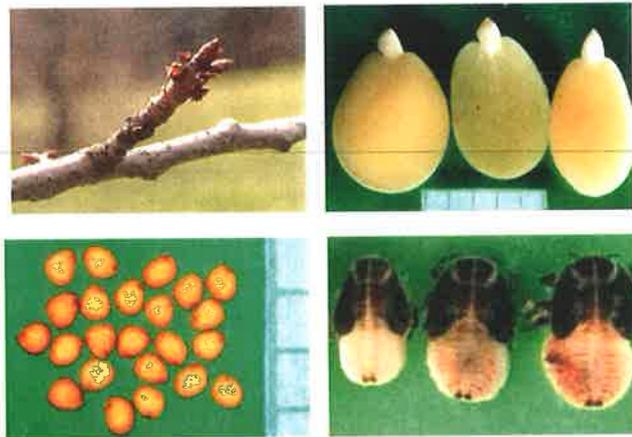


**The feeding ecology of the
Adelaide Rosella *Platycercus elegans adelaidae*
in cherry growing districts of the Adelaide Hills**

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Table of Contents

1	GENERAL INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1	TAXONOMY OF THE ADELAIDE ROSELLA.....	3
1.2	GENERAL BIOLOGY OF CRIMSON ROSELLAS	3
1.2.1	Habitat.....	3
1.2.2	Movements	4
1.2.3	Social organisation and behaviour	4
1.2.4	Breeding	4
1.2.5	Feeding ecology	5
1.3	CONSERVATION	8
1.4	PEST MANAGEMENT	9
1.5	STUDY OBJECTIVES.....	10
2	PATTERN AND EXTENT OF DAMAGE TO FLOWER BUDS OF CHERRY TREES IN THE ADELAIDE HILLS	12
2.1	INTRODUCTION.....	12
2.2	METHODS	17
2.2.1	Data collection	17
2.2.2	Data analysis	19
2.3	RESULTS.....	19
2.3.1	Variation over time in loss of buds to four cherry varieties at Bishop's orchard, Basket Range	19
2.3.2	Comparison of bud damage to varieties of cherries in two orchards (Basket Range and Cherryville) in 1992	22
2.4	DISCUSSION.....	25
3	DIETS OF ADELAIDE ROSELLAS IN THE STUDY AREA	28
3.1	INTRODUCTION.....	28
3.2	METHODS	28
3.2.1	Description of study area	29
3.2.2	Collection and storage of crops	34
3.2.3	Measurement and analysis of crop contents	35
3.2.4	Sexing of birds	41
3.2.5	Field observations of food use.....	41
3.3	RESULTS.....	42
3.3.1	Frequency of foods	42
3.3.2	Volumetric measurements of food items	54
3.3.3	Prominent foods in the diet.....	61
3.3.4	Observations of rosella foraging behaviour	76
3.4	DISCUSSION.....	78
3.4.1	Sampling techniques	78
3.4.2	Broad seasonal differences in diet	80
3.4.3	The use of particular foods by rosellas.....	80
3.4.4	Influence of land-use changes on the diet of rosellas	89
3.4.5	Adaptations for feeding specialisation	94
3.4.6	Other food studies	95
3.4.7	Conclusions	97
4	ENERGETICS OF FORAGING BEHAVIOUR AND FOOD USE	100
4.1	INTRODUCTION.....	100
4.2	METHODS	101
4.2.1	Bud primordia density	101
4.2.2	Energy yields of various foods in the diet	102
4.2.3	Harvesting rate of cherry flower buds	103
4.3	RESULTS.....	103
4.3.1	Energy yield of cherry flower buds	103
4.3.2	Density of flower bud primordia	104
4.3.3	Energy content of flower buds	106

