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ECLECTUS PARROTS

TRANSVESTITES IN THE TREETOPS

Eclectus parrot boys look like girls and the girls look like boys. In fact, the males and females look so dissimilar they were long thought to be entirely different species, and it was only when naturalists finally saw them mating that the penny dropped. The males are a vibrant green and the females a stunning red, and such extreme differences between the sexes are exceedingly rare in the animal world. To understand this colourful arrangement in *Eclectus* parrots, one needs to take a close look at their unique lifestyle in the Cape York rainforests.

Australians are fortunate because the rainforest patches of the Iron and McIlwraith ranges on Cape York Peninsula are just large enough to support a population of this remarkable New Guinean parrot. The females need large hollows in tall emergent rainforest trees to breed, but usable hollows are few and far between (averaging only one per square kilometre of rainforest). A female with a good hollow has no choice but to sit tight and defend it from others. Scuffles often break out between females and they will even fight to the death to defend this precious resource.

Top: The female shows additional blue when her wings are outstretched. Photo: R. Seitre

Opposite: Male *Eclectus* parrots (*Eclectus roratus*) feed the females all their food during the breeding season. The male dances and bobs in front of the female and then regurgitates the fruit pulp directly beak to beak.