



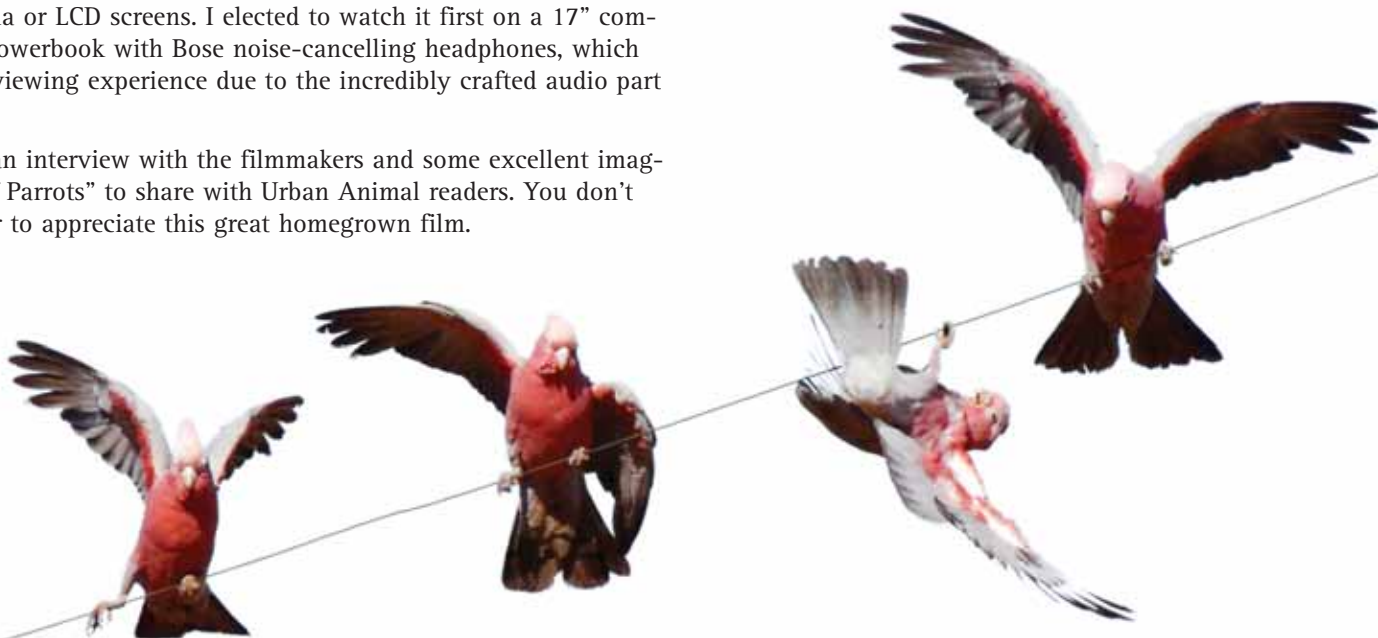
Australia, The Land of Parrots

I'm a sucker for a great parrot video and have watched David Attenborough's "The Life of Birds" first in VHS and then on DVD, giving away the tapes to another parrot fancier. We were lucky enough to meet Mark Bittner, the subject of the fabulous film "The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill" when he was here premiering the documentary, and later at his home in San Francisco where the birds are protected. So it was an easy decision to accept a preview copy of the ABC program, which is now a DVD, "Australia Land Of Parrots" by David Parer and Elizabeth Parer-Cook.

The couple have filmed all around the world for the ABC Natural History Unit since the early '70s, from Antarctica to Papua New Guinea, from Patagonia to Norway, underwater and in all climates. Their wildlife films focus on detailed behaviour of animals, including an Emmy-winning "Wolves of the Seas" which examined the lives of killer whales, and "The Dragons of Galapagos", on the struggles of land and marine iguanas to survive at a volcano's edge.

Their love has been for Australian species, with films on Tasmanian Devils and the Platypus, and their latest is a High Definition film shot on the parrots and cockatoos of this great continent. With its widescreen format, rich colours and high resolution, this film brings the forests, bush and deserts right into the lounge room vividly through HD-capable plasma or LCD screens. I elected to watch it first on a 17" computer screen on my Mac Powerbook with Bose noise-cancelling headphones, which made for a jaw-dropping viewing experience due to the incredibly crafted audio part of the film.

We were fortunate to get an interview with the filmmakers and some excellent images from "Australia Land of Parrots" to share with Urban Animal readers. You don't have to be a parrot fancier to appreciate this great homegrown film.





So why is Australia called the land of parrots?

In the minds of most people in the world, parrots belong in the rainforests of South America. But it wasn't always so. On many of the early maps of the southern hemisphere, when the great South land was simply Terra Incognita, the earliest explorers to sight continental Australia called it Terra Psittacorum – the land of parrots. Presumably these early navigators glimpsed the parrots and cockatoos that live right across the dry open woodlands, savanna grasslands and deserts of what would eventually become known as Australia.

When the first settlers arrived 200 years ago, they were confronted by a kaleidoscope of colourful and noisy parrots. These beautiful birds were collected, caged, stuffed, painted and sent back to Europe where they were coveted and bred.

