

Caging and Housing Lovebirds

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Caging and housing any genus or group of birds will undoubtedly produce a diversity of opinions. When we discuss a group as prevalent in aviculture as the lovebirds or genus *Agapornis*, this may be especially true as these birds have bred in virtually every type of accommodation. My suggestions are based on personal experience with the eight species we have kept in American collections. I have been fortunate enough to breed seven of the eight species listed (the Red-faced Lovebird, an extremely specialized and difficult species, has not bred for me yet, however, it is currently in my collection).

I have listed below some specific precautions which should be observed for the protection and well-being of the birds.

- Do not use chicken wire or 1/2" hex aviary netting for construction as the birds can chew through this (I can personally attest to this).

- Lovebirds chew wood, therefore aviary frames should be sturdy. For the best and safest results, plywood covered with wire will provide security.

- Shelter is necessary. Most lovebirds can withstand colder temperatures if properly acclimatized, but drafts can be deadly. If aviaries are subject to cold winds, they should have solid "wind blocks" attached to protect the birds.

- Avoid perches or nesting materials from toxic plants such as oleander or castor bean. Most lovebirds will destroy planted flights, so don't waste time planting aviaries.

- See my notes on individual species for compatibility in colonies. Do not introduce new specimens to established groups. Do not intermix or hybridize different species.

- In aviaries, a safety aisle is manda-

tory as escapes can and will happen, even during routine maintenance.

- Vermin must be controlled as they will enter nest boxes, kill babies and adults and contaminate food. Watch for rats, mice, snakes and, in some areas, squirrels, opossums and raccoons.

- Lovebirds must have water — particularly in hot weather. Check receptacles daily or even more often as needed.

- Length is more important than width when building cages and aviaries. This provides for exercise and allows the birds to come in condition for breeding.

- Provide at least one and a half times the number of nest boxes as pairs of birds and don't overcrowd (too many pairs), even in large flights.

All of my lovebird aviaries are 7' to 8' high, 4' wide and 6' to 12' long. I use only welded wire and some are of "erect easy"-type panel construction. All are sheltered at least 4' of the length and secured from drafts. My breeding cages are about 4' long by 3' wide by 3' high.

In aviaries, I offer both natural branches and "perch ladders" suspended diagonally from the top of the flight. In colonies, they help allow the birds to establish dominance and reduce aggressive behavior. Note: in colonies, make sure there are enough perches in different locations because fighting can occur. However, do not crowd the flight section of the aviary or cage so the birds are inhibited from actually flying.

I feed in bowls and pans and check daily to make sure what "looks full" is, indeed, full of fresh seed (not hulls). Bowls containing soft foods such as fruits and beans are cleaned up and disinfected with a mild bleach solution daily. A great disposable alternative is paper "French fry boats" available from grocery supply houses or discount stores such as Costco. You just use the trays once and then throw them away.

I provide fresh water daily in glass pie dishes (automatic waterers are fine, however, lovebirds bathe regu-

larly and the water they retain and carry in their breast feathers is important for maintaining humidity in the nest.)

Below are some brief notes on the individual species (I will elaborate in upcoming articles covering the individual species and their unique requirements).

Peach-faced. Keep in pairs or controlled colonies *only*, as they are aggressive. Cage breeding is preferable for establishing mutations (particularly the rarer ones) and monitoring genetics. Make sure there are even numbers of pairs and, if kept in colonies, extra nest boxes.

Fischer's, Masked, Black-cheeked, Nyasa. Maintain in small, controlled colonies or cage breed individual pairs when establishing mutations. *Hybrids are undesirable* so do not mix species. Extra nest boxes are mandatory.

Abyssinian, Madagascar. *Single pairs only!* These species are unsuitable for colonies. Females are very aggressive so be sure pairs are compatible. Madagascars are nervous and are most stable in breeding cages with privacy. Abyssinians are calmer and more "parrot-like" and will do well in cages or small flights. Madagascars are sensitive to cold, whereas Abyssinians are somewhat more tolerant.

Red-faced. These birds are quite difficult to induce to breed. Most recent breeding successes have been in very private cages, however, this lovebird will live harmoniously with other birds (not other lovebirds). Red-faced do not destroy shrubbery in planted flights. They require a high nest temperature when breeding. Pairs can be aggressive towards each other. This is not a bird for beginners.

As I mentioned, my recommendations are based on my own experience. Your opinions may vary, as many breeders have enjoyed success even in extremely small cages. Lovebirds will sometimes breed in very small facilities, but the offspring are often small and sometimes the parents are so out of condition they can't even fly.

Good housing, good diet and good judgment are most important in maintaining and breeding the lovebirds. And remember, do not mix any species of lovebird (except Red-faced) in community aviaries with other varieties of birds. ●

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