Birds of many feathers: Parrots and Parakeets at Dehiwela Zoo

Posted on

Jeya Rutnam



If you are a tropical bird enthusiast, then the Dehiwela Zoo is the place for you. Amidst a lush setting of flowering plants and trees and landscaped gardens, you can wander frnm one exhibit to another savouring the beauty and variety of the many species on display. The Dehiwela Zoo, located just south of Colombo's city limits, is considered one of the region's best-stocked zoos. It is open all year round from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily.

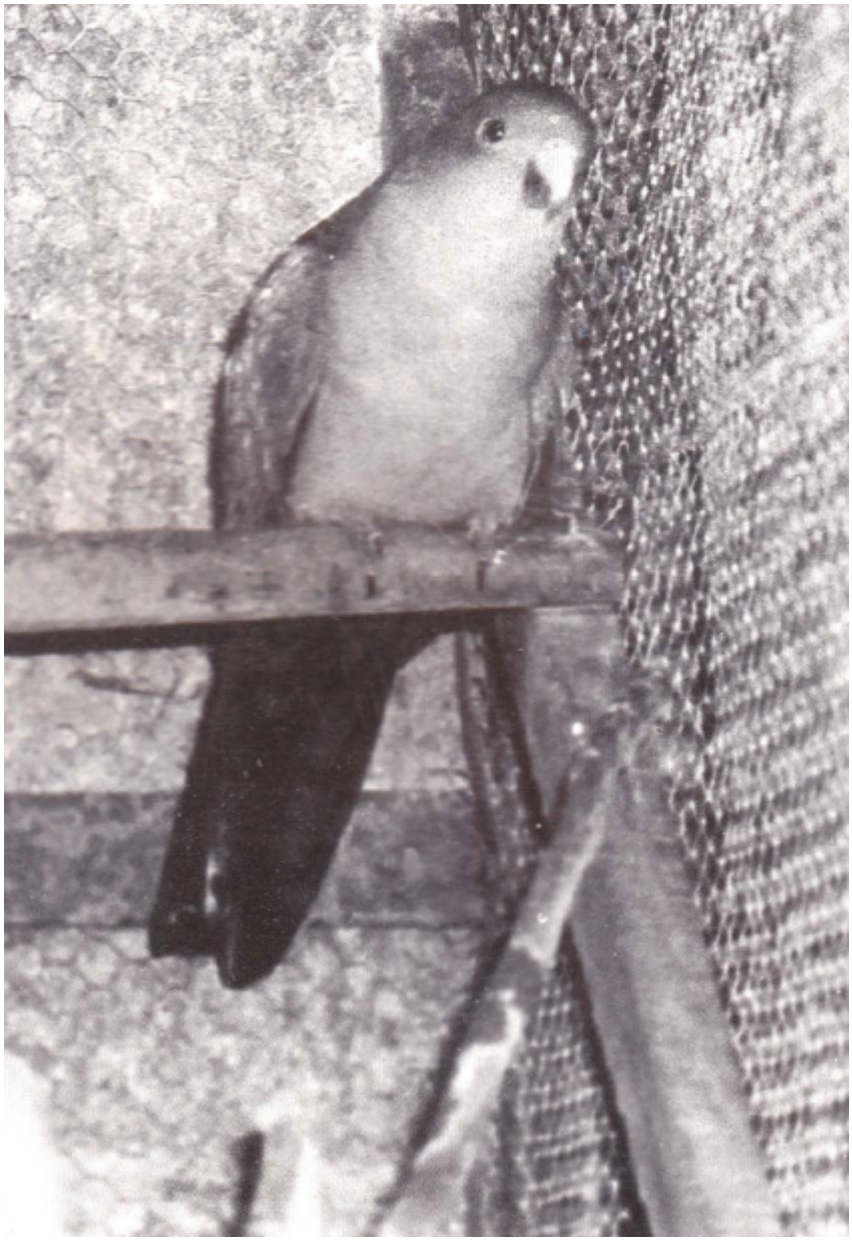
One of the distinct advantages about a zoo in the tropics is the weather which allows almost all exhibits to be open-air. This way, you can watch the zoo's inhabitants easily, not to mention them watching you! This is true even of the birds. A large number of the fauna at the Dehiwela Zoo do not just sit around in cages. Instead, they are all around you, busily nesting and feeding in the trees and calling to one another in a profusion of colour and sound. And even closer at hand, don't be surprised if you meet up with a rather prudish-looking crane or two taking a stroll down the path with the rest of the visitors.

As you probably know, the tropical regions of the world contain the vast majority of living species, whether plants, insects, birds or animals. The Amazon region for instance is said to have about two-thirds of the entire world's species. Incredible, isn't it? Of course, if you wanted to sample some of this diversity, you may think of paying a visit to South America but that isn't always possible. Even if you get there you may have to spend weeks fighting your way through tropical forest in order to catch a glimpse of its wonders. You could, however take the easy way out and settle for the same birds closer at hand at the Dehiwela Zoo.

