

The Beautiful Plum-headed Parakeet

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The Plum-headed Parakeet, *Psittacula cyanocephala* (Linne), is indigenous to most of India, West Pakistan, Nepal east to Bhutan, West Bengal, Rameswaram Island, and Sri Lanka. These birds prefer wooded plains and foothills near cultivated areas. The Plum-headed Parakeet can be a serious pest, often raiding grain fields and orchards.

The breeding season in the wild is reported to be from December to April throughout India, and from February to May in Sri Lanka, often producing a second clutch in August and September. Plum-headed Parakeets make their nests in the knot holes of *Bassia* trees, or they may use another bird's nest cavity. They have been known to nest in the crevices of buildings.

General information on Captive birds

The beauty of Plum-headed Parakeets is breathtaking. The pattern and color of the plumage is complex and jewel-like. Written descriptions of the birds are not adequate. There are plenty of good pictures, but film has its limitations too. Plum-headed Parakeets must be seen to be appreciated.

Plum-headed Parakeets are dimorphic as adults. The adult molt occurs at about 27 months of age. Immature birds resemble the adult females. If necessary to determine sex prior to the adult molt, surgical sexing, or DNA sexing is advisable.

Plum-headed Parakeets have long been favored by aviculturists everywhere. At one time, it seemed as though every bird breeder had at least one or two pairs. However, this species may be in danger of disappearing from American aviculture due to apathy. The tendency to take for granted that this familiar bird will always be around is dangerous.

We are now seeing a decline in the availability of these parakeets. The most obvious reason for the shortage can be attributed to the close of quarantine. There are many other reasons for the decline. Each is relatively minor by itself, but there are so many, that the cumulative potential for loss is greater than ever. In general, production is low for most pairs due to mismanagement and poor

feeding practices.

In analyzing our breeding program, there are really only four things critically important to achieving breeding success with Asian parakeets. If any one element



Photo by George D. Dodge and Dale R. Thompson

The graceful and colorful Plum-headed Parakeet is one of the finest aviary birds but must be managed carefully to assure its future in U.S. aviculture.

is ignored, reproduction is minimal or nonexistent. The four elements are: proper pairing and set-up, preventive maintenance / health care, diet and nutrition, and consistency.

Pairing and Set-up

Proper set-up of pairs begins with making sure you are working with the same species or subspecies. Blossom-headed, Plum-headed and Slaty-headed Parakeets are frequently misidentified. It's important to keep the species separate and preserve the purity of the breeding stock.

Breeding success with Plum-headed Parakeets is enhanced considerably by having at least three to five pairs to work with. During the fall, all males should be

housed in a separate aviary next to the females. The birds begin to pair off by hanging on the wire to be close to the chosen mate. They talk to each other and the males feed the hens through the wire if they can manage to reach. This behavior is part of the bonding process. As each pair bonds, it should be removed and placed in its own aviary with a nestbox. These birds soon proceed through courtship rituals, mating and finally nesting. In southern California, eggs are usually laid in late February or March.

Some birds may not want to pair with any of the birds offered. Those birds need to be kept for use in the next breeding season, or you may try finding another mature bird to work with during the current season. The ratio of males to females produced is high; about eight to one respectively. Single birds really aren't a handicap to a breeding program because birds of this species form new pair bonds each season. The extra birds can be paired in rotation to increase genetic diversity in subsequent breeding seasons.

Housing and Nest Boxes

The flight size should be no smaller than 2 ft. wide x 6 ft. high x 6 ft. long, (60cm x 2m x 2m). Our birds are housed in flights that are 3 ft. wide x 8' ft. high x 12 ft. long (1m x 2.5m x 3.75m). It is advisable to wire all sides including the top and bottom of the aviaries because Plum-headed hens are notorious for digging into the ground prior to and even during breeding season. Many birds have either escaped to the outside or been killed by other birds when they emerged into a neighboring aviary.

Leave no areas between walls, nest boxes or feeders that females could possibly fit into. Often the hen will try to find a secluded nesting area other than the box provided. She may get caught and die before you can find her. Hens are in extremely short supply, so extra precautions need to be taken to insure their safety.

We have found the grandfather clock style nestbox works the best. Ours are made of pine planks which provide better insulation than plywood. The birds really prefer small spaces to nest, and the interior of our boxes measure 9 in. x 9 in. x 24 in. deep (23cm x 23cm x 60cm). We install a 1/2 in. x 1 in. welded wire ladder inside the nest box. It's placed on the sidewall instead of just below the entrance hole, to make it easier for the birds to get in and out of the box. This helps prevent damage to the eggs if the birds are frightened and dive in quickly.

Nesting material should be placed in the boxes to a depth of about 12 inches. We prefer to use ground wood fiber for nesting material because of its special texture. It lacks the big chunks and sharp edges of shavings, and it's not dangerously fine like sawdust. The birds like it too.

The nestbox is hung on a sidewall of the aviary, about 18 in. to 24 in. from the rear panel. The entrance hole of the nestbox should be facing the back wall. This gives the birds a greater sense of security.

