

Amethyst Starling

Cinnyricinclus leucogaster

by Roland and Ilana Cristo, USA

There are three species in the genus *Cinnyricinclus*:

- Amethyst Starling *Cinnyricinclus leucogaster*, ranges in African woodlands from Senegal east to Somalia and south from parts of Saudi Arabia all the way to Natal, Orange Free State, and Cape province. It is not found in deserts or thick forests.
- Abbott's Starling *Cinnyricinclus femeralis*, is more of a forest bird found in east Africa in the Mt. Kilimanjaro area of Kenya and parts of Tanzania.
- Sharpe's Starling *Cinnyricinclus Sharpii*, ranges from northern South Africa to Senegal on the west coast across to northern Tanzania on the east coast of Africa (except the Mt. Kilimanjaro area).

This article addresses only the Amethyst Starling. It inhabits woodland, savannah, forest edges, and riverine habitats. Much of its time is spent in the tree tops in the wild, rarely is it seen on the ground. This species is very gregarious, often found in pairs during breeding season (not noisy) otherwise in nomadic flocks of mostly one sex.

Up until 1910 only one male had been on exhibit in the London Zoo. The species was first bred just prior to 1936.

When I first saw these birds I was awestruck. The male with its almost pure white belly contrasting with the amethyst-purple of the rest of his body was stunning. His colors glittered

much like the colors of a sunbird or a humming bird's violet in the sunlight. The female looked much like a hen American House Finch (*Carpodacus*) with a finer beak and head and more white on the belly.

Amethysts are sexually dimorphic when in adult plumage. It must be remembered that the young males come off the nest looking like the hen. They do not start to get adult plumage until at least one year old. I have seen some that did not start to get their adult male plumage until three years of age. This makes it imperative to sex any birds that look like hens.

Amethyst Starlings remind me very much of our American Blue Bird in size and shape. After keeping the Blue Birds in the early 1950s the main difference I see between the two is that the Amethysts are not aggressive towards their own kind or other birds as Blue Birds are.

We acquired our first Amethysts in 1990 — the subspecies *Cinnyricinclus leucogaster verreauxi* differing from the nominate only in that the outer tail feathers are marked with white. They were put into a 3 x 16 foot flight, 6 feet of which is under cover and 10 feet is open and planted. A nest box made of $\frac{3}{4}$ inch pine stock with inside dimensions of 5 x 7 x 12 inches high was installed just inside the sheltered area at about six feet above the ground with the entrance hole facing north. A hollow oak knot was put over the entrance hole and grass was added to

the nest bottom.

The birds would put small green leaves in the box but we never got eggs. We talked to Wayne Schulenberg (of San Diego Zoo fame) and took his advice (which he received from an African gentleman), and put a log that looked like a fence post with a hole close to the ground. This didn't work. We put a natural log up about three feet from the ground. This didn't work either.

Once, while talking to Rick Jordan about his Amethysts, he said "My flight looks like a show room for nest boxes" and I concurred — ours now looks the same.

In 1997, I changed the hollow oak knot on the original nest to one that was pointing slightly upward. We also added green moss, like florists and nurseries use. The birds immediately went to nest using the modified original put up in 1990.


I am at a loss as to what actually stimulated the pair to start nesting. Was it the changes mentioned above or the fact that we acquired another pair of Amethysts that were placed only five flights away and where the two pairs could hear each other?

Once the first pair got started, they nested the last three years in a row.

They have three eggs, which concurs with observations in the wild. The adults cover the eggs with small green leaves picked off the plants in the aviary when the hen leaves the nest. The eggs hatch in 14 days and the babies leave the nest 16-20 days later. They are fed by the parents for at least another 10 days.

Up until this year they have only had one clutch a year. This year they are on their second clutch.

This species is very worthy of aviculturists' attention and breeding efforts. Although the Amethyst is still being imported in small numbers, aviculturists should work to develop domestic bloodlines while stock is still available. The species is nonaggressive and may be kept in mixed-species and planted aviaries.

The Amethyst and the Royal Starling are two of the most beautiful birds I've ever seen. They are, in fact, stunning. In the sunlight they are indeed living jewels. 



Amethyst Starlings with the colorful adult male in the center, the female on the left and a young male from the previous season on the right.

Photo by Roland Cristo