



EPPA GAZETTE ~ Fall 08

A Publication of the Edmonton Pet Parrot Association

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Above: Lucy, the
Maroon-bellied
Conure.



Above: This handsome parrot is Kiwi, an Alexandrine Parrot who belongs to the Gruenberg family.

Contacts:

Louise (President): louise.walden@shaw.ca

Petra (Vice President): pkh@telus.net

Jessie (Secretary): jzgurski@ualberta.ca

Sandy (Treasurer): svieville@hotmail.com

Past Meetings and Events

April's Meeting

For April's meeting, Pam M. gave a talk on some of the different parrot toys she makes for her birds and often has for sale. Thanks to Pam for her presentation!

May's Meeting

For May's meeting, Dr. Theresa Bousquet from the Park Veterinary Clinic gave a presentation on dealing with and preventing bird illness and emergencies.

In thanks, Dr. Bousquet was presented with a Military Macaw wall tile decoration.

Later, I was sent a thank you note, which read: *Thank you very much for inviting me to speak to your club. I had a blast hanging out with your "flock. Thank you for the lovely tile. We are looking for an appropriate place to display it in the clinic."*

The Park Veterinary Centre is in Sherwood Park at 101 Broadway Blvd. (1 780 417 1119). They work on dogs, cats and small exotics, such as birds, rodents, rabbits, reptiles and ferrets.

June's Picnic.

Rather than have a meeting, in June we usually have a picnic. I would like to thank Petra K. for hosting it at her house.

We had many items donated by **Hagen**, <http://www.hagen.com/hari/welcome.htm> that included a large Vision cage, and many bags of food, toys, and perches. Their website above also has a lot of interesting parrot care articles on it.

During June, we were also invited to have an information table at a Farmer's Market at Capilano Mall. I'd like to send a big "Thank you!" to Melanie, Kathy, Marie & Dwayne, Linda & Danny & family, and David & Louise for coming along with their parrots. I apologize if I missed anyone.



Above: Pictures taken at the Capilano Mall info. table. Top: Melanie & Frizzle (Indian Ringneck) & Liberty (Princess Parakeet). Bottom: Linda and a Jenday Conure.

August's Meeting.

For August's meeting, Petra showed some photos she took at the World Parrot Refuge on Vancouver Island.

Their website is:
<http://worldparrotrefuge.org/> .

Thanks to Petra for her talk and to Joy R. for bringing the snacks!

September's Meeting

For September's meeting, we made toys for our parrots. Thanks to Dave W. for arranging our toy-making session and to Nancy for bringing snacks.

Upcoming Events

For October's meeting, we will be discussing how to make a bird first-aid kit and how to deal with emergencies when an avian vet is not available. October's meeting will be at the City Arts Centre (10943 84 Ave).

We have also been asked to set up an information table at the Capilano Mall's farmer's market on Saturday, October 4th. Capilano mall is on 98 Ave and 50 St. We need members to come out with their parrot(s). This would last from 9:30 am to 5:30 pm. However, staying the whole time is not necessary, so if you can only come for a couple hours, it would be much appreciated! contact Louise for more details.

Website

Our website is www.eppa.ca . We have a page with pictures and brief biographies of member's birds and if you'd like your bird to be included, please Email his or her picture to Louise at louise.walden@shaw.ca. We also have a section for member's websites, so if you have a parrot-related website, please send the URL along to Louise.

Parrot-related Websites

A couple of our members help moderate internet discussion groups. The URLs are:

<http://www.theperch.net/discussion>
<http://www.3featheredfriends.net>

These look like nice, friendly places to chat about your parrots with other people from throughout the world. Thanks to Megan G. and Christel B. for sending these along.

I'm also going to do a bit of totally shameless self-promotion here and note that I've been posting parrot-related articles I've written, along with news about parrots on a blog at zoologica.wordpress.com.

There are also a few sites out there that have parrot-related podcasts available for download. These include:

<http://www.petliferadio.com/> (click on the "Wings and Things" icon to get to the parrot stuff.

The above podcast is hosted by professional trainer Barbara Heidenreich.

Her blog here:
<http://goodbirdinc.blogspot.com/>
also has a lot of useful information on it.

