

The National Exotic Bird Registration Scheme

Sophie Moller¹

Introduction

The National Exotic Bird Registration Scheme (NEBRS) will come into being on the 2nd October this year. The original idea for the scheme came out of a wildlife law enforcement seminar over ten years ago following a growing realisation that exotic birds were being smuggled into Australia, with no control by Federal, State or local government agencies, or by the avicultural industry itself. The scheme has the following main aims:

- It will combat smuggling by making it harder to launder illegal birds. This will be achieved through the recording of transactions and breeding results in record books.
- It will assist Australia in meeting obligations to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES). Many species of exotic birds in Australia, and in particular most parrots and some pheasants, are listed on the Appendices to CITES and therefore protected by the Commonwealth *Wildlife Protection (Regulation of Exports and Imports) Act 1982* by requiring the issue of permits to import or export live animals or products derived from them. The demand for these birds in Australia has repercussions on the international market, and adds to the current problems faced overseas where birds are trapped in the wild to supply the demand.
- It aims to prevent the establishment of any additional species of pest birds in the Australian environment. (See "Contingency Plans for Exotic Bird Escapes in Australia", Moller and Barrett, 1996).

The NEBRS will be set up under amendments to the Wildlife Protection Act. The Amendment Bill was presented to the Senate in 9 May 1995 and was debated on 19-20 September 1995. It was given full support from all Parties. The Australian Democrats proposed an amendment to the Bill to ensure that no single interest group would have a majority on the Exotic Birds Committee, which will oversee the development and implementation of the scheme. This was accepted by all Parties. The Amendment Bill was debated in the House of Representatives on 25 October 1995 and was passed with no opposition. It was then given Royal Assent by the Governor-General on 2 November 1995, and is now an Act of Parliament.

As previously mentioned, the scheme will come into operation in all States and Territories on 2 October 1996.

¹ **Wildlife Protection Authority, Australian Nature Conservation Agency, GPO
Box 636, Canberra. ACT 2601**

The Exotic Birds Committee

A specialist committee, known as the) will be set up to provide advice to the Minister on the operation of the scheme. The EBC will be set up under Section 57 of the Wildlife Protection Act, and will have at least 13 members. The Chairperson must not be a member of the Commonwealth, and as a statutory committee appointed by the Minister, all members will receive remuneration and allowances. The committee will consist of representatives from all aspects of the community, including aviculture, zoos and wildlife parks, State and Territory agencies, the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service, non-government conservation groups, commercial bird breeders, and expert ornithologists. No one interest group may have a majority on the committee. The recommendations of the Committee must be referred to the Federal Minister for the Environment for a final decision.

As the legislative basis for the scheme does not come into force until 2 October 1996, the final committee can not be established until that time. However, an Interim Exotic Birds Committee has been recognised by the Minister, and it met in Canberra on 6-7 June 1996, to examine what birds should be listed on Schedule 9 to the Act (the exempt list). The Interim EBC's recommendations have been forwarded to the Minister for his approval.

The Exempt List

The process for determining the list of species to be exempt from registration included two stages of review by independent expert consultants, John Long and Penny Olsen. The list of species to be reviewed was compiled from lists provided by zoos, aviculturists, birds verified in the NSW verification period, and those species registered in some States and Territories. Recommendations were made on the following categories:

- birds which are considered to have major pest potential;
- birds which are considered to have high pest potential, significant conservation value or to be highly dangerous to humans;
- birds which are recognised as having minimal or no pest potential;
- birds which are recognised or potential pest animals with wild populations already established in a State or Territory.

These reports were then reviewed by an independent scientific assessment panel comprising Professor Peter Jarman, Mr Joe Forshaw, and Dr Judy Caughley which provided recommendations to the Interim Exotic Birds Committee. The Interim Committee took their recommendations into account in making its decisions, as well as a number of other factors, including whether the species was:

- listed on the Appendices to CITES or had high conservation value;
- a potential pest or had established a feral population;
- a target for smuggling;
- actually held in Australian aviaries;
- able to hybridise with native birds.

