

Polytelis Parakeets



This fact sheet gives an overview on keeping Polytelis Parakeets.

The Barraband, Rock Pebbler and Princess of Wales form a very interesting group of Australian parakeets collectively known as the *Polytelis* Group. They are all suitable parakeets for the beginner but also offer a challenge to the experienced bird keeper. The *Polytelis* group is often referred to as the long tailed grass parakeets; this comes from the fact that the middle tail feather grows much longer than the rest of the tail feathers. Some breeders like to refer to them as the “Waxbilled Parakeets”, this obvious name comes from the bright red waxy coloured beak that all of the species have.

All of the group are medium sized (16-18 inches) parakeets, they are all gentle and friendly by nature, do not chew timber frames and can become quite attached to their keepers. They are also quite hardy and able to winter in this country without any special needs - heat etc.

The name *Polytelis* is a Greek word meaning “**magnificent**” or “**delicate**”, both expressions are suitable to all birds in this genus. Let’s look at the species in more detail: -

In some books the **Barraband** (*Polytelis swainsonii*) is described as the Superb Parakeet. This name is fully justified when you look at a mature pair, and see the stunning coloured face of the cock bird.

The Barraband is sexually dimorphic; this means that the cock is very easily distinguished from the hen. Both sexes are predominantly green overall. The cock birds forehead, chin and throat are bright fluorescent yellow, with a bright red strip across the base of the throat, the outer feathers of the wings and edge of tail are also tinged with blue. The female does not possess the yellow face and the red strip; her chin and throat are best described as a suffused bluish-green colour. On the underneath of the tail feathers, a pink border is usually present and the thigh feathers are generally red. Both cock and hen have a coral coloured beak, usually a light pink or red.

When purchasing a pair of Barrabands, beware! - Immature cocks look exactly like the hens for several months. Some Barrabands can be sexually mature at the age of one, but normally they do not start to breed until they are two or three years old, so be patient! No colour mutations have been reported at present.

The **Rock Pebbler** (*Polytelis anthopeplus*), sometimes called “Smokers” by the Australian breeders, is the only member of the genus which has a sub-species (*P.a.westralis*). The sub-species is in doubt at the present, but for the purpose of this fact sheet it will be included. The nominate species is found in South East Australia whilst the sub-species is found in the South West. Most birds that are offered for sale in the UK are of the first species. The cock bird’s body colour is mainly olive-green, and becomes more intense with age. The sub-species have

a slightly duller coloured yellow. The hens of both species are similar in colouration. The Rock Pebbler can be housed with other grass parakeets, such as the Neophema group, but care should be taken during the breeding season, as some hens are known to become slightly aggressive at this time of year. Rumours of a pied mutation have been reported in Europe, but no pictures or other details are available at present.

The **Princess of Wales** (*Polytelis alexandrae*), so named by John Gould, (the famous collector of birds), was named after Princess Alexandra married to Edward VII, Prince of Wales. Also called the Rose throated Parrot, this species is the most colourful member of the family. The rump of the cock bird is violet-blue, whilst the hens are a greyish-blue. The adult cock bird also has an extended third primary feather on the wings in the shape of a spatula; the hen does not have this feather. This spatula is a clear indicator of sex, but unfortunately some devious people have been known to trim the feather on poorly colour cock birds, and then sell them as hens. Another good indicator is the colour on the beak. Cock birds have a more brightly coloured red beak, and the general colour of the bird should be stronger. Several colour mutations have become established, including the Blue, Lutino and Albino.

Ideally pairs should be kept on their own in as big a flight as possible. The size of flight depends on the space available but should be at least 10-12 feet long by 3 feet wide and at least 6 feet high. In smaller flights adult birds can easily become overweight. A frost-free shelter should be provided and can also be used as a feeding/watering area.

Because of their inoffensive and docile nature many breeders use the Barrabands, Rock Peblers and Princess of Wales as a buffer between other birds, usually Rosellas and other pugnacious species, to stop the quarrelling of adjacent pairs.

Pairs like to bathe freely every day, so ensure that a dish of water is available at all times. The nest box should be about 8-10 inches square and 24 inches in depth; a 3-inch entrance hole should be near the top of the box with a ladder inside to assist the hen to climb down onto the nest. A sliding door at the side of the nest box allows the egg or chicks to be inspected.

Most pairs take an almost immediate interest in the nest box and the courtship displays are observed during the middle part of March onwards. The hen is usually the dominant bird of the pair; she will control the mating display. The cock birds usually run up and down the perch, calling all the time and contracting the pupils in an attempt to get the female interested in breeding. The female responds by squatting on the perch, spreading her wings slightly and also raising the feathers on the top of her head.

Polytelis parakeets lay a clutch of between 4-6 white eggs. Incubation is done solely by the female, and lasts for about 20 days. The chicks, when first hatched, are covered in a white fluffy down. The cock bird is quite attentive to the hen and sits on the perch attached to the nest box, constantly looking in to ensure all is well.

At about 4-5 weeks of age the young birds start to become more adventurous, and can often be seen begging for food from the cock at the entrance hole. They leave the nest at approximately 5 weeks of age, and constantly pester the cock for food. Young cocks usually start their first moult at about 3-4 months of age, the first signs of adult colour can then be seen. They take approximately 14-18 months to attain full adult plumage. They are not renowned for second round breeding, it will depend on the time of the year and the pair of birds. The youngsters should be split-rung as soon as they are out of the nest box, as they can grow to look like the hen very quickly. The young birds should be removed from the parents once they are independent.

Feeding this species is quite simple, a basic diet should consist of canary seed and millets with some oats, wheat, safflower, and buckwheat added, also sunflower seed (small striped and small white sunflower is also taken). Pine nuts, monkey-nuts, peanuts and hemp should also be offered in smaller quantities. Vegetables and fruits can be offered daily. Cuttlefish and grit should be available. Fresh elderberries, chickweed, dandelion and seeding grasses can also be given when in season.

On a less positive note, the Barraband especially, is well known for two health problems. The first manifests itself as an eye infection, in the form of Conjunctivitis. The bird can be seen wiping its eye constantly over the perch and is in obvious discomfort. The eye infection can be cured by use of an antibiotic cream. All perches should be removed and replaced to lessen the chances of infection spreading. The second problem, and probably most alarming, is a form of leg paralysis; this is very difficult to cure. A veterinarian should be consulted for either of the ailments.

Overall the Polytelis family are relatively in-expensive, inoffensive and friendly parakeets, which can offer a lot of enjoyment to the bird-keeper. As more birds are now being bred in this country, the price of a breeding pair is becoming easily acceptable to those with limited budgets. Hybrids between the species have been bred, but are of little value to the breeding hobbyists.

This fact sheet has been produced for:
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