This podcast:

<http://www.scratches.com/podcast/index.html>

is hosted by Marguarite Floyd, who also writes for
<http://www.parrotchronicles.com/>

Photo Page



Top to Bottom: Bishop the Mitred Conure, Buttons the Umbrella Cockatoo and Lucy the Maroon-bellied Conure. Bishop belongs to David & Louise, Buttons belongs to Richard & Petra and Lucy belongs to Jessie & Quentin.

Top to Bottom: Snowy, Pete's Citron-crested Cockatoo, Marie & Dwayne's Scarlet Macaw, and Azzie, Kathy's Hawkheaded Parrot.

Meet the Kea: New Zealand's Mountain Parrot

By: Jessie Zgurski

(This is a slightly longer version of an article I wrote for *Parrots* magazine)

Last year, I learned that one of the scientific societies I belong to was going to hold its annual conference in Christchurch, New Zealand, during June, 2007. I was elated to hear this – after all, who wouldn't want to visit such a beautiful country? In particular, I enjoy bird watching and hiking, and New Zealand is home to many national parks and several unusual bird species. Now I had a good reason to go there.

The charming, needle-nosed kiwi is generally the animal that most people think of when the subject of New Zealand wildlife is brought up. However, to me, another animal came to mind when I realized I had the chance to visit New Zealand. It's an offbeat creature that is among the most intelligent and adaptable of all non-human animals. I decided that I *must* see this animal in the wild on my trip.

The animal I refer to is a very clever, curious parrot. And it's no ordinary parrot. To most people, parrots are brightly-coloured inhabitants of steamy tropical rainforests. However, this parrot makes its home at chilly, high-elevation sites that are often covered in snow. It is also cloaked in plain, earth-toned feathers rather than the bright green or blue ones many parrots have. I am referring, of course, to the kea. New Zealanders I met often described keas as being "cheeky," and there's even a café on the West Coast called the "Cheeky Kea." Other verbs often used to describe

it are "mischievous", "roguish", and "clownish" — all apt descriptions of this peculiar creature, as shall become apparent.

I asked a few people I know who have visited New Zealand where I could see keas. Anyone I asked who had visited the mountainous national parks on the South Island had seen keas, and a few people assured me I would see them if I went to any of these tourist-frequented areas. Two different people also noted that, "You won't have to find the keas – they'll find you!"

So, after the conference, I took the TranzAlpine train across the Alps and rented a car in Greymouth. I explored the beautiful and diverse Westland Tai Poutini National Park, but despite doing a fair bit of hiking, I found no keas. So, I made my way south, and drove to Milford Sound, in Fiordland National Park. The scenery along the road to Milford Sound is absolutely fabulous and includes rocky mountains, thick, emerald-green forests and several large, clear lakes. The road is often clogged with tour buses, but it wasn't so bad in the winter and I lucked out and got a perfect, clear day for my drive.

I made it to Milford Sound shortly after most tour buses had left so I had the place almost to myself. I was immediately treated to the site of a lovely White Heron, or *Kotuku*, a bird that is very rare in New Zealand. I also found some busy Silvereyes, a pair of black Oystercatchers, and some Paradise Ducks. There were "Please Do Not Feed the Kea" signs around, so I figured there must be some keas in the vicinity. For the moment, I decided to try to photograph the heron and the ducks.

The place was fairly quiet except for the ethereal song of the Bellbird. I crept towards the heron and snapped some photos. I then sat on a bench for a bit, to enjoy the view and the Bellbird's songs, until a loud, shrill screech broke the silence. I had heard that sound before at an aviary at the zoo in Christchurch. Keas!

The kea's call is very distinctive sounding and really can't easily be mistaken for any other bird noise. The Maori actually named the bird after its call: Keeeaaaaah! I followed the noise and came across the site of a young kea sitting on a very short, stone fence. He was hunched over with his wings out alongside his body, with the tips touching the ground. With body feathers loose and fluffed out, beak down and open, and tail fanned out, he was squealing at another kea on the ground, who was digging around for roots. I watched the juvenile kea pester his elder for a while, when I spotted a third one up on a roof, who was calmly surveying her surroundings.



