

PATIENCE PAYS DIVIDENDS IN BIRD WATCHING

MIKE SMITH MONITORED A LONG-TAILED PARAKEET NEST IN SINGAPORE UNTIL THE YOUNG CHICK MADE ITS FIRST OF MANY ASIAN JOURNEYS.

MIKE SMITH PHOTOS



I heard from a friend that a long-tailed parakeet nest had been discovered in Hort Park, Singapore and decided to take a look. Eleven weeks later I had visited the area on 29 days and spent over 90 hours studying the nest and bird behaviour as a male and at least four females raised a healthy fledgling.

LUCKY SPOTTING

The parakeets took over an abandoned lineated barbet nest hole six metres from the ground in a rainbow gum tree. During my first visit I was lucky to see a female because, as I soon discovered, during the three weeks she sits on the eggs she rarely makes an appearance; just pokes her head out of the nest a few times for a few minutes and occasionally hangs out upside down. Not a sound was heard; complete silence! No male parakeet was observed during the first month.

Female parakeets like to hang around with me, but they do it upside down. My records show at least four different females

over the 11 weeks! Communal breeding my “go to” expert explained! Apparently, it’s not uncommon in the birding world.

ROTATING CARE

During week three a female was hanging upside down outside the nest, suddenly she gave a soft screech and flew rapidly from the nest to feed in the forest, 0.5km away. A different female returned after 10 minutes. This was repeated ten minutes later.

Monitoring the nest was rather boring as



there were long periods of inactivity under a harsh sun and humid conditions. However, I did get to photograph female parakeets in flight. Most of the action took place between 7:00am and 9:00am and then from 5:00pm to 7:00pm. After landing at the nest, the female parakeet would quickly disappear inside.

A lineated barbet came back to inspect its former nest hole. I feared there would be a turf war, but I guess the parakeet signed a lease and it stayed put.

A CHANGE IN BEHAVIOUR

The initial flights I witnessed lasted only a few minutes. I assume this was because the eggs were being incubated. After feeding, the female would rest and watch the nest from a tall trumpet tree some 50 metres away, before giving a small screech and heading to the nest.

After five weeks I noticed a change in



behaviour, the absence of the female was getting longer, up to an hour, and a week later up to three hours. For the first time the male appeared on the trumpet tree and fed the female by regurgitating food. The female then flew to the nest and while the male went back to the forest. Clearly there were chick(s), but deep in the nest hole. Flights increased in number.

THE BABY APPEARS!!

My first sighting of a chick was not until week eight. Even then it was impossible to get a good photo. My first clear sight of one chick, which had grown significantly and was now a colourful bird, was in week ten.

Watching the nest was now much more interesting. The baby was growing fast and there were regular photo opportunities. The female



stayed away from the nest for long periods and would watch from the trumpet tree for up to an hour. The baby appeared at the hole entrance regularly.

Another behavioural change - Females spend more time close to but not in the nest.

In week eleven a female spent time on the nest tree but not in the hole which was presumably now a tight fit for two birds.

THE MALE RETURNS TO THE NEST VICINITY

A day later at 9:00am the male bird posed much closer to the nest on nearby trees. Suddenly the baby stretched its neck out of the hole and started screeching at the top of its voice, both the male and female flew near to it (the first time I had seen the male anywhere near the nest). The male fed the female before flying off, the female flew into the nest and fed the baby out of sight.

THE FIRST FLIGHT

At 8.00am the following day the young baby stretched its neck out of the nest as a female parakeet landed on top of the trumpet tree some 50 metres away. Thirty minutes later, with a loud screech, the male joined the female. At 8:50am the female flew to the nest. Five minutes later there was

a terrific amount of screeching from the male on the distant tree and the female by the nest. Without warning the female flew towards the male and the baby followed. The male took off and all three headed for the jungle.

The finale happened so quickly I only got a blurred picture of the male and female with the fledgling flying below them towards Kent Ridge Park. I wondered if the chick would return to the nest, but it did not and presumably is being looked after communally in Kent Ridge Park. It was rather disappointing that the chick didn't pose outside the nest or feed at the entrance, but at least it successfully left the nest aged at an estimated seven weeks old. ❖