

Breeding Notes on the Plumhead Parakeet

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Introduction

Although specializing in cockatiels for close to 15 years, I have always maintained a variety of other parrots in my collection. One such species is the Plumhead Parakeet whose exceptional grace and charm has always held a special fascination for me. Vastly overlooked, these gems of the avian world are, to my mind, a most profound statement in elegance and beauty.

It was my unexpected good fortune in early 1976 to acquire an adult hen which was rescued from a cramped cage which it shared with a peachface lovebird in a local petshop. Realizing hens were difficult to acquire, I immediately purchased the bird. Although imported males were to be found, it proved quite difficult at the time to secure a domestic-bred male in the Northeast. For several years, the hen lived quite contentedly in a ten-foot long walk-in flight with cockatiels. After a time, I gave up on the hope of purchasing a domestically bred male with a known history and finally secured an imported male, background unknown.

The pair succeeded in raising young and I have attempted to document their breeding activities and requirements from notes kept earlier. As little attention is given the species in print, I thought I would share these

notes which are first prefaced by a brief statement of the Plumhead's origin and a complete description of the parrot's physical appearance.

Distribution

The Plumhead Parakeet (*Psittacula cyanocephala*) originates from India and is one of the more familiar members of the genus *Psittacula*. According to Forshaw, their distribution includes "Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Rameswaram Island, and most of India, east of about Rawalpindi in West Pakistan, and Nepal east to Bhutan and West Bengal."

Description

Plumhead Parakeets may frequently be confused with the Blossomhead Parakeet (*Psittacula roseata*) which some authors recognize as a separate species according to subtle differences in coloration.

The adult male Plumhead is a soft shade of green, being a bright greenish-yellow on the underparts and darker on the rump and through the flight feathers. They measure 12 inches in length including a long, slender tail of about seven inches. The long central tail feathers are blue broadly tipped with white, while the lateral tail feathers are yellow-green, tipped with yellow. Males develop the deep red-plum head which is brighter across the forehead becoming bluish-

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A large, stylized illustration of a macaw's face, showing its characteristic facial feathers and large, hooked beak. The illustration is in a light, sketchy style.

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purple on the hindcrown, nape and the lower cheeks. Some authors state that the bluish-purple is caused by a blue color blended with rose-red which extends beyond the black neck ring and mandibular stripe. Upon close inspection, however, this extended collar appears more of a sea-green than it does blue in the specimens I have worked with. A dark, red-plum band matching the head color cuts diagonally across the wing coverts. The upper mandible of the beak is orange-yellow with darker pigment coloring the lower mandible brownish-black. Feet are grey and the eyes are pigmented dark with a yellowish-white iris.

Adult hens and immature young appear as their male counterparts with the following differences: a more subdued lavender-grey replaces the bright red-plum color on the head. The upper mandible is pale yellow and the lower mandible appears greyish. A yellow collar replaces the male's black neckring and mandibular stripe, as well as the sea-green collar extension. Finally, some authors state that both hens and young lack the deep plum-red wing band. I disagree with this as the hens I



Photo by Jerry Jennings, Fallbrook, CA

Plumheaded parakeet male. The pair has a choice of nest boxes. This aviary set-up was photographed in Phoenix, Arizona at the breeding facilities of Opal and Tal Crosser.

have seen wear a *lavender-grey* wing band matching their head coloration which, upon cursory inspection, could go unnoticed.

As previously stated, the Plumhead Parakeet is sometimes confused with the Blossomhead Parakeet (*Psittacula roseata*). The latter can be differentiated from the Plumhead by the following subtle differences: the

male's head coloration is a brighter rose-pink on the forecrown, cheeks and ear coverts which blend into a paler bluish-lilac on the crown and nape. This contrasts to the previously described male Plumhead's red-plum head color becoming bluish-purple. The male Blossomhead also lacks the sea-green extended neck band and the rump is plain rather than blue-

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green. A more brownish-red patch, compared to red-plum, appears on the wing coverts as well.

The Blossomhead hen appears similar to the Plumhead hen but with one very noticeable difference. The Blossomhead hen will, as does her male counterpart, display dark red wing patches across the wing covert feathers! In addition, she will differ from the Plumhead hen by a yellow upper mandible and lower greyish-white mandible (compared to the pale yellow upper mandible and greyish lower mandible of the Plumhead hen). However, for practical purposes, the easiest method to distinguish between a Plumhead or a Blossomhead Parakeet at a glance, is to look at the *tail*. The Plumhead's tail is tipped in *white*, whereas the Blossomhead's tail is tipped in *yellow*. This is the easiest method to use should you not recall the other differences. Some breeders have unfortunately hybridized by mating Blossomheads to Plumheads. If care and responsibility is not taken, we could eventually lose both species. In the wild, each species lives in different geographical regions thus preventing hybridization.

Breeding

Breeding in captivity can take place from mid-autumn through the winter. Forshaw states that according to two different sources, the breeding season in India is from December to April, and in Ceylon it is from February to May and often again in August through September.