4.3.4	Harvesting rate of cherry flower buds by rosellas	106
4.3.5	Energy values of other foods in the diet	107
4.3.6	Contribution of major food groups to the diet	110
4.4	DISCUSSION.....	112
4.4.1	Energy content of foods.....	112
4.4.2	Energy requirements of rosellas.....	115
4.4.3	Some foraging theory considerations.....	118
4.4.4	Factors influencing foraging on cherry buds.....	120
4.4.5	Conclusions	128
5	FOOD SELECTION TRIAL.....	132
5.1	INTRODUCTION.....	132
5.2	METHODS	133
5.3	RESULTS.....	134
5.4	DISCUSSION.....	135
6	HABITAT MANIPULATION TRIAL	138
6.1	INTRODUCTION.....	138
6.2	METHODS	139
6.3	RESULTS.....	141
6.4	DISCUSSION.....	143
7	MANAGEMENT OF PEST ROSELLA POPULATIONS	145
7.1	IMPACT OF ROSELLAS ON CHERRY PRODUCTION	145
7.2	DEVELOPING CONTROL STRATEGIES	148
7.3	OPTIONS FOR DAMAGE CONTROL	151
7.3.1	Deterrence	151
7.3.2	Population reduction.....	152
7.3.3	Exclusion	155
7.3.4	Habitat manipulation	156
7.3.5	Integrating methods of control	165
7.4	CONSERVATION ISSUES	166
7.5	CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS	171
	REFERENCES	175
	APPENDIX 1	184
	APPENDIX 2	188

List of Figures

Figure 2.1. Proportion of trees recorded in each of seven bud damage classes for four cherry varieties (Lustre, Makings, Opal and William's Favourite) in each year from 1988 to 1992 in Bishop's orchard at Basket Range.	20
Figure 2.2. Overall proportion of cherry trees in each bud damage class averaged over five years (1988 - 1992).	21
Figure 2.3. Distribution of bud damage within seven damage classes for the main cherry varieties at Bishop's orchard, Basket Range and Bungay's orchard, Cherryville in 1992.	23
Figure 2.4. Distribution of bud damage within four (aggregated) damage classes for the main cherry varieties at Bishop's orchard, Basket Range and Bungay's orchard, Cherryville in 1992.	24
Figure 3.1. Mean monthly rainfall in mm (dots) and mean number of rain-days (bars) for each month at Lenswood Research Centre in the Mount Lofty Ranges.	29
Figure 3.2. Mean daily maximum temperature and mean daily minimum temperature (°C) for each month at Lenswood Research Centre in the Mount Lofty Ranges.	30
Figure 3.3. Types of land use within the Adelaide Hills study area. Cherry orchards where Adelaide Rosellas were collected for dietary analysis (1985 to 1992) are represented as Study Sites and identified by Orchard Codes.	31
Figure 3.4. Remnant native vegetation associations within the Adelaide Hills study area. Cherry orchards where Adelaide Rosellas were collected for dietary analysis (1985 to 1992) are represented as Study Sites and identified by Orchard Codes.	32
Figure 3.5. Percentage of food items in the crops of Adelaide Rosellas that belonged to six possible food groups in each season.	44
Figure 3.6. Percentage of crops of Adelaide Rosellas in which foods were recorded belonging to six possible food groups in each season.	44
Figure 3.7. Percentage of crops containing indigenous and non-indigenous food types for Adelaide Rosellas collected in and around cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992.	48
Figure 3.8. Food types recorded in the crops of Adelaide Rosellas collected in and around cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992, expressed as a percentage of all food items recorded for each season.	48
Figure 3.9. Relationship between the volume of food in crops and the number of foods in a crop.	55
Figure 3.10. Percent volume of foods eaten in each season by Adelaide Rosellas taken in and around cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992 based on six Food Groups.	56
Figure 3.11. Percent volume of seven food groups that represented at least 10% by volume of foods in any season for Adelaide Rosellas taken in and around cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992.	57
Figure 3.12. Contribution of indigenous and non-indigenous foods to the diet of Adelaide Rosellas taken in and around cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992 based on the percentage volume of all foods.	60
Figure 3.13. Volumetric proportions of apple seed and apple flesh in the crops of Adelaide Rosellas taken in and around cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992.	63
Figure 3.14. Mean volume of apple seed in crops and number of crops with apple seeds for 323 Adelaide Rosellas of known sex collected in and around commercial cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992.	63

