for some First Nations peoples. She argues that its behaviour was probably helpful to some indigenous groups in helping them to find water sources and assess approaching weather, whilst other clans exploited it as a food source.

Olsen is particularly good at carefully documenting the history of the discovery of both poorly known and iconic Australian wildlife. In Chapters 2-4, she traces the intriguing history of the Budgerigar from its scientific 'discovery' in the early 1800s, when the first specimen was sent to England, to it becoming a widespread household pet in Britain and Europe by the 1860s-1870s. John Gould, as well as publishing one of the early illustrations of the species (painted by his wife, Elizabeth) in *The Birds of Australia*, was in 1840 probably one of the first importers of live Budgerigars to England, albeit only two individuals! However, the export of live budgies to Britain and Europe rapidly developed into a huge trade. The trapping activity that supplied this trade was lucrative, if often cruel; Adelaide eventually became the main export centre and entrepreneurial captains and crews of ships whose main cargo was commodities such as wool became the main importers. However, the advent of large-scale captive-breeding in Britain and Europe from the 1860s onwards precipitated a decline in the import trade, and eventually captive-bred birds came to dominate the market there. By the late 1800s and early 1900s, pet budgies were thriving in many British, European and North American homes not only within the confines of small cages, but also in more spacious indoor rooms and outdoor aviaries that permitted greater mobility.

The period between the two World Wars saw the proliferation in Britain and Europe of 'The Fancy', the breeding of Budgerigars for exhibition in specialist, competitive shows. Many new colour varieties were bred and standards to which exhibited birds had to conform to be successful were established. This expansion was fostered by the establishment of numerous Budgerigar societies and clubs and the publication of a large volume of literature on the domesticated bird, including Whatmough's landmark *The Cult of the Budgerigar*. Olsen highlights the ironic fact that throughout the period of 'budgiemania' in Britain and Europe from 1850-1920, Australians preferred exotic birds, such as the canary, as household pets, and it was only in the 1920s-1930s that domesticated budgies were finally imported into Australia and became popular pets and exhibition birds. Neville Cayley, a familiar name to Australian ornithologists, was a keen budgie breeder, championed the establishment of 'The Fancy' in Australia and wrote the first Australian book on budgies, *Budgerigars in Bush and Aviary*.

Not surprisingly, Budgerigar keeping, breeding and showing declined in Europe during World War II, but it revived and spread spectacularly post-war to the point where a World Budgerigar Convention was staged in England in 1954 and an estimated six million birds were being kept as household pets in that country in 1959. However, this boom was relatively short-lived and, as Olsen describes in Chapter 11, although the species is still a popular pet and show bird in many parts of the world including Australia, 'budgiemania' is on a much more modest scale now.

Nonetheless, a World Budgerigar Organisation was formed as recently as 1994 and now has over 40 member countries, and there are regular World Budgerigar Championships!

The author supplements the text of this fascinating history of the Budgerigar with vignettes that explore intriguing features of the story in more detail. For example, one dealing with the bird's affinities points out that it was originally thought to be closely related to ground and grass parrots, but is now known through genetic studies to belong to a clade including the lories, lorikeets and fig-parrots that diverged from a common parrot ancestor when Australia began to become arid 15 million years ago. In another vignette, Olsen discusses the many names that the Budgerigar has had since its 'discovery' in the early 1800s. Its original scientific name was *Psittacus undulatus* because of the scalloped plumage pattern on its back, but after several further name changes Gould eventually altered the generic name to *Melopsittacus* in view of the species' vocal ability and that name has stuck. It has had many common names too: early ones included Shell Parrot, Undulated Parrot and Love-bird, and it is still sometimes referred to by the latter name (or Parakeet) in the USA. Olsen tells us that the name Budgerigar appears to be derived from 'Budgery', meaning 'good or excellent' in a pidgin English sometimes used at the time of European settlement of Australia, and 'Gar', which might refer to the bird's known edibility at that time – hence Budgerigar might mean 'good to eat'!

Another vignette describes the use of live budgies as targets in shooting competitions in the mid-1800s; fortunately, the birds were mostly too elusive for the shooters and the practice soon ceased! In another of these feature articles the author humorously describes the relationship between UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Toby, his much-loved budgie friend. Toby was permitted to roam freely during early morning cabinet meetings at Churchill's bedside and apparently sometimes relieved himself on the balding head of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who was heard to remark in response "The things I do for England". Budgerigars are known for their ability to mimic human speech and Olsen also refers in a further vignette to two of the most remarkable talking budgies on record. Sparkie Williams at 4 years old had a repertoire of 580 words and eight complete nursery rhymes. He made a hit record, and appeared on TV and radio and, appropriately, in a birdseed commercial! Puck, an American budgie, had the largest known mimicked vocabulary of any bird, some 1,728 words, and he created novel sentences and phrases. On Christmas Day in 1993 he spontaneously celebrated with "It's Christmas. That's what's happening. That's what it's all about. I love Pucky. I love everyone."

Olsen's text is accompanied by many illustrations drawn from a wide range of sources. There are reproductions of historic Budgerigar paintings and excellent colour photographs of wild and domesticated budgies. There are also photographic images of significant people in Budgerigar history (including HRH Queen Elizabeth as a young budgie keeper at Windsor), newspaper articles, advertisements and booklet covers. The provenance of all these illustrations is given in a List of Illustrations at the back of the book. There is also a detailed bibliography that helpfully lists all the references by chapter.

I confess that before I read Olsen's erudite book I knew little of the remarkable story of the domestication of the Budgerigar. The book was so absorbing that I 'devoured' it in a day and I shall now look at caged pet budgies with a new respect. Anyone interested in birds will find this very reasonably-priced and well organised book fascinating reading and will acquire a lot of intriguing information about an animal that we often regard merely as an amusing and sociable pet.

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