The breeding unit utilized for the Plumhead pair was of the same dimensions as used for cockatiels, measuring four feet long, by three feet high, by two and one-half feet deep. The double units were built one on top of the other and raised 18 inches off the ground as insurance against any possible basement flooding. The pair was initially presented with a 12-inch square cockatiel nestbox which, surprisingly, proved satisfactory and thus eliminated the need to build a grandfather style nestbox especially for them. One inch of white pine shavings was placed in the box as nesting material, which was partially eliminated each time the pair went to nest.

Behaviorally, the Plumhead hen is dominant in the relationship and will have to be won by the male through an elaborate display and accompanying courtship serenade. The more

decorative garb of the male in *Psittacula* is now understandable since it is essential that the males capture and keep the attention of the females when selecting and competing for mates.

The male attempts to catch the hen's attention by enthusiastically vocalizing his courtship song and rapidly marching up and down the perch on which she is sitting, while stopping intermittently to perform a series of ritualistic bows to gain her admiration. The actual act of mating appears to be the only time when the male becomes dominant. Yet, he quickly flies from the perch upon completion, to escape the returned assertion and dominance of the hen.

The mating song of these birds simply cannot be described and to dare to call it an exotic ensemble of rich and melodic tones varying in their intensity and sweetness, is to do little justice. The hen's song can be just as strange and enchanting, however, the male's exuberance and accompanying display is, indeed, a marvel to watch.

The male stands guard just outside the nest entrance hole. My pair laid either four or five eggs per clutch and on one occasion I caught the male sitting next to the hen inside the box while she was incubating the eggs. This leads to the speculation that Plumheads are normally very shy birds by nature and that perhaps in the wild or with tame pairs they may perform this activity more often. However, in captivity, the male may be even more alert to visitors or footsteps approaching the aviary, coming out in time to meet them.

Incubation is approximately 25 days and chicks hatch out blind and naked. The following quote from my original notes on the first successful hatching reads: "The chick was born naked with no down feathers whatsoever and looks similar in appearance to a newborn Indian Ringneck chick, with the exception of the beak which is a very pale light color instead of the more orange color of the Ringneck hatchling. The Plumhead chick's loud cries also sound very similar to a Ringneck chicks'. I was fascinated today to watch the hen feed the chick on its back with a very gentle pumping motion. She is still somewhat aggressive towards the male and protective of her chick, at least when I'm around. She continues to incubate the other eggs and although they appear infertile, I'm going to leave them with

her to entice her to stay in the nest with her chick, since this is her first experience."

Later, the following notes were entered: "The chick developed sparse white down at about two weeks of age which gave way to feather tracks and, eventually, pin feathers. The chick was banded late at 21 days with a closed, coded NCS cockatiel legband." The last notation of this nest included the following excerpt: "Upon walking into the aviary, I was startled to hear the most enchanting, melodious sound coming from the Plumheads' nestbox. When I opened it I was startled to discover it was the 5-1/2 week old chick begging to be fed! I never quite heard anything like it before. If only all birds could sing for their supper in such style!"

Interestingly, the feather tracks on the head which appear a greyish-mauve on chicks are the last to open and surprisingly color the head *green* with only the cheeks being mauve in color. The beak is now more orange than horn and the chick completes its feathering with a yellow collar around its neck.

Chicks fly the nest by six to seven weeks and need another few weeks to wean. It is only later, when the chicks complete their first baby molt, that the young birds' head feathers turn from green to the lavender-gray coloration of the adult hen frequently described in the literature.

It takes some time for Plumheads to be properly sexed — often from two to three years for the markings of adult males to show. Forshaw states that, "According to Tavistock (1954), young birds attain a plumage similar to that of the female with their first molt and males come into full color with the second complete molt when in their third year." This is where the inexperienced are often fooled, when purchasing immature birds as hens, only to discover the following year they have molted into adult males.

The eruption of young Plumhead males into adult feather can be an experience to the uninitiated, to say the least. I remember walking into the aviary where a young hen was housed and discovered it had apparently been in a fight or accident since there was some blood, or so it appeared, on its head. Actually, on closer inspection, the "blood" proved to be the initial red-plum coloration of adult male plumage! My "Blossom" was renamed "Bobby" and it was fascinating to watch the head take on the

haphazard patchwork of color until it entirely filled in with plum-red and the yellow collar was replaced by the black neckring and the addition of the plum-red wing patch. Eventually, Bobby was transferred over to the male flight.