Figure 3.15. Percent occurrence of soursob parts in the crops of Adelaide Rosellas taken in and around cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992.	65
Figure 3.16. Volumetric proportions of soursob buds, bulbs and stems in the crops of Adelaide Rosellas taken in and around cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992.....	66
Figure 3.17. Percent occurrence of cherry flesh and cherry flower primordia in crops of Adelaide Rosellas taken in and around cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992.....	69
Figure 3.18. Volumetric proportions of cherry flesh (fruit pulp) and cherry flower primordia in crops of Adelaide Rosellas taken in and around cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992....	69
Figure 3.19. Prominent foods used by Adelaide Rosellas that consumed cherry primordia..	70
Figure 3.20. Seasonal distribution of immature stages of major insect groups in the diet of Adelaide Rosellas taken in and around cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992.....	72
Figure 3.21. Relative proportions of insect orders in the diet of Adelaide Rosellas based on volumetric measurements of the insect component in the crops of birds taken in and around cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992.....	73
Figure 3.22. Relative proportions of major invertebrate groups in the diet of Adelaide Rosellas based on volumetric measurements of the insect component in the crops of birds taken in and around cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992.....	74
Figure 4.1. Relative frequency of buds for three commercial varieties of sweet cherry from Basket Range (26/7/98-1/8/98) based on number of primordia per bud.....	105

List of Tables

Table 2.1. Indices for percentage of damaged cherry buds based on visual estimates.....	18
Table 3.1. Districts in the Mount Lofty Ranges from which Adelaide Rosellas were collected between 1985 and 1992 for dietary analysis showing summary of land-use and vegetation..	33
Table 3.2. Distribution of Adelaide Rosella specimens taken from commercial orchards within the Adelaide Hills study area for dietary analysis.....	34
Table 3.3. Number of foods according to major food groupings found in the crops of Adelaide Rosellas taken from cherry orchards in the Adelaide Hills between 1985 and 1992.....	43
Table 3.4. Mean number of foods per crop from Adelaide Rosellas taken in each month of the year during the period 1985-1992 in and around cherry orchards in the Adelaide Hills.	45
Non-food items were represented by amber, bark or charcoal.	45
Table 3.5. Seasonal variation in number of foods recorded per crop from Adelaide Rosellas taken in each season during the period 1985-1992 in and around cherry orchards.....	46
Table 3.6. Mean number of foods per crop for each season of male and female Adelaide Rosellas collected in and around cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992.	46
Table 3.7. Most frequently occurring seeds from indigenous species in the diet of Adelaide Rosellas taken in and around cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992.....	47
Table 3.8. Individual foods occurring in more than 10% of all crops from a sample of 333 Adelaide Rosellas taken in around cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992.....	50
Table 3.9. Individual foods occurring in more than 10% of all crops in any season for the sample of 333 Adelaide Rosellas taken in and around cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992.....	53
Table 3.10. Mean volume of food in the crops of Adelaide Rosellas taken in and around cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992, in each season and for each sex.	55
Table 3.11. The number of foods eaten by Adelaide Rosellas that each contributed at least 1% by volume of all foods in each season, and the percent volume of the seasonal diet that these foods collectively contributed.....	57
Table 3.12. Contribution by volume of indigenous and non-indigenous food sources to the seasonal diet of Adelaide Rosellas collected in and around cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992.....	59
Table 3.13. Percent volume of major foods from indigenous species in the diet of Adelaide Rosellas taken in and around cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992.....	60
Table 3.14. Mean volume of apple flesh recorded in crops of male and female Adelaide Rosellas collected in and around cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992.	62
Table 3.15. Mean volume of soursob flower bulbs in crops of Adelaide Rosellas based on the sample of birds that consumed bulbs.....	65
Table 3.16. Mean volume of soursob flower buds in crops based on the sample of Adelaide Rosellas that consumed buds.	66
Table 3.17. Mean volume of cherry primordia in the crops of Adelaide Rosellas that consumed primordia (n=54).	68
Table 3.18. Mean volume of insects in crops of Adelaide Rosellas in each season and for each sex.	71
Table 3.19. Summary of opportunistic observations of feeding by Adelaide Rosellas within cherry growing districts of the Adelaide Hills between 1985 and 1992 according to habitat type.	77