What was the juvenile trying to convey with his odd posture? At first, I figured that he must be begging the other kea for food. But the posture wasn't quite right, as begging parrots tend to look up at, not down to, the bird they are begging from.

With his head and wings down, the young kea could have been taking on a submissive posture, but the adult seemed to be backing away from the fluffed-up, noisy juvenile.

I found out later he wasn't necessarily begging to the older kea, nor was he solely trying to be submissive. He was taking on a posture that Judy Diamond and Alan Bond call "hunching" in their book, *Kea: Bird of Paradox – the Evolution and Behavior of a New Zealand Parrot*. Of all age and sex classes, juvenile keas hunch most often and juvenile males do it more than females. Juveniles most often hunch to adult males and they generally vocalize while they are hunching.

Now, keas – like most wild parrots – can be very possessive of food. However, adults will allow hunching juveniles to feed very close to them. Additionally, adults will sometimes try to drive other keas away from a patch of food. But if a juvenile kea hunches towards an adult, the adult will be much less likely to try to drive the juvenile away. Juveniles will also hunch to any adult, while they only beg from their male parent once fledged. Later on in the evening, I saw a juvenile kea hunch to two adult keas in a short time period.

A hunching kea is being both mildly aggressive and deferential at the same time. He pushes the adult away, but indicates with his lowered beak and wings that he intends no real harm. Generally, the adult was gentle towards the juvenile, except for one small incident.

At one point, when the adult wouldn't move away from the juvenile, the juvenile stood up taller, fluffed out his head

feathers and spread his wings out. Now, if a kea wants to intimidate another kea, he'll show the red under his wings, much like a matador provoking a bull with a red cape. The adult wasn't pleased with this insubordination, and the two got into a brief tussle, rolling around and nipping at each other. The spat ended rather quickly, and the two went back to foraging and exploring like nothing had happened. It's rare for parrots to seriously injure each other over anything other than nest holes and adults will almost never harm juveniles.

How could I tell the juvenile from the adults? It's actually quite easy with keas. Young keas have an orange eye ring and an orange lower mandible, while these are black in adults (over 3 years old). The males and females are a bit more difficult to tell apart. Males are usually about 20% heavier than females and their beaks are longer. However, it can take a lot of kea watching to be able to tell the difference, so while I refer to certain birds in this article as "he" or "she," I cannot say that I'm completely certain of what sex the birds I was watching were.



After sitting and watching the keas for a while, I could see why all the "Do Not Feed the Kea" signs are necessary. This trio of keas was not scared of humans

and it could be tempting to toss them treats, particularly when they look at you and wail. However, it's never a good idea to hand feed wildlife, because it could make them dependent on human food. Additionally, the snacks humans eat are often unhealthy for animals, and being handfed can make wild animals very pushy and aggressive towards people. However, these keas, while they let me get quite close, did not come to approach me. They went about their business as though I wasn't there. Hopefully, that means people are obeying the signs.

That was a bit different from my experience with the Sulfur-crested Cockatoos I saw in Sydney during a stopover there on the way to Christchurch. They were gorgeous birds and I loved watching them, but one did come to chew on my coat and shoes while I sat photographing them. Later, I saw a few young people feeding them, so the bold behavior of the cockatoo was likely due to his expecting food from me. He even poked around in my pockets ("Where are the snacks?") before I stood up and walked off. Luckily, these cockatoos still spent a lot of their time foraging on natural foods and most ignored all the people around.



Back to the keas: The three I saw displayed the characteristic inquisitive and destructive nature their species is famous (even infamous) for. They spent a lot of time foraging for roots, but they also stopped to poke around on the ground near the rubbish bins behind a restaurant and the juvenile started ripping up some plastic he found on a roof. Another adult jabbed at a tire for a bit. The rubbish bins were shut tight and sealed so the keas couldn't go in them to eat scraps and toss trash everywhere. When keas forage in trash bags or piles of vegetation, they will literally toss non-food items out of the way after inspecting them. They can be quite clever at getting access to trash and may simply shove aside heavy objects placed on the bins by people to keep the keas out.

