

Rainbow Lorikeets dying?

by Ed Parker

Rainbow Lorikeets are probably best known in SE Queensland as one of the native bird species that congregate in great numbers at various venues, such as Currumbin Sanctuary, where feeding is undertaken.

They are popular with tourists and other visitors because of their colourful appearance and gregarious, if greedy, disposition at such feeding times.

However, it seems that these colourful birds are inexplicably dying in unusual numbers.

At a recent bushcare working bee in Westlake, we came across a fresh carcass of a Rainbow Lorikeet lying amongst the understorey of a group wattles. It appeared to have no external signs of injury and gave the appearance of having been a healthy specimen before its demise.

It was strange that such a healthy bird could be found dead with no sign of injury. Nothing much further was thought about this event until a chance discussion a few days later with an acquaintance from the Queensland Museum.

Upon raising our sighting, we learnt that Rainbow Lorikeets have been dropping in unusual numbers across Greater Brisbane, and beyond, since early this year.

To date there is no explanation from either the Museum or Currumbin Sanctuary. Staff are not sure whether it is due to normal factors (eg. normal disease, lack of food, etc.) or something more sinister.

The Rainbow Lorikeet, known by its scientific name as *Trichoglossus haematodus*, is a distinctively multi-coloured parrot, some 28cm in length. Its head is purplish blue; breast yellow and orange; back green; with a purplish-blue belly and red beak.

Its scientific generic name "Trichoglossus" means "hairy-tongued", because its brush-like tongue is tipped with elongated hair-like structures (papillae) which are either extended when feeding or folded away when not in use. The brush is used to press pollen into a suitable shape for swallowing.

Its habitat is in well-vegetated lowland areas with suitable food trees bearing flowers (pollen and nectar being the main diet) and fruits. Vegetation types include rainforests, open forests, woodlands, heaths and gardens.

The lorikeet's range is eastern Australia from Cape York to Tasmania and the Eyre Peninsula in SA. It also occurs in the south-eastern Pacific islands.

This regular Nature Watch column is contributed by your local Centenary bushland care groups.

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