Table 3.20. Field observations within the study area of Adelaide Rosellas feeding on foods not recorded from crop samples of birds taken from cherry orchards between 1985 and 1992..	77
Table 3.21. Mean volume of apple seed and apple flesh recorded in the crops of Adelaide Rosellas of known sex.....	84
Table 4.1. Energy yields for cherry flower primordia collected at Basket Range between 26 July and 1 August 1998.....	103
Table 4.2. Energy content of flower primordia from three commercial varieties of sweet cherry collected at Basket Range, 26/7/98 to 1/8/98.	106
Table 4.3. Estimated rate of energy intake by rosellas consuming flower primordia of three cherry varieties, William's Favourite, Lustre and Makings.	107
Table 4.4. Energy values of some foods in the diet of the Adelaide Rosella.	108
Table 4.5. Mean volume and estimated energy content (kJ) of apple seed and flesh per crop sample for Adelaide Rosellas collected in cherry orchards in the Adelaide Hills between 1985 and 1992.....	109
Table 4.6. Energy content per food item for apple seeds, soursob bulbs and cherry buds based on wet weights.....	110
Table 4.7. Approximate energy values (kJ g ⁻¹ dry mass) for foods in major food groups being considered in this study.	111
Table 4.8. Percent volume (wet mass) and estimated percent energy contributed by major food groups to the diet of Adelaide Rosellas in the Adelaide Hills.....	111
Table 4.9. Percent volume and estimated percent energy content of foods eaten by Adelaide Rosellas in each season according to major food groups.	112
Table 4.10. Cost of thermo-regulation for Adelaide Rosellas in autumn and winter (kJ day ⁻¹) in the Mount Lofty Ranges.	116
Table 4.11. Mean body weight of adult Adelaide Rosellas of minimum age of 12 months taken from cherry orchards in the Adelaide Hills between 1985 and 1992.....	117
Table 5.1. Consumption of soursob bulbs and apple seeds in a choice trial (Trial 1) involving 5 replicates with 2 or 3 rosellas housed in each aviary.....	134
Table 5.2. Consumption of soursob bulbs and apple seeds in a choice trial (Trial 2) involving 5 replicates with 2 or 3 rosellas housed in each aviary.....	135
Table 6.1 Habitat manipulation trial: Visitation by Adelaide Rosellas to tilled and untilled plots differing in cover of soursob plants at four sites in the Adelaide Hills during October and November 1992.	142
Table 7.1. Potential depletion of the bud resource in a small cherry orchard by Adelaide Rosellas.....	147
Table 7.2. Summary of suggested experimental approaches for developing control measures to reduce cherry bud damage by Adelaide Rosellas.....	173

List of Plates

Plate 1. Undamaged and damaged buds on fruiting spurs of William's Favourite cherry trees; and cherry primordia found in crops of rosellas.	13
Plate 2. Cherry orchards and cherry trees in the Adelaide Hills.	16
Plate 3. Some foods recorded in crops of Adelaide Rosellas collected in and around cherry orchards in the Adelaide Hills between 1985 and 1992.	38
Plate 4. Some foods recorded in crops of Adelaide Rosellas collected in and around cherry orchards in the Adelaide Hills between 1985 and 1992.	39
Plate 5. Some foods and food plants of Adelaide Rosellas in cherry growing districts of the Adelaide Hills.	40
Plate 6. Some psyllid insects recorded in crops of Adelaide Rosellas from the Adelaide Hills.	75

ABSTRACT

The Adelaide Rosella *Platycercus elegans adalaidae* has been one of the main bird pests of commercial cherry (*Prunus avium*) orchards in the Adelaide Hills. The greatest effect on production has been prior to fruit development through destructive feeding on dormant flower buds in autumn and winter and on flowers in spring. This is the only bird species that has been recorded in Australia to feed on and damage cherry flower buds. Although more than fifty varieties of cherries are commonly grown in the Adelaide Hills, severe damage to buds and flowers by rosellas has usually been restricted to one variety or its derivatives. Rosellas also feed on ripening and ripe cherry fruit.

The specific aims of this study were to:

- gather baseline information on diets of Adelaide Rosellas around cherry orchards at different times of the year;
- determine the importance of cherry primordia relative to other foods in the diet, and
- investigate some of the factors that might influence food use and food choice (e.g. energy content of foods, accessibility of foods) as precursors for proposing management strategies for reducing damage to cherry buds caused by rosellas.

