



The Rare Lovebirds... A Future Focus

The Nyasa Lovebird

by Rick Smith
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The rarest of the eight species of the genus *Agapornis* or lovebirds kept in American aviculture today is the Nyasa Lovebird from Zambia (formerly Rhodesia) in central east Africa. This is one of the smaller species, about five inches long, and has often been confused with Fischer's Lovebird from Tanzania and even hybrids of several related "eye-ring" subspecies. At a glance, the coloring is similar. However, besides the difference in size, the Nyasa has a smaller, paler beak, a light colored iris, a yellowish "wash" on the nape, and a pure green rump. The Nyasa Lovebird thrives in particularly hot temperature extremes in its native habitat. Very early importations that were received in southern California by Mr. Rudkin, Sr. did fairly well in the warm, dry climate, yet were quickly overlooked as more exotic species of birds appeared on the market.

However, the first and only group to be successfully established in this country were from six or so birds sent to the Brookfield Zoo in Chicago from an established group in Australia. The fact that the number brought in was so small, and these birds were probably already significantly inbred, did not speak well for their prognosis. For some time the birds bred well, even producing the beautiful lutino mutation but, by the early 1970s, the species was once again in decline. The fertility was very low, probably due to years of successive inbreeding without an outcross to new blood. Males were scarce and fertile males even scarcer. The population was scattered and fragmented and serious lovebird breeders were quite concerned this species would be lost. Most of the

lutinos had been sent to Europe where they were used to introduce the color to other *personata* subspecies (eye-ring group). They were still fairly well represented in African collections; however, Rhodesia banned any exportations as they do to this day.

In a last effort, Lee Horton procured a group of about 80 birds through South Africa in 1974 and I subsequently obtained about 30 from a different source in the same country. Despite some appalling setbacks in quarantine, the Nyasas Horton brought in did well for some time and produced young. Unfortunately, mine did not do well and most were lost with very few hatchings. Mysteriously, Horton's birds eventually also went into a decline with the adults dying off and offspring not surviving. By this time, there were only a few aging birds from the Brookfield strain left and few breedings were reported. The prospects did not look good.

Last year, a group of about 50 birds was imported from the largest known group outside Africa. (Unfortunately, this breeding group of about 350 birds in Jersey subsequently succumbed to a virus late last year). The birds did poorly in quarantine and only about 30 made it to release. Half went to Lee Horton and the other half to Mark Roberts in Georgia. Roberts sent his group to me in the spring as he felt California was a more suitable climate and he hoped Horton and I could work jointly to establish the species. I must acknowledge Roberts for thinking of the birds first and setting an outstanding precedent for rare bird preservation in aviculture. Of this final group, there are only 21 birds left — Horton has 10 and I have 11. If Nyasas

were easy to establish, they would be well represented in American collections. They have proven quite difficult and we face quite a challenge. To date, some of mine have paired and carried nest material but no eggs have been produced. All we can do is be patient and wait and see. They love the sun and heat in California and that may be a factor in why they previously acclimated and did fairly well here. The Nyasa is not endangered in the wild and there are apparently some still in Europe (possibly of questionable purity); however, with the current import restrictions, I see little hope of augmenting this small population we now have.

Nyasas like a small "budgie" nest box and will build domed nests with palm fronds. They are susceptible to cold and dampness and the temperature in which they are maintained should not fall below 60°F. Their diet is uncomplicated. I feed Keet XM with turkey starter crumbles, a soaked and cooked bean mix, and fruits, vegetables and greens. Incubation is about 21 days with normal clutch size from two to four.

As I mentioned previously, a beautiful mutation, the lutino, was produced. Indeed, it was one of the first of any lovebird mutations and the first "red-eye." This bird was brilliant saffron yellow with the normal orange facial markings and the albinistic red eye. I do not believe it exists in the U.S. in its pure form. The lutino Fischer's Lovebird we see today undoubtedly originated from this bird.

There may be a few pure Nyasas in collections in the U.S. that we do not know of. We would certainly welcome the opportunity to establish a breeding consortium for this species. If you or someone you know has pure Nyasas and are interested in helping those of us in the African Lovebird Society dedicated to establishing this species, please contact either me or the editor. Many aviculturists started with lovebirds, then gradually moved on to species such as Australian parakeets, cockatoos and eclectus. Compared to the rare lovebirds, many of these are fairly well secured in American collections. Perhaps, upon recollection, some of you will remember how enjoyable the lovebirds can be and consider, again, helping to ensure they are established for future generations to enjoy. ●

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