No one will ever call the kea a fussy eater, since they will gladly eat almost anything that's edible. This includes the parts of over 100 plant species (especially the fruits and seeds), snails, insects, meat and garbage. Some will drag shearwater chicks from their nests to consume them, and they will eat rabbits and rodents. They will also scavenge on sheep carcasses, and some will even kill sheep by digging at their backs with their beaks. The government declared a bounty on keas because of this in the 1880s, which led to a sharp decline in the species' abundance. Keas are now a protected species because there are less than 5000 of them left. Instead of shooting keas, ranchers can report problem birds to the department of conservation, who will send officers to investigate the problem and relocate problem birds.

I'll admit I was skeptical when I read about the kea's predatory behavior

towards large mammals. Really, *parrots* killing full-grown sheep? But it's true, and keas have been caught on video tape attacking sheep. They will land on sheep's backs and start pulling off wool, sometimes going farther by digging holes in the sheep's skin. The sheep can then die of infection. Keas will eat sheep carcasses, going for the kidneys first.



Before humans arrived, land mammals besides bats had been absent on New Zealand for millions of years, and keas – as bright and curious as they are – quickly figured out that sheep can be a very valuable food source. This is almost certainly due to their tendency to examine new items. In contrast to keas, most adult wild animals are wary of things they've never seen before, and that's why they avoid people. When sheep arrived in New Zealand, keas likely went to check them out by landing on them and picking at them with their beaks. The wool was no doubt fun for them to pull out, and the sheep were probably like big, furry toys to them. At some point, various birds figured out they could reach the edible flesh by digging at the sheep hard enough. Keas also examined the bodies of sheep that died naturally, and found out that they were a rich, nutritious food source. All that fat and protein would be like winning a lottery jackpot for a kea, especially in

winter when high-energy food sources are scarce and they are at a real risk of starvation.

Aside from allowing them to learn to exploit new food sources, their intelligence also makes keas a challenge for biologists to trap. Diamond and Bond (1999) report in their book that they needed to catch and band keas so they could identify individuals in their studies on them. They set up a trap baited with butter – a fine delicacy for keas – and placed a drop net over it. The keas quickly learned to get the butter while avoiding capture. One bird would run over, jiggle the trap just enough to make the net drop, run away quickly, and then go back and eat the butter through the net. Other birds would wait until another fellow kea tripped the net, and then they'd run in and try to steal the butter through the net before the biologists came to mark and release the trapped kea. Others mastered the skill of quickly bolting under the net and grabbing some butter and running with it before the net fell.

Biologists doing studies on captive keas have also shown that these parrots have remarkable problem-solving skills. For example, in Austria, biologists gave seven captive keas access to a long, wooden perch, in the middle of which hung a long string which had an object smeared with a mix of butter and egg yolk on the end of it. This experiment was done by Dagmar Werdenich and Ludwig Huber and the results were reported in the journal *Animal Behaviour* in 2006. The intention was to see if the keas would figure out how to get the butter. The only way they could do so would be to pull the string up, hold the pulled-up piece of string down on the perch with the foot, and repeat until the

butter was in reach. The butter was not accessible from the ground or from flight. The keas had never handled string before. This puzzle is extremely difficult for most animals to figure out, although ravens – another very intelligent animal – can often figure this out quite quickly.

What about the keas? Well, the butter sure intrigued them, and all showed immediate interest in it. One fledgling took several trials over the span of a month before he managed to get the butter. His lack of foot coordination hampered his first efforts at getting it. The adults, however, all figured out the right sequence of motions to do to get the butter in one trial, in six minutes or less. One individual took a mere 9 seconds on her first trial and four out of six adult birds got the butter in 16 seconds or less. The birds who took a few minutes to get the butter improved their performance in subsequent trials, showing that keas can learn from their mistakes. There's almost no chance that the sequence of actions the keas used to get the butter was instinctive, and some keas immediately solved the problem, showing that it wasn't necessarily trial-and-error learning. They had to use their insight to get their reward.