Explorers soon ventured inland to Central Australia and came back with stories of vast grassland plains and deserts with flocks of white cockatoos and pink galahs. Their fame spread and when bird artist and naturalist John Gould returned to England in the 1840s with a cage full of budgies, these became the founder stock for the most popular pet bird in the world.

Today we know that the parrots of Australia are both extremely diverse and unusual – and number 56 different kinds. Of the 14 species of cockatoos in the world, 11 are found in Australia – and the rest in the surrounding islands of New Guinea and Indonesia. In addition, lorikeets and rosellas are only found in this part of the world.

What made you decide to do a film on birds and specifically what made you choose Eclectus as an anchor bird for “Australia Land of Parrots”? My Ecce certainly appreciated it!



In 2005 we were looking around for a wildlife subject that had an iconic status for the Australian public and one that could be exploited for its beauty and colour for the newly emerging medium of high-definition television - HDTV. Parrots and cockatoos seemed a natural for this new medium. Our aim was to capture their beauty and grace – and the stunning variety of species that occurs in Australia.

Our goal was to bring the variety and brilliance of Australia's parrot and cockatoo fauna to fellow Australians and the rest of the world. For the film we needed three or four stunning sequences to make the program exciting and spectacular.

The two species that stood out in terms of new discoveries about their behaviour was Dr Rob Heinsohn's work on the Eclectus Parrot in the Iron Range area of Cape York Peninsula and Dr Steve Murphy's research on the Palm Cockatoo – again in the Cape York. So our stars had to include these two species - the fabulous tool-using Palm Cockatoos and the outrageously colourful Eclectus Parrot with their preference for kinky mating habits. In addition we had to have the massive flocks of Budgerigars that breed up when the rain falls in the arid areas.

We also wanted to capture the variety of parrots and diverse habitats in which they live - from deserts to tropics and from temperate forests to the rocky shorelines – using the latest aerial filming techniques. In all, over a period of 18 months we filmed over half Australia's parrots and cockies and I think about 27 different species made it to the final program.

You do some high wire work. What was the most dangerous aspect of filming?

The Eclectus Parrot was one of the most difficult birds to film as it nests 100 feet up in the canopy of the rainforest. The females are brightly coloured and she spends 10 months in her hollow where she is fed by up to seven males - a “meals on wheels” type existence as scientist Rob Heinsohn calls it. Our challenge was to film them from a number of angles and record their intimate behaviour.

We put up a 70-foot filming tower and gradually moved the tower closer to the nest hollow. We also filmed some of the behaviour from the ground on a very long telephoto zoom lens and over a period of 3 weeks we got the footage we needed.

Parrots are neither easier nor harder to film than most other animals. In wildlife film-making it's the bush and technical skills of the cameraman that really counts. You've got to be fiercely determined and patient enough to wait for the right moment - and then quick enough to capture it on film when it does happen.

What was the hardest aspect of doing this film? Finance? Environment? Conditions? The wait?

The wait is actually the easiest part of the film-making process. It becomes a battle of wits between bird and cameraman, and a challenge to figure out how to get what you want without disturbing them. And it's the part I most enjoy.

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Finance is always a challenge. With a production period of about two years, budgets are high because of expensive travel costs, high equipment hire, fees for filming in national parks, increasing cost of fuel in remote areas and the uncertainty of Australia's climate.

The environments & conditions are a changing palate across Australia. Farming practices have completely altered the face of the countryside in the 220 years since European settlers first arrived. We have removed most of the forests and harvested most of the water for towns and farms, forcing changes to the lifestyle of many of our animals. With the parrots and cockatoos, some have been able to exploit the new conditions created by the farmers and there is now conflict.

In the Southeast of the continent the wheat country is a smorgasbord for the cockatoos. The Corellas fly en masse when the crops are sown, posting sentries in the nearby trees to alert the flock when a farmer approaches. Scarecrows, alarms, and shotguns do little to deter them. Day after day they return for their daily feed and there is little the farmers can do. But in some areas farmers are working with National Parks scientists and conservationists to solve the problem.

In the peanut-growing area of Lakeland Downs in the tropical Far North, Sulphur-crested Cockatoos were devastating the crops. Conservationists suggested to the farmers that they band together and plant a sacrificial peanut crop – one where the birds could gather and feed and not be harassed. Unfortunately, the cockatoos would not or could not get the idea of what was their crop and which ones belonged to the farmers. They continued to feed where ever they wished. Eventually all but one of the seven peanut farms had to be closed down.

Fruit orchards are a favourite of the parrots and lorikeets. They arrive at dawn in large numbers when the apples and stone fruits are ripening and will often take just a single peck from each piece of fruit before moving on to the next. Some orchard farmers even employ helicopters as a non-lethal way of keeping them at bay – a very expensive scarecrow.

I recently finished David Attenborough's Planet Earth and also rewatched the series on birds he did. Are there any films, programs or series in this vein that inspired you? Do you yourself watch wildlife films as a habit?

We watch as many new wildlife films that come out as we can – and David Attenborough's are high on the list of our favourites. I worked as a cameraman on Attenborough's first mega-series, "Life on Earth" back in 1978 and got to experience the depth of his story-telling abilities first hand. That series, together with his "The Life of Plants" are two of the best and most influential natural history series ever made and certainly inspired our approach to many of the films we have made.

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