



## Sex Life of the Parrot

By Tom Marshall

Humans in general, but not learned aviculturists like ourselves, have tended to cast the parrot solely in the role of a boisterous, flamboyant companion with an array of clownish antics for our amusement, but we know that role is insufficient and unworthy of this avian companion. In real life parrots are masterpieces of animal design, with private lives full of fascination and, in many cases, mystery. We know parrots reproduce, and in fact we probably know where our particular pet parrot(s) came from as aviculturists. The breeding and keeping of parrots is our avocation. We know parrots pair up, but what do we really know about their sex lives?

We have witnessed, more often than should be necessary, how our dogs and farm animals do it, but do parrots do it that way? Parrots are not mammals, and unlike mammals, appear to have no external sex organs, which may be why they seem so safe to be seen in the presence of children, if it were not for those beaks! Parrots and most birds appear to keep their sexual apparatus hidden away.

Startling as it may seem to us male folks, male birds of most species manage to engage in sex without a penis. The peculiarity of that knowledge lies in that fact that those birds are not like most animals. Parrots and most birds have been excluded from

an otherwise very large and inclusive category which includes all mammals and many insects, reptiles and some fish.

Such an appendage is rare in birds, though not unknown. In non-mammals, these protrusive male thingamajigs are not all called penises; the word by its strict definition is specific only to mammals. Biology has different names for penis-like organs in different animals, but the generalized term for all the different types is: *intromittent organs*. These intromittent organs are designed to project, or *intromit*, sperm from the male body into that of the female.

Therefore in most bird species, the male lacks an intromittant organ. Instead, those birds do their mating cloaca-to-cloaca, a somewhat crude but workable arrangement that has been described as roughly resembling the joining of two vacuum-cleaner hoses.

The cloaca is an all-purpose passage through which a bird expels urine and feces, as well as sperm from males and eggs from females. To fertilize ova, the male and the female must connect their cloacae, which isn't an easy feat, especially on a tree limb, because the cloacae are situated under the tail, at the bottom of the abdomen. The male mounts the female from the rear; she moves her tail out of the way and twists her abdomen sideways. He then curves his tail and abdomen downward and they both invert their cloacae to achieve copulation.

With 300+ species of parrots, it is not too surprising to find one parrot that deviates from the norm. That parrot is found on an island nation located in the southern Indian Ocean, off the coast of Africa. The Vasa Parrot (*Coracopsis*) consists of at least two species which are endemic to Madagascar and nearby islands. In addition to their appearance, which includes extremely truncated bodies, with long necks, black to grey feathers and a pinkish beak color, the skin of both female and male Vasa turn yellow during the breeding season. And there is often noticeable feather loss, which in females can result in baldness.

What is really unique from a sexual perspective, is that the male Vasa's cloaca is able to invert into a unique (somewhat reptilian) hemipenis, which becomes erect during mating – a startling feature to those of us familiar with breeding parrots and which, of course is even more unique to most birds and the single rare exception among parrots. The phallus is associated with prolonged mating. Many of you have seen dogs in what is called a copulatory tie during mating. Swelling occurs which can last from a few minutes to an hour. I assume this is a biological method to make sure there is a consummation of the mating. Oddly enough it is the female which is dominant among Vasa parrots, and makes the decision as to when mating will occur. The act of mating is unlike any other parrot species. The male mounts the female in the normal fashion, as well as side by side mating. What is unique and somewhat reptilian, is that the male has that protrudes at this time and the pair will actually lock together. This locked behavior has been observed both in the nest box as well as on the perch.

Some parrot pairs are monogamous, being one of the many apparent characteristics of parrots that are endearing to those of us who keep them. Avian monogamy, however, should not be confused with fidelity with regard to all parrots.

Among parrots and all birds there is almost every sort of relationship that is found in humans. People have affairs, but they stay in their marriage relationship of monogamy, and so do many parrots. Some human males are dominant in the relationship, but there are also “hen-pecked” husbands, figuratively speaking.

I used to breed Indian Ringneck Parakeets, where the dominance of the female was often quite obvious. When breeding was attempted, you could see the inner struggle among the males in approaching the female that was a combination of lust and fear. Also one can notice that female lovebirds are often bigger than their male partners, and they do demonstrate a temper from time to time. The same can be said about Eclectus parrots. Aviculturists will often refer to these birds as non-pair bonded birds.

Recent studies of Eclectus parrots suggest that they might be bigamists or polygamists. When the male is a polygamist, it's called *polygyny*. When the female has two or more husbands, it is *polyandry*. Some birds like to mix it up with a mating system called *polyandry*, in which both males and females have multiple husbands or lovers. Only Eclectus, I believe, among all parrots practice this lifestyle.

Of course, Eclectus have the greatest example of sexual dimorphism than do any other in the genus. This may explain, in part, their unique breeding strategy, as it is the female which must remain conspicuous at the entry of the nest hole. She

must make sure that the males know where she is and that rival females stay away. She is, however, well hidden when down in the nest hole, because the red color hides her well in the darkness of the cavity. The male with his bright green color actually offers camouflage when in the tree tops, foraging for the wife and kids. The fact that the hens rarely leave “home”, allows the male opportunities to fraternize with other females. The fact that the hen is conspicuously “dressed” at the entrance of the nesting cavity could be a beacon to lustful males.

Courtship for most parrots does not usually produce a dramatic change in personality when trying to attract a mate, although males often become more aggressive around rivals in order to protect their mate, offspring and nesting site. The birds are often in sizable flocks, at least in non-breeding seasons, and are well-acquainted with each other through mutual preening, which results in strong bonds among them.

Parrots with sex on their minds do their courting by showing off, not unlike many human males and females. This usually involves a repertoire of fairly simple movements, such as bowing, eye-flashing, head pumping, hopping, wing flicking and flapping, tail wagging and pompous strutting. Aroused males tend to raise their head feathers, which is particularly evident in cockatoos.

Then there is the Kakapo of New Zealand, which is much different in so many respects than other parrots. This, the heaviest of all parrots, does not fly and is most active at night.



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New Zealand was so remote that this parrot evolved in a radical different way than its kin in other parts of the world. The islands for eons were free of land predators, so they lost their ability to fly. Eagles and hawks, which are diurnal were present, so being active at night fit their evolutionary needs quite well. Kakapos were more like feathered rabbits than a typical parrot, and their eating habits were similar. However, it is their special breeding system that deserves attention.

The objective of courtship, as we know, is copulation. Male Kakapos are interested in the "one-night stand" of love-making. They invite the interested female to their "pads" by using their voices for some melodic courting to attract females. (Scientists refer to these pads as "leks" and the melodic courting as "booming", likened to the sound made by blowing across the opening of a Coke bottle.) If the male's advances are perceived as seductive, and the female's physiological condition is right, and she is in a good mood, she solicits by crouching over the perch with her wings and tail raised. Unfortunately, and atypical of most in the family of parrots, she will be left with raising her offspring as a single parent. Although never ideal, this is workable when needed.

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**Cape Fear Parrot Sanctuary**

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**Ces Erdman**  
 Director

Wilmington, NC

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 cesnc1978@hotmail.com  
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