

Threatened Species of the Northern Territory

PRINCESS PARROT

Polytelis alexandrae

Conservation status

Australia: Vulnerable

Northern Territory: Vulnerable



Princess parrot. (Kay Kes

Description

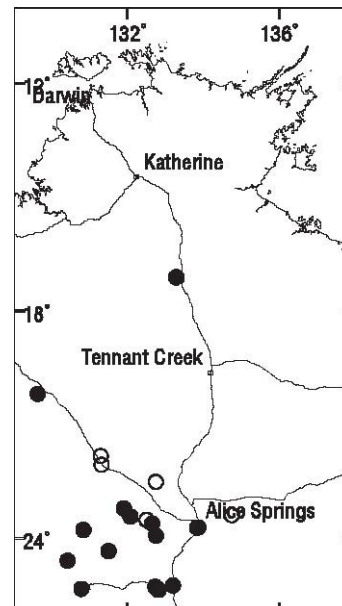
The princess parrot is a very distinctive bird which is slim in build, beautifully plumaged and has a very long, tapering tail. It is a medium-sized parrot with total length of 40-45 cm and body mass of 90-120 g. The basic colour is dull olive-green; paler on the underparts. It has a red bill, blue-grey crown, pink chin, throat and foreneck, prominent yellow-green shoulder patches, bluish rump and back, and blue-green uppertail.

Distribution

This species has a patchy and irregular distribution in arid Australia. In the Northern Territory, it occurs in the southern section of the Tanami Desert south to Angas Downs and Yulara and east to Alice Springs. The exact distribution within this range is not well understood and it is unclear whether the species is resident in the Northern Territory. Few locations exist in the Northern Territory where the species is regularly seen, and even then there may be long intervals (up to 20 years) between records. Most records from the MacDonnell Ranges bioregion are during dry periods.

Conservation reserves where reported:

The princess parrot is not resident in any conservation reserve in the Northern Territory but it has been observed regularly in and adjacent to Uluru Kata Tjuta National Park, and there is at least one record from West MacDonnell National Park.



Known locations of the princess parrot.

= pre 1970; • = post 1970.

Ecology

The princess parrot usually occupies swales between sand dunes and is occasionally seen on slopes and crests of dunes. This habitat consists mostly of shrubs such as *Eremophila*, *Grevillea*, and *Hakea* and scattered trees. Some records are from riverine forest, woodland and shrubland. The species is highly gregarious with most sightings being of small flocks of 10-20; however, groups of up to 100 birds occur.

Breeding takes place in hollows in large eucalypts, particularly river red gums *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, and also in desert oaks *Allocasuarina decaisneana*. Breeding colonies of up to 10 pairs are sometimes recorded but solitary nesting also occurs. Four to six eggs are laid (Higgins 1999).

The princess parrot feeds on the ground and in flowering shrubs and trees. The diet consists mostly of seeds with flowers, nectar and leaves being of secondary importance.

Conservation assessment The nomadic nature of this species combined with infrequent sightings make it very difficult to assign it a conservation status in the Northern Territory. The Australian breeding

population is estimated at 5000 birds (Garnett and Crowley 2000), the majority of which occur in the Great Sandy Desert. There is some circumstantial evidence of a reduction in population size within its Northern Territory range (Garnett and Crowley 2000), although this is difficult to judge given the paucity of information on abundance.

Based on the available information, it has the status of Vulnerable in the Northern Territory (under criterion C2b) due to:

- population size estimated to be
- <10,000 mature individuals;
- continuing decline in numbers of mature individuals; and

- extreme fluctuations in number of mature individuals.

Threatening processes

No specific threatening process has been identified for the princess parrot. However, it is possible that the process of environmental degradation and habitat homogenization that has occurred throughout arid Australia following European settlement may have negatively affected the princess parrot. Grazing by rabbits and introduced herbivores and changes in fire regimes are all likely to have contributed to this process. The large increase in the camel population in arid Australia may have reduced or altered the availability of favoured food plants of the princess parrot. The impact of land degradation has been most severe on the margins of the range of this species.

On a local scale, raiding of nests to collect eggs and capture fledglings for the overseas bird market may affect breeding colonies.

Conservation objectives and management

There is no existing management program for this species.

Research and management priorities are to:

- i. record any sightings of the species in the Biological Records Scheme of the Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts; and
- ii. attempt to locate areas where the species is regularly present, particularly drought refuges, in order to undertake an assessment of threats and ecology, and thence provide for appropriate management.

Several princess parrots are held and displayed at the Alice Springs Desert Park, and it is a common aviary bird in Australia.

Compiled by

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References

Garnett, S.T., and Crowley, G.M. (2000). The Action Plan for Australian Birds. (Environment Australia, Canberra.)

Higgins, P.J. (ed.) (1999). Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds. Volume 4: Parrots to

Dollarbird. (Oxford University Press, Melbourne.)