Macaws are the largest birds belonging to the parrot family, or Psittacidae, its biological name. They are spectacular birds measuring over 3 feet in length and sporting the most wonderful colours found in any species. Macaws are indigenous to the South American region from Mexico to Paraguay. How would you like to look a beady-eyed Scarlet Macaw right in the eye as he sits on a branch a few inches from you nose? Which is precisely what you can do at the Dehiwela Zoo at the macaw exhibit. These brilliantly-coloured giant parrots perch unconcerned outdoors, occasionally giving out an unmusical squawak at gaping visitors. Other macaws to be found at the Zoo are the Hyacinth Macaw, the Military Macaw, the Green-winged Macaw and the Blue and Yellow Macaws. Not all macaws are in outdoor displays, however, and soon the Zoo will have some new cages ready where these beautiful birds can be seen in all their splendour.



A pair of Red Macaws at the Dehiwel Zoo, the giant of the parrot family relaxing in a natural setting.



The Red Lory at the Zoo watches the world go by with a beady eye.

If macaws are the giants of the parrot family, then the pygmies are definitely the 4-inch long pygmy parrots of New Guinea. You can see the range of distribution of parrots the world-over. Also in this comer of the world, including Australia, lives another species of parrot somewhat larger than the pygmies but still very dainty – the budgerigar. The Dehiwela Zoo has a lovely collection of these attractive, highly active birds which are found in their millions in the arid parts of Australia.

Budgerigars, or budgies for short, are among the most popular species of an array birds. Few people know that the wild budgerigar is actually green in colour and that the blues, yellows, whites and greys that are commonly found today are the result of selective breeding in captivity. The first budgerigar to be bred in captivity was brought to England by an ornithologist in 1840. The species did so well that in a short space of time, the budgerigar became the commonest domesticated cage-bird ever.

Another small parrot species native to Australia and the Polynesian islands are the lories and lorikeets. The Dehiwela Zoo has a slightly larger species from Australia, the Rainbow Lorikeet, a beautiful specimen with bright red beak and blue, light green and red bands around the neck It also has a long, pointed tail. Lorikeets are not confined to the Australian region alone. There are the Indian and Sri Lankan lorikeets, also small in size and highly gregarious. In India, the lorikeets frequent wooded areas in the Himalayan region while the Sri Lankan species is found almost everywhere including the hill country. These lorikeets blend so well with their surroundings that can only spot them by their squeaky calls up in the trees. However, you can see the Ceylon lorikeet quite easily the Zoo.

To return to Australia, there is one species of the parrot family that is unique to this region, the cockatoos. What distinguished cockatoos from other members of this family is the characteristic crest that stands long and erect on its head. Cockatoos can be trained to talk as with the other parrot species and probably became very famous after the television series, Columbo. You can see white cockatoos, similar to the bird which starred on television at the Dehiwela Zoo. This particular group sports pale yellow crests and are known as Sulphur-crested Cockatoos. The Zoo also has the Black Cockatoo with its dark plumage. Cockatoos have powerful beaks with sharp, pointed tips which are useful in breaking open hard nuts, a favourite of these birds.

Parakeets and parrots are the other members of the Psittacidae group. Apart from the macaws, the Dehiwela Zoo also has a fine collection of parrots from the Amazon region. These include the orange-winged amazon parrot, the blue-fronted and red-fronted amazon parrot and the yellow-fronted amazon parrot, a truly amazing configuration of bright colours in one species!

