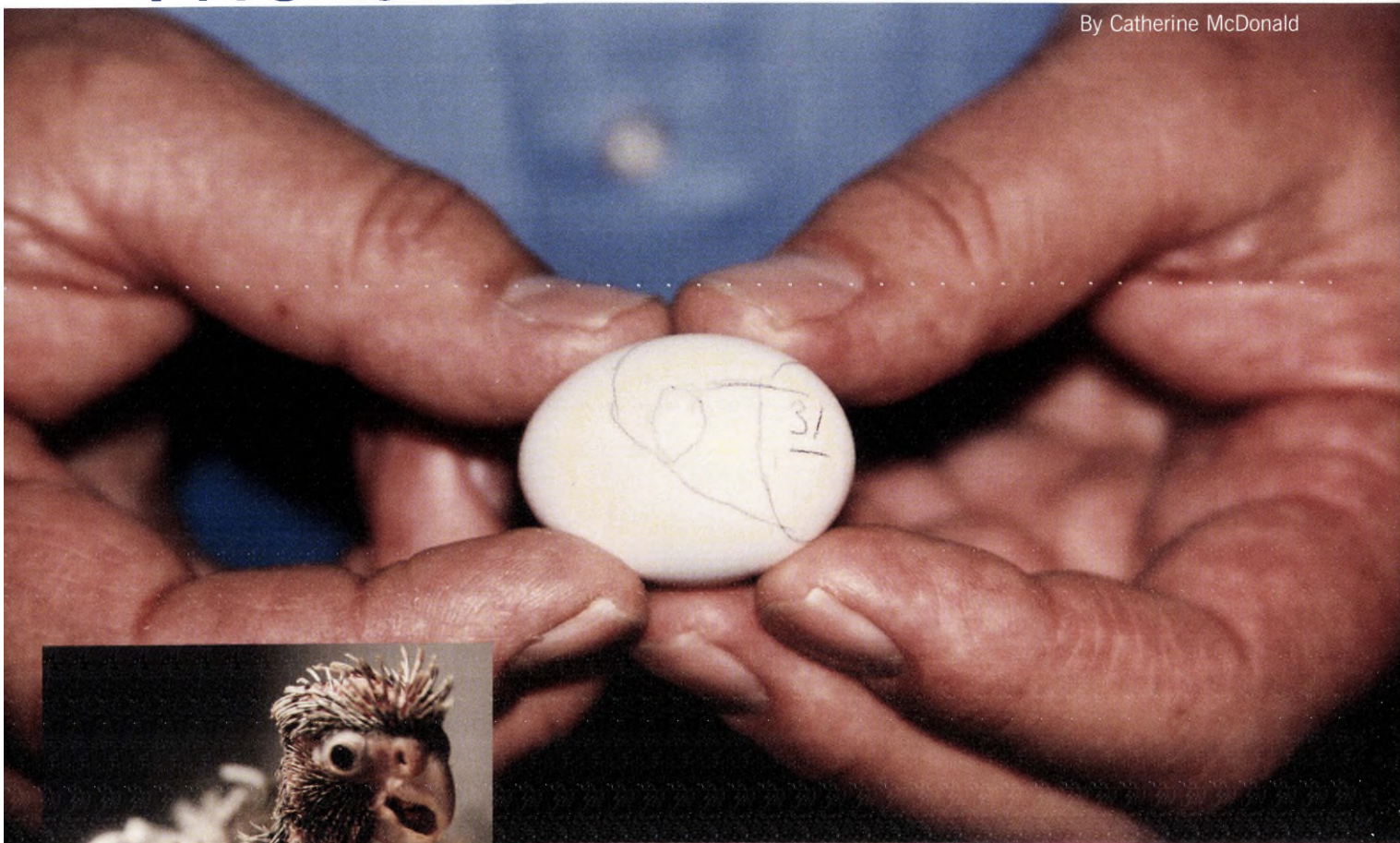


The birds that survived

By Catherine McDonald



top: One of the seized eggs during incubation.

inset: At approximately one month, the species is still unable to be identified.

Tied in stockings around the waist of the man were 34 eggs - another attempt to illegally export Australian wildlife. The rescue of these eggs by Customs at the border meant the opportunity of life in their native land.

Although criminal activities are designed in secret, they are often tracked through cause and effect. Wildlife trade is different. It is one of the hardest of all criminal activities to detect because it is victimless in human terms; the animals suffer cruelly, while serious damage is done to our natural environment.

Money was the motive in the case of the man caught with the eggs. Wildlife collectors pay high prices for our native wildlife because of it is so unique.

It was on a Sunday late last year. A

man, booked on a flight to Thailand, presented Customs at Sydney's international airport with the correct documentation (tickets and outgoing passenger card) to leave the country.

A Customs officer selected the man to undergo a frisk search. Initially he refused. He was questioned and within a short period of time admitted to carrying a quantity of bird eggs concealed on his body. He had intended to take them to Bangkok where he claimed he would be paid \$5000.

The smuggler was searched, revealing most eggs were concealed within stockings tied about his midriff. One was found concealed in his underpants. The man was arrested.

Customs officers then made a makeshift incubator, consisting of an insulated container, hot water bottles

and cotton wool to mother the eggs until they could be handed over to professionals at Sydney's Taronga Zoo for care.

The staff of the zoo cared for the eggs and the chicks that hatched for a week, repairing cracks with nail polish, moving hatched chicks to the brooder and then feeding the baby birds every two hours.

The hatched chicks and remaining unhatched eggs were then transported to the care of a registered breeder for rearing. These featherless chicks could not be identified for months; the breeder and his family pondered exactly what type of birds they were caring for. Eighteen were found to be rose-breasted galahs. The remaining three were Major Mitchell cockatoos.

Raised by humans, these birds have now gone to homes throughout Australia. Had they been sold overseas - if they survived the journey - the potential value of all the birds that hatched was nearly A\$100,000: the selling price at the time for a Major Mitchell cockatoo at A\$10,000+ while a galah could bring A\$3800.

The maximum penalty for this offence is \$110,000 or imprisonment for ten years, or both. In this case, the smuggler pleaded guilty in June this year and was given a fine of \$2100 and a 15-month suspended sentence on the condition that, should he commit another offence within this period, he would be sent to jail for 15 months.

Customs takes wildlife crime very seriously and works cooperatively with other Federal and State agencies including Environment Australia, Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service and State and Territory parks and wildlife authorities in detecting and preventing native flora and fauna from being smuggled out of Australia.

The *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* is the means by which Australia protects both its own and international flora and fauna from wildlife trade. It reads:

For the purposes of the Act, a regulated native specimen is a specimen that:

- (a) is, or is derived from, a native animal or a native plant; and
- (b) is not included in the list referred to as the List of Exempt Native Specimens, which are those specimens which can be exported from Australia without a permit.

For each specimen included in the list, there is a notation that states whether the inclusion of the specimen in the list is subject to restrictions or conditions and, if so, the nature of those restrictions or conditions.

A permit cannot be issued for the export of a native bird unless the Minister is satisfied that the proposed export would be an eligible non-commercial purpose.



Two of the birds that survived, a Major Mitchell cockatoo (left) and a rose-breasted galah.