Back at Milford Sound, I watched the keas until it became dark and then I headed up to the motel. However, that wasn't the last of my kea sightings for the day. I spotted one with my flashlight messing around under a truck while I was getting my luggage out of my car. Seeing that, I was glad I got extra insurance on my rental car. Keas will chew the parts off of cars, especially the wipers. Keas will also pick through any other interesting items humans leave in their reach, including backpacks, coats, laundry on a clothesline, tents, or boots

(the latter they'll go for even if a person is still wearing them). Keas have also been known to get into mountain huts through chimneys. Once in, they'll have a grand time shredding and ruining anything they find and scattering the remains about. Dishes may be smashed, and even the door and window frames could be attacked and destroyed. It's generally the juveniles that cause this kind of trouble. After leaving their parents, young birds flock together until they're old enough to start their own families. While adult keas are curious and enjoy chewing things, juvenile keas are extra-inquisitive and destructive.

Later on, an hour after seeing the juvenile under the car, a group of keas, as people had predicted, found me. I heard a familiar squealing sound outside my motel room door, and outside were three keas (the same from before?) milling around. One juvenile was hunching to and pushing around two other keas, who were generally exploring the parking lot. I watched them for a while and went back inside. I could hear them busily running around the boardwalk outside my room for another half hour or so.

While they must spend a lot of time foraging and resting, particularly in winter, keas also spend a lot of time exploring (even if not hungry) and playing. Their play behavior is the most complex of any bird species. Keas will throw items straight up in the air in play, sometimes jumping up exuberantly after the thrown item. Such "object play" is extremely rare in birds, but keas will play, either alone or in a group, with any interesting items they come across. Juveniles really enjoy playing tug-of-war and keep-away. Much of their tussle play is similar to the wrestling that

puppies will do, and like ferrets, they will also drag each other around by the back of the necks. Juveniles do most of the playing, but adults are not adverse to a short play session as well.

I saw the keas again the next day, and two of them were digging in the dirt and exploring the territory around restaurants and houses. The third kea was up a tree loudly sounding off, which enabled me to find the trio quite quickly. I watched and photographed them for a while, until I finally had to head out to Invercargill, where I could take a ferry to Stewart Island to look for more wild parrots, kaka and kakariki. More about them in the next issues!

References

- Diamond, J., and Bond, A. B. 1999. *Kea, Bird of Paradox: The Evolution and Behavior of a New Zealand Parrot*. University of California Press, Berkeley, California.
- Werdenich, D., and Huber, L. 2006. A case of quick problem solving in birds: string pulling in keas, *Nestor notabilis*. *Animal Behaviour* 71: 855-863.



The Extraordinary, Enigmatic *Eclectus* Parrot

1. The Behaviour of Wild *Eclectus* Parrots

The *Eclectus* parrot (*Eclectus roratus*) is quite atypical among parrots in being highly sexually dimorphic. In other words, the males and females of the species are entirely different colours. Males are primarily a bright emerald green, with some blue and red on the wings, and females are dark crimson with blue-violet abdomens. Such a degree of sexual dimorphism is very unusual in parrots. While a few other parrot species do have males and females that look different, none show such extreme colour differences between the sexes. For instance, mature male ringneck or Alexandrine parakeets have rings around their necks while the females do not. However, they are not completely different colours.

Even when considering all other bird species, the dimorphism between male and female *Eclectus* is unusual. It's quite common for male birds to be a lot more colorful than females – peacocks are the perfect example of this – but in the *Eclectus*, neither sex is really more colorful than the other. They're both quite bright and beautiful.

The breeding behavior of *Eclectus* parrots is also quite different from that of other parrots. Most parrots, for example, are monogamous. Generally, a male and a female parrot will pair up and produce a family each spring. Male parrots are also generally quite protective of their mates and won't let any other

males near them during the breeding season. But not the wild *Eclectus*, which displays a very unusual behavior for any bird: polyandry. In the wild, a female *Eclectus* may be courted and fed by up to seven males at once.

There are other polyandrous bird species, although even the form of polyandry that the *Eclectus* displays is quite odd. In most polyandrous birds (such as phalaropes or sandpipers), the male will care for the young while the female goes off and finds another mate. However, in the *Eclectus*, the female will guard the nest hole and her young while multiple males will feed her.