The diets of Adelaide Rosellas were determined principally from crop contents, complemented by opportunistic field observations of feeding birds. Adelaide Rosellas in the Adelaide Hills are predominantly seed-eaters but supplement their diet at times with other foods such as fruit, bulbs, buds and insects. The birds are generalists, feeding on a wide range of foods. The high proportion and variety of non-indigenous foods in the diet of the rosellas sampled indicate that they can be highly adaptable in their foraging behaviour and that they probably forage opportunistically according to the seasonal availability of foods.

Adelaide Rosellas consumed a greater volume and number of food items in autumn than in other seasons. The higher quantity of food consumed in autumn was to a large extent attributable to the availability of apples at this time of year. A lesser number of food items and volume of food were consumed by rosellas in summer when seeds and insects were usually more abundant compared to autumn. Non-indigenous foods comprised the bulk of the diet throughout the year but were of least

importance in summer possibly reflecting the relative availability of these and indigenous foods. Weeds were an important food source in all seasons, providing seeds, buds and bulbs to the diet, but were of greatest importance in spring. Fruit pulp represented a large component of the diet based on the volume consumed although it is likely to be of lesser relative importance than seeds in terms of the total energy contribution to the diet.

Rosellas damaged flower buds of cherry for the sole purpose of removing and eating flower primordia. Although significant levels of cherry bud damage occurred within the study area, flower primordia were a food of minor importance in the diet in terms of the volume consumed relative to other foods. Cherry primordia were absent in the diet in summer and occurred in negligible amounts in autumn and spring. In winter, primordia comprised less than 2% by volume of all foods but were consumed by 43% of birds in the sample.

Apple (*Malus sylvestris*) flesh was the most frequently occurring food item (39% of birds) followed by the seeds of sub-clover *Trifolium subterraneum*, apple, wild radish *Raphanus raphanistrum*, and fat hen *Chenopodium album*. The foods of greatest importance based on volumetric proportions in birds' crops were apple flesh (18% of all foods), wild radish seed (9%), apple seed (9%), *Trifolium* spp. seed (mainly sub-clover; 8%) and olive (*Olea europaea*) fruit (5%).

Insects represented only 1.4% of the diet by volume of all foods but were recorded in the crops of 41% of all birds. On a seasonal basis, the order Hemiptera was the major insect group represented in the diet. The percent contribution of all hemipteran insects to the volume of insect material in the diets was highest in summer (93% of all insects) and lowest in winter (58%). The Psylloidea (jumping plant lice and lerp insects) were the main component of hemipteran insects in the diet in each season except summer. Triozid nymphs (Psylloidea) were the dominant insect group in winter and spring and were represented by two species *Schedotrioza marginata* and *S. multitudinea*.

There were seven foods that each comprised more than 10% of the diet by volume in at least one season. Of these foods, three collectively represented 42% by volume of the summer diet, three represented 48% of the autumn diet, three represented 51% of the winter diet and four foods represented 49% of the spring diet. Seasonally, the most important foods by percentage volume were soursob bulb in

spring (16%), cherry fruit in summer (20%) and apple fruit in autumn and winter (27% and 18% respectively). The seasonal peak in consumption of apple fruit was autumn (27% by volume) when cherry fruit was not recorded.

Based on general observations of relative abundance and availability of foods in relation to their representation in the diet, selection for cherry flower primordia by rosellas was low and may therefore be considered a food of relatively low importance. The dietary information collected during this study indicated several food sources of high dietary importance (e.g. apples, sub-clover, and soursobs *Oxalis pes-caprae*) with promising potential for use as an alternative food source to divert feeding activity of rosellas from cherry trees.

The opportunity to maximise energy intake (or net energy gain) during bud feeding appeared to be a key factor influencing varietal preference by rosellas. Although the energy density (J mg^{-1} dry mass) of cherry flower primordia did not differ significantly between the heavily damaged variety (William's Favourite) and two lesser damaged varieties (Lustre and Makings), the difference in mean energy content per bud was significant, due to the difference between varieties in number (means of 3.8, 3.0 and 2.5 respectively) and dry weight of primordia per bud. This difference provides rosellas with the opportunity to increase the rate of energy intake, thereby influencing their choice between varieties. The differences in the estimated rate of energy intake between the three varieties broadly corresponded with bud damage levels observed for each of these varieties within the same orchard at Basket Range over a five-year period (1988 to 1992). Measurements of bud density for the three varieties indicated that the bud feeding rate may also differ between varieties, reflecting the observed varietal differences in mean number of primordia and mean energy content per bud. Thus, bud density differences indicated that feeding on buds of William's Favourite compared to the other varieties was energetically more profitable than differences in bud energy content alone suggested.