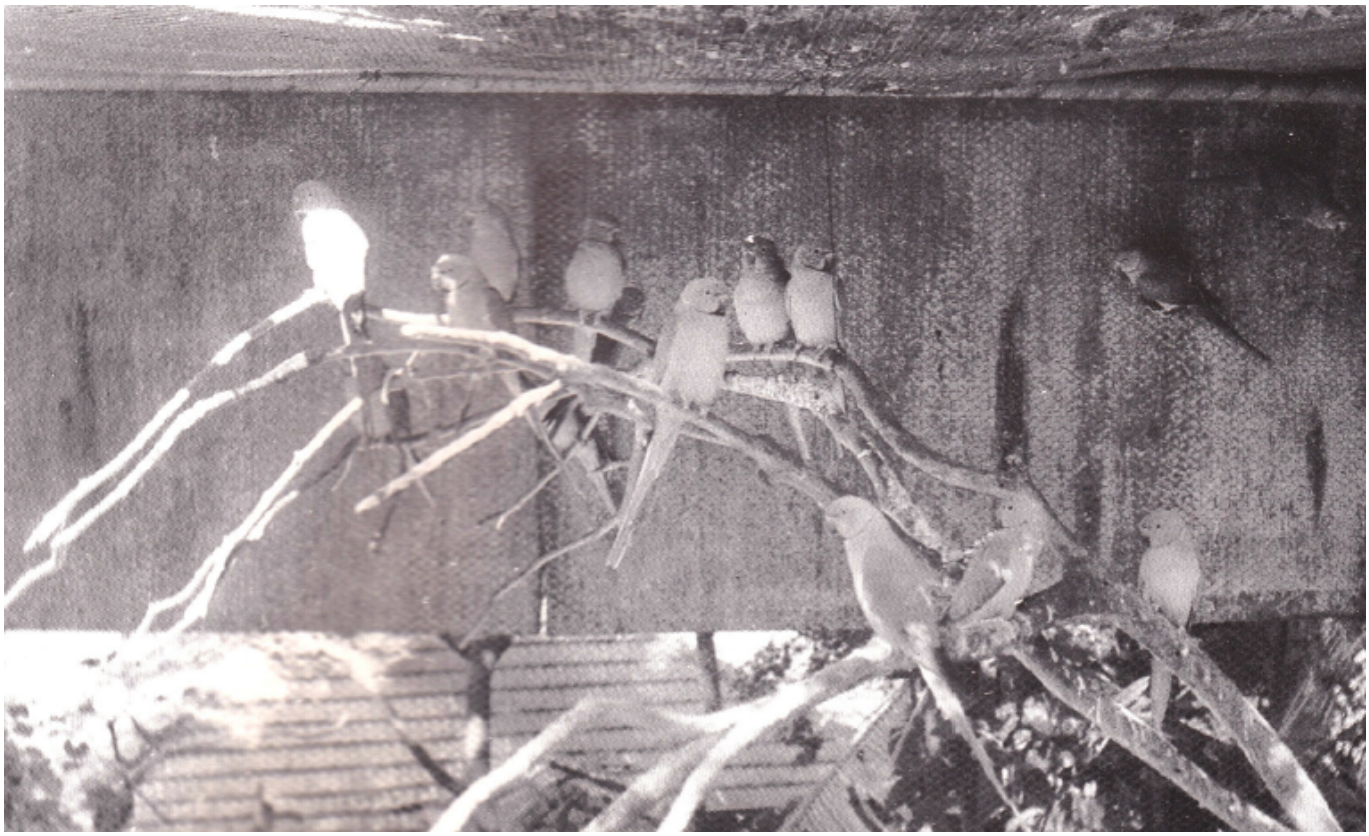
Also blending in with this kaleidoscope, but from a completely different part of the world, is the Halmahera Red-sided Parrot of the East Indies. This bright scarlet and red parrot is also on display at the Zoo. If all this colour is becoming too blindingly beautiful for you, you can rest your eyes on the African Grey Parrot whose name clearly spells out both the origin and appearance of the bird.

Similar in colour to the African grey is the Timneh Grey Parrot, also from Africa. This bird, however, comes with a pale-brown tail. Another attractive dark Parrot is the Vasa Parrot which is a greyish black species found in Madagascar and the Cormorant Islands. Africa too has its own diminutive brand of parrots of which the most famous are the Lovebirds which are about 6-7 inches in length.

Closer home in the south-east Asian region are a number of parakeet species of which the Rose-ringed Parakeet is the most commonly-found both in the wild and in aviaries. The parakeet moves around in great flocks which make a lot of noise apart from doing damage to fruit trees and ocher crops. The rose-ringed, as its name implies has a red ring around its neck. As with other parrot species. it is equipped with feet well-adapted for climbing around in trees. However, the rose-ringed parakeet also occasionally moves on the ground by waddling around on its short legs. The Alexandrine, or large Indian parakeet, is a larger version of the rose-ringed with additional colour on its wings. It is known as a voracious eater which consumes large quantities of fruits and food crops. Both species inhabit forested lands and build their nests in tree-holes.

A very pretty but not common parakeet is the Blossom-headed Parakeet ·which confines itself to less populated areas. The parakeet has a pale mauve and blue-shaded head unlike the rest. It also sounds more pleasant than the others with a more musical cry. A species unique to Sri Lanka, along with the Ceylon lorikeet, is the Emerald-collared or Layard’s Parakeet which is found in most parts of the country including the hills up to around 6000 feet. All these species are exhibited at the Dehiwela Zoo. Parrots, macaws, budgerigars – they’re all there from all corners of the tropical world. Not only are this family of birds set apart from the rest by their wonderful, riotous colours, short, strong beaks and. sleek, firm feathers but they are fascinating to watch. Parrots are rarely quiet either and together with amusing us with their strange, harsh screeches and gurgles, they also entertain with their great gift of mimicry as many visitors to the Zoo will come to know. There is no doubt that

parrots and people can develop a close relationship not possible with other avian species.



Mala Giraw, parrots with colorful bands around their necks perched on branches at the Zoo.



The Eastern Rosella with two toned feathers is another colorful specimen at the Zoo



A majestic Red-fronted Macaw watches the visitors haughtily.