Diet

The Plumheads were fed the same nutritional program as the flock of cockatiels, with a wider selection of fresh fruits and vegetables. The pair received a fortified brand of cockatiel food mixed with a fortified brand of parakeet food and a small amount of a commercial dried fruit and vegetable treat mixed in. A fortified brand of parrot food was offered in a separate bowl. These items replaced the straight seed mixes coated with a powdered vitamin fed to all birds up through the early 1980s. A supplemental mash, either Petamine or Nutracare, is offered to all birds in a separate feed vessel hung high in the pen. Originally, monkey chow had been offered, but it was eventually replaced by avian pellets, once they came on the market, and offered in a second hanging vessel. I chose to feed both pellets and seed since I have little control over what the offspring are fed once sold, and I want them to be familiar with all the foodstuffs in their new environment. Millet sprays were also made available on a daily basis, once chicks hatched. Clean, fresh water, cuttlebone and a small amount of soluble mineralized grit were also available each day.

The diet was supplemented year round with fresh fruits and vegetables but, during breeding season, included a daily portion of corn on the cob, a green vegetable and several varieties of fruit. I've fed dried fig daily since 1976 when I read in Forshaw's "Parrots of the World" that fig was the Plumhead's favorite food item. I can undoubtedly state that among all my Indian Ringnecks and Plumheads, fig is, by far, the uncontested food item of choice being first selected from the dish. The only exception I have found has been the adult Plumhead hen's fondness for strawberries, though once consumed, fig is immediately next in the selection process. I have had mixed reaction to the feeding of fresh fig; however, dried fig cut into quarters is jealously held and stripped of its "seeds" by all and I wholeheartedly recommend it.

Referring to my earlier notes, the following entry read: "Fig was always

the first food selected. Once eaten, only then would they go on to consume the corn on the cob and other fruits and vegetables served on an alternating schedule including: strawberries, blueberries, blackberries, cranberries, papaya, apple, green and red grapes, orange, pomegranate, English peas in the pod, carrot, dandelion, kale, parsley, spinach, collard greens, Swiss chard and chicory, which were all lightly dusted with a powdered vitamin. There was an increase in the amount of sunflower seed consumed, some peanuts and cheese were also eaten, along with some smaller seeds such as canary, millet and oats. Oddly, both dry and moistened whole wheat bread were refused, as was monkey chow."

It is interesting to watch how the food selection process varies depending upon the stage of the breeding cycle. It is my belief that the pair were seeking to satisfy specific nutritional needs that change during the periods of egg-laying, hatching, rearing and weaning of young. Therefore, an attempt is made to provide a plentiful and widely varied diet.

Banding and Exhibiting

I had been in the habit of banding young Plumheads with NCS cockatiel legbands before the formation of the Society of Parrot Breeders and Exhibitors. Now, members can order SPBE closed-coded bands for their parrots, including the Plumhead, at a small additional cost. I am a strong advocate of closed banding as it furnishes proof of permanent identification, enables one to trace family background and allows the correct identification of a bird for line-breeding or outcrossing. Plus, it provides the means to record an accurate pedigree record or hatch date. Closed banding also allows you to show a bird and receive champion points (although SPBE does allow their own SPBE open bands on entries at shows).

I had the opportunity last year to exhibit a young male I had kept that had been handled frequently in the nest and responded well to show training. I was pleased that he made the SPBE top bench at the two shows in which he was exhibited and he earned champion points towards his certificate. It is always a thrill to place high in a show with a bird you have bred and banded yourself. To the best of my knowledge, I have seen only one other Plumhead make the Top Bench during the 1988 show season.

It would be nice to see these birds complete their championship certificates.

I recommend that those who are interested in exhibiting Plumheads, do so with tame or semi-tame individuals. Wild-caught Plumheads, in particular, can be very shy and it can be most stressful to them if they remain uncomfortable at shows. Exhibiting birds according to proper show standards is the method of comparing and improving our breeding lines. However, birds should be well-groomed, showage trained and prepared for this event.

Pet Potential

Although I have only kept Plumheads for breeding, I have been told they make excellent pets, especially if handfed. Like their close relatives, the Indian Ringnecks (*Psittacula krameri*), young birds should continue to be handled and played with daily, even if handfed, so they won't lose their tameness and become wild. Both sexes can learn to talk and I knew of one young bird, still unsexed, which acquired quite an extensive vocabulary. Of course, those more interested in a clearer speaking voice might be better off choosing one of the larger parrots known for their talking ability. Although it would be intriguing to own a talker, the Plumhead's own natural voice and song are so expressive and melodic that I would dearly miss the latter, if it came to a choice.

Conclusion

In summary, the Plumhead Parakeet is an ideal aviary bird, breeding well in captivity, in either large or small enclosures. Pairs can be separated and kept in cock and hen flights during resting periods with other non-aggressive species such as cockatiels and fed in a similar fashion, with additional fruits and vegetables. They can make excellent pets and good talkers, and may even exhibit well at shows. They are easily kept and it is surprising they are not more popular.

Yet, it is the unparalleled charm, grace and style of these birds that will not escape the true connoisseur's eye. The Plumhead Parakeet . . . enchantment and pure delight! A total statement in elegance and beauty and, altogether, a remarkable bird.

Reference

Forshaw, Joseph, M. "Parrots of the World", Doubleday & Company, Inc. Garden City, New York. c. 1973. pp. 334-335. ●