Although cherry buds were not a staple part of rosellas' diet this food was possibly sought when birds were able to meet their minimum daily energy requirement from more energetically profitable foods. I propose a number of reasons as to why rosellas feed on cherry buds in orchards when other foods may be available:

- Cherry buds are an abundant, relatively constant and predictable food resource;

- Some varieties (e.g. William's Favourite) provide the opportunity for increasing foraging profitability;
- Despite the small size and low energy content of buds as individual food units, high harvesting rates are possible (due to bud and primordia density and the bill structure of rosellas allowing a higher rate of energy intake compared to some other foods such as seed of salvation jane *Echium plantagineum* or wireweed *Polygonum aviculare*);
- As a tree crop, feeding on cherry buds allows birds to avoid the higher risk of predation when feeding on the ground, particularly in wet conditions;
- Cherry trees may provide birds with the opportunity to manage their daily energy expenditure: for example, basking in the leafless canopy in winter as a form of behavioural thermo-regulation requires less effort to avoid predation compared to ground feeding and provides the opportunity to continue feeding when weather conditions are adverse for ground feeding;
- There is no competition for this food resource by cohabiting species; and
- Cherry buds may provide minor nutrients that occur in very low amounts, or are not present, in other foods.

A further consideration is the availability of other food resources in the orchard pasture, and the close proximity to favoured roosts or day-time resting sites, which may increase the attractiveness of cherry orchards to rosellas.

A habitat manipulation experiment involving the cultivation of small replicate plots supporting soursob plants to expose bulbs elicited a significant feeding response by rosellas. At each field site there was an increase in rosella visits to treated plots following the exposure of soursob bulbs to the surface by hand tilling. On plots that were not cultivated there was no change in visitation by rosellas. These results indicated that soursobs, as an important food source of rosellas and a widespread and common weed in the Adelaide Hills, might be of value as a decoy food for reducing feeding damage to cherry trees at certain times of the year. Soursob bulbs are not normally accessible to rosellas. As rosellas do not dig for bulbs, access to them depends on cultivation or other disturbance to the soil to bring the bulbs to the surface.

The use of decoy foods appears to show some promise as a control strategy, particularly where rosellas are causing damage to trees within cherry orchards that are uneconomic to protect with netting. In these situations habitat modification in

order to change existing patterns of foraging behaviour is worth consideration. As foraging generalists, rosellas have a diverse diet for meeting their daily energy requirements throughout the year. A number of food sources of rosellas identified in this study were common weed or pasture species (e.g. soursob, wild radish, sub-clover) that could be promoted or manipulated through particular farm cultural practices, possibly involving a modest investment of time and effort by the orchard manager. As the orchard pasture may represent an important foraging resource for rosellas, the effect of its composition on bud damage levels is worthy of further investigation. Apples and cereal grain (e.g. oats or barley) are suggested as potential decoy foods; and sub-clover (as a sown pasture) and William's Favourite cherry trees are suggested as potential cultivated decoy crops. A summary is given of the type of experiments that could be carried out in order to develop practical control measures for rosellas that damage buds in commercial cherry orchards.

As a general principle, measures to discourage feeding at the susceptible crop should be counter-balanced by measures to encourage feeding at other sites. With the exception of exclusion netting, the use of any control technique should therefore be integrated with other measures to ensure that the orchard to be protected is made as unattractive to birds as possible, and that attractive alternative feeding sites are available. This approach may need to be adopted over a large area involving possibly several properties. For each locality and situation, the attributes of the orchard that rosellas utilise as a food source should be evaluated in relation to the key environmental resources that the population requires to survive during the period when trees are vulnerable to feeding damage. From this understanding more effective management strategies can be developed and implemented.

DECLARATION

This thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference or acknowledgment is made.

I give my consent to this thesis being made available for photocopying and loan.

.....
T.M. Reynolds

5th December 2003

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