

Stella's Lorikeet, What a Bird!

by Carl and Donna McCullough
Spring Valley, CA

Little orange feet run back and forth behind the closed off doors. Some of the birds greet us with a soft call, others hang impatiently from the top of their cages; but all are magnificent in their brilliant plumage as they eagerly await the morning food dish. These striking and affectionate birds from the mountain forests of Papua New Guinea, are often called Stella's Lorikeets.

The first time we saw a Stella's Lorikeet was at the San Diego Zoo. The zoo had a walk through aviary the size of a football field, 50 ft. high, and full of tropical birds. There were bellbirds, leafbirds, tanagers, fruit doves, and a small red parrot. It had bright green wings, orange beak and legs, a flashing yellow back, a blue crown, black abdomen and thighs, and two yellow slender tail feathers twelve inches long. To our delight this bird was tame. It landed on Carl's outstretched hand but would not let him pet it. We were mesmerized by this exquisite creature for a few minute and then it flew off to parts unknown. This lovely bird was a hand-raised female red Stella's Lorikeet. That chance encounter led us to acquire our first pair. With trades and careful breeding management we now have 11 breeding pairs and have successfully raised 60 healthy chicks.

Stella's Lorikeets come in two color phases, red and dark purple. The dark purple phase is called melanistic. Melanistic Stella's are commonly referred to as "blacks." However, when seen in sunlight they are actually dark purple birds with green wings, blue crowns, black abdomens and thighs, blue rumps and long green tail feathers.

Stella's Lorikeets are sexually dimorphic. Red females have yellow backs while the backs of melanistic females are green. Both red and melanistic males have red backs. Sexual dimorphism is apparent at about seven weeks after hatching. Except for dark colored beaks and feet there is no juvenile coloration.

In our experience, the melanistic phase is the dominant gene for color. We have melanistic and mixed pairs that produce both melanistic and red chicks. Our red pairs only produce red chicks. We have yet to see an exception.

The genus for Stella's Lorikeet is *Charmosyna* and there are four subspecies, *Charmosyna papou papou*, *Charmosyna papou stellae*, *Charmosyna papou goliathina*, and *Charmosyna papou wabnesi*. Except for the *wabnesi* the differences are slight. The *wabnesi* has a broad band of yellow across its breast. We have both *stellae* and *goliathina*.

In their native habitat Stella's Lorikeets eat pollen, nectar, fruits and insects. We feed our Stella's a liquid nectar that we make each morning. The basics of our diet consists of cooked carrots, papaya, apples, sugar, fresh wheat germ, rice, oatmeal, pancake mix (no lard), vitamins and protein powder. We also use mangos, nectarines, peaches and pears when available.

Our aviaries are the raised California type; 3 ft. high, 18-in. wide, 6 ft. long. They are in a 1,000 square foot, climate controlled building. The building has heating, air-conditioning, and a misting system. The roof is fiberglass. We cover it with light shade-cloth in the winter and a heavy shade-cloth in the summer. There are hanging plants throughout the building.

The box that our Stella's use has three components: a log, a long ramp and a nesting chamber. The log is oak, with a diameter of about 12 in. and 18 in. long. The log is split in half with a 2 9/16 in. hole drilled in the top half. About 3 in. below the hole is a perch. The log is attached to the inside of the back of the aviary and wire is removed where the hole is drilled. To the back of the log and aviary is attached a 8 in. square tube set at a forty five degree angle leading to a nesting chamber. The nesting chamber is 8 in. wide, 12 in. long, and 12 in. high. It has a flip top lid for easy cleaning and inspection twice a week. The ramp and nesting chamber are both made of cedar to keep feather mites to a minimum. The nesting chamber contains about two inches of pine shavings.

Cleanliness is the most important factor in breeding lorikeets. The blender must be disassembled and washed daily. All produce must be thoroughly cleaned and checked for signs of fun-

gus and spoilage. Dishes are washed and filled with nectar twice a day. The aviaries are completely cleaned with a power washer every two weeks and spot cleaned as often as needed.

The female Stella's lays her first egg about a week after copulation. The second egg is laid three days later. Incubation is 24 days and both parents take turns incubating the white eggs. We allow our pairs to parent raise all their young and do no handfeeding! Red Stella's chicks are pink with white down and melanistic chicks are a brownish pink with gray down. This first down lasts for about two weeks and is replaced by a very thick dark gray down. At about three weeks of age feathers start to appear on the head and chest. Wing and tail feathers appear next. The last feathers to appear are the back feathers at seven weeks. This is when the sexual dimorphism becomes apparent. The chicks fledge at eight weeks and are completely self-feeding within two weeks. The females are sexually mature at two years and the males at three years. Both continue to grow for the first five years.

Stella's Lorikeets are the most playful during their first two years of life. They play by grabbing each others' feet and tumbling about on the bottom of the cage. While rolling around they bite each other playfully until one hollers and then they separate. Sometimes one of the birds will roll on its back and wait for its partner to jump on and a new wrestling match begins. The long tail feathers are usually broken for the first year because of the rough play.

A common problem for young Stella's Lorikeets is having their tongues bitten by their adult neighbors. Our aviaries are doubled wired with two inches between the cages. If a bird gets its tongue bitten, we clean out its mouth with a cotton swab dipped in hydrogen peroxide. Usually the bird can eat again within a few hours.

Since we received our first pair of Stella's Lorikeets in 1987, we have fallen in love with this species for many reasons. They are beautiful, affectionate, playful and intelligent. Most Stella's enjoy interacting with people. Although we now care for many of these birds, we still enjoy the reaction of someone who has never seen a Stella's Lorikeet before. Most people fall in love with these birds the same way we did many years ago. ➤