Biologists who study wild *Eclectus* believe that its unusual behaviour is the result of a sex ratio that's biased towards females and a shortage of suitable nest holes. *Eclectus* have to compete with other larger parrots, like Black Palm or Sulphur-crested Cockatoos, for nest holes. So, at least one member of a pair of *Eclectus* must guard a nest hole for most of the year. The female *Eclectus* does just this for about eleven months each year. It's a very dangerous job, so females have a higher mortality rate than males. This means that there are not enough females with nest holes for every male *Eclectus*, so each female ends up with more than one partner. This works out in the end, since more than one male may be needed to provide all the food for a female and her chicks. Food is scattered widely around where *Eclectus* are found naturally (Australia's Cape York Peninsula, New Guinea and the surrounding islands), so males must travel widely to find food. Most *Eclectus* have a home range of about thirty square kilometers.

The very different roles of the male and female Eclectus appear to explain why they are coloured so differently. Male Eclectus, with their largely green plumage, blend in well with the leafy treetops they forage amongst. Females do not have as large a need to be camouflaged, but they actually do need to be quite conspicuous at times. Most female Eclectus parrots will fight other birds who attempt to get near their nesting holes. However, avoiding fights is any birds' best interest, so female Eclectus will sit outside their nest holes and call loudly before commencing breeding. By being very conspicuous at times a female can let other parrots know that her nest hole is taken and that they should stay back.

2. The Needs of Captive Eclectus Parrots

Wild Eclectus parrots display some very unusual behaviours, which are rare not only among parrots, but among birds in general. As pets, they also have some needs that differ a bit from those of other parrots.

For one thing, wild Eclectus eat a lot of fruit. They also have very long intestinal tracts for their size, which means that they can absorb the nutrients in food very efficiently. As a result, a diet of all pellets can be too rich for them, and most do best on a diet that contains a high proportion of fruit. Most Eclectus breeders recommend feeding these birds a diet composed primarily of fruit and vegetables (particularly ones high in vitamin A), along with grains, beans and lentils, and a small bit of seeds and nuts. Some breeders and keepers of Eclectus allow high-quality pellets make of a part of their birds' diet, but others do not use them at all. It is not true, as is

sometimes claimed, that all Eclectus need to receive vitamin A supplements. This is only true for birds that have been on very poor diets, and such supplements should only be given on the advice of a veterinarian. An Eclectus on a healthy diet should be getting all of its nutrients from the food it eats.

Eclectus parrots will also sometimes freeze in place if something alarms them, while many other types of parrots will fly away. It's hard to say for sure why this is, but it could be that Eclectus prefer to evaluate a situation before reacting. Additionally, some birds will freeze if startled so they remain inconspicuous. Birds that rely on camouflage for protection (as wild male Eclectus do) often do this because it allows them to blend in to the environment.

Eclectus parrots are reputedly very good talkers and are very intelligent, as parrots tend to be. Like most parrots, they do require a lot of work to keep happy, as an Eclectus needs chew toys (non-toxic branches can work well), a play stand, a large cage (as they are large parrots), and plenty of attention. Apparently, many Eclectus are messy eaters so their living areas often need frequent cleaning.

For more information on Eclectus parrots, check out <http://www.parrotplace.ca/> . This site has some information on caring for them, along with links to other sites about Eclectus parrots, and parrots in general.





Left: This beautiful Eclectus parrot is Mozart and he belongs to Doreen M. He is about four years old.

Classifieds

David and Louise (466-7273) do bird sitting - long and short-term rates. We also have extra cages available so you only have to bring the bird. Along with the bird sitting comes complementary toe nail and wing clipping. We also provide DNA testing for \$25, and have numerous bird cages of various sizes available.



Barb has tote-a-pet carriers for sale. They can be viewed at <http://www.tote-a-pet.com/> If anyone wants to buy one, contact Louise at 466-7273.



Reminders

Remember that members get a discount at several shops in town that sell parrot supplies. These include Baker's Feed and Seed, all PJs Pets locations, and the Wild Bird General Store.



Left: This Hyacinth Macaw lives at the Minnesota Zoo, where he performs in a free-flight bird show.