The Wildlife Protection Act does provide for certain conditions to be placed on some species of

registrable birds, however, any decision to place conditions on any species will be made by the Minister on advice from the Exotic Birds Committee.

How the scheme will work

The scheme requires that owners of all species of birds not listed on Schedule 9 to the Act will require registration. As such, on 2 October 1996, holders of those species should apply to become registered. The cost of registration will be \$30 per holder, irrespective of the number of birds they hold. Holders include zoos, wildlife parks, pet shops and commercial dealers, and individual pet owners.

Once registered, the holder will receive a record book in which they will record details of the number of birds of a particular species in the collection, and any transfers, trades, hatchings or deaths that occur within the twelve month period.

If a person who is not registered under the scheme wishes to purchase a registrable bird, they must first apply to become registered. Once they have received a registration certificate, they may then buy the bird. It is an offence to transfer a bird to a person who is not registered under the scheme.

Some States and Territories may place additional conditions on the keeping or entry of birds, where they have concerns about pest potential.

Inspections

It is not intended that all bird holders will be inspected annually. Rather, compliance with the scheme will be primarily intelligence driven. This means that inspections will be performed on a random basis or where there is information which suggests that an inspection should be performed. In most States and Territories, ANCA will have an agreement in place with the local wildlife or agriculture authorities, the Australian Customs Service (ACS) or the Australian Federal Police (AFP) to carry out inspections.

Of critical importance to the scheme is accurate identification of birds. ANCA intends to produce a colour guide to exotic species for use by inspectors.

Offences

Under the scheme, five offences will apply:

- possession of unregistered classified exotic birds - that is, possession of unregistered exotic birds not listed on Schedule 9;
- failure to maintain records;
- falsifications to, or omissions from, record books;
- transfer of registered birds to an unregistered person; and

- failure to supply annual returns of records.

During the first few months of the scheme, ANCA will not be taking action against those genuinely unaware of the registration scheme.

State and Territory Cooperation

ANCA has been liaising with State and Territory agencies to discuss the development of the registration scheme, and how it will be implemented.

ANCA will run the registration scheme in all States and Territories with the exception of Western Australia and New South Wales. This is due to the small number of people required to register in WA and the fact that their existing system has easily been adapted to collect the necessary data. NSW will administer all registrations through NSW Agriculture Department to ensure a coordinated approach, and to share the administrative burden.

Construction of the computer database.

ANCA has engaged a computer consulting firm to design and build a database to record and analyse the records for the registration scheme. ANCA has also approached various avicultural groups with regards to existing computer packages used by aviculturists which could be used in conjunction with the new database. This means that it may be possible for aviculturists to provide their records in electronic form.

Publicity Campaign

In order to reach as large a percentage of the target audience as possible, ANCA is conducting a broad publicity campaign. This has involved the production of labels on bird seed products, and advertisements in newspapers and key bird magazines. Since 1993 ANCA has been distributing newsletters about the scheme to relevant bird clubs, avian veterinarians and other interest groups. ANCA will also attend pet expos for both the general public and industry, and has issued several media statements.

Support for the scheme

Since January 1996, when the first reports from the consultants became available, and especially since the meeting of the Interim Exotic Birds Committee meeting in June, there has been a growing acceptance of the scheme within avicultural groups. As concerns about species to be registered and the potential impact of the scheme on business were addressed satisfactorily, these concerns have dissipated. ANCA anticipates that within the first six months of the scheme's operation, it will gain a good understanding about the extent and diversity of captive exotic birds in Australia.

The scheme will increase the confidence in the avicultural industry with the result that bird-keeping in Australia will become more popular. As advancements in avicultural technology (incubation, hand-rearing skills) increase, so to will the demand for avian veterinary services. In addressing this conference, it is hoped that increased knowledge about the scheme and its ideology by those in the service industry will create run-on effects to clients. Thus, ANCA sees

vets playing a valuable role in promoting and displaying the scheme in veterinary clinics which will be advantageous both for the avicultural community and for the government in implementing this important program.