Don't worry about the long tapering tails breaking off in tiny nesting spaces. Tail feathers are flexible, and the birds know just how to get into the box so the tail wraps around neatly. A distinctly curved tail on the hen is an indication that she likes her box and nesting has begun.

Not all Plum-headed Parakeets are going to like the constructed nest boxes. In particular, wild caught birds may lack interest because they don't feel secure about the size or look of the box. While Plum-headed Parakeets aren't overly concerned about the depth of the nest box, they definitely prefer the interior to be small. This gives the parents the advantage when defending the nest from predators.

One pair of our wild-caught Plum-headed refused to go to nest in our standard boxes. The pair was put into a large flight cage with a number of other species. The Plum-headed pair spotted a palm log that had been hollowed out slightly and immediately took it over. The pair was on eggs in two weeks, and successfully hatched three chicks. The nest hole was only eight inches deep and about seven inches in diameter. The chicks had to be pulled in for handfeeding at 18 days, because in another week they wouldn't have all fit!

Colony breeding has been tried with Plum-headed Parakeets, but results have been mixed. These birds are territorial, particularly toward their own species during breeding season. Set up one pair per aviary to keep distractions and squabbles to a minimum. Construct adjoining aviary walls using plywood, or double-wire with a two inch space for safety. Plum-headed aren't likely to chew toes of their neighbors, but more aggressive species can be a problem. Newly fledged Plum-headed Parakeets are most likely to be hurt.

Nesting in Captivity

Under the right conditions, Plum-headed Parakeets are prolific breeders and the parents do an excellent job of

raising babies. Clutches of eggs range in size from four to six, and Plum-headed Parakeets usually do not double clutch in captivity.

The hens incubate the eggs while the male stands guard outside the box. The normal incubation period is 18 or 19 days. The male eats frequently throughout the day and feeds the hen. When the chicks hatch, he continues to feed her, and she in turn feeds the hatchlings until they are about one week old. After that, the cock and hen both feed the babies. At about six weeks, the babies begin to fledge. The parents continue to feed them for approximately two to three weeks more. Feeding frequency decreases slowly and the fledglings learn to find food and water on their own.

Artificial incubation of Asian parakeet eggs from lay to hatch is something we try to avoid. Because Plum-headed Parakeets do not usually double clutch in captivity, there is no production advantage to artificially incubate and feed from day-one. Still, it's a good idea to have an incubator running through the breeding season for emergencies. Some pairs don't take care of their eggs or babies properly, and you may not have other breeding pairs at the proper stage for use as foster parents. The incubator is invaluable in these cases as a temporary "mom" for abandoned eggs or chicks until they can be fostered or if necessary brooded and handfed.

Preventive Medicine / Health Care

Plum-headed Parakeets are incredibly hardy. They have few health problems and tolerate a wide temperature range. Good nutrition and clean water every day go a long way to prevent illness.

As part of your daily routine, look at the birds and their droppings for signs of infection or illness. Changes are often indications of problems. Bacterial, viral and fungal infections occur with some frequency even in the most sanitary conditions. If the birds are listless, not eating or if there are other signs of illness, culture and treat accordingly. Worm birds annually if they are kept in aviaries with dirt floors. Plum-headed Parakeets don't do well when caught for a series of injections or oral dosing of medications. If at all possible, medicate birds through water or food. A good avian veterinarian can design a health care maintenance program for the specific needs of each collection.

One of the few health issues specific to Plum-headed Parakeets is egg binding. There is a higher incidence of egg binding in cold weather, but dietary deficiency is nearly always the cause.

Eggbound hens don't eat or drink, and generally look ill. They soon die without supportive care. If eggbinding is suspected, move the bird to a heated hospital cage. Handle the bird with extreme care so the egg doesn't break inside the body, which is nearly always fatal. When warm, the hen may be able to lay the egg without assistance. If the egg isn't laid within a couple of hours, take the bird to a veterinarian.

Egg binding is easily prevented with vitamin A supplementation. Avoid overdosing this fat soluble vitamin by providing it through a natural food source such as grated carrot. Calcium also plays a significant role in the prevention of egg binding, and should be a regular supplement. Cuttlebone naturally contains the correct proportion of calcium and phosphorus, and is easily assimilated.

Diet and Nutrition

Although proper pairing, housing and health maintenance are important for breeding success, the most critical element is diet. A quality feeding program should keep the adult birds in good breeding condition year after year.

An all seed diet may keep the birds alive, but does little to stimulate breeding. It also limits survival of the chicks because of the effort needed to crack enough seed to feed a full clutch. Pelleted or extruded feeds are quite nutritious, but it is still important to feed a variety of soft foods and fresh produce. While the precise nutritional needs of this species are not known, the birds will likely get enough of what they need to do well if offered a wide variety.

Plum-headed Parakeets respond well to seasonal feeding rather than year around availability of all foodstuffs. We feed high quality Cockatiel mix throughout the year. The addition of soft foods to the diet, beginning in December will bring the birds into condition, and stimulate them to breed. The soft food mix is prepared fresh each day and fed only during the breeding season.

Our soft food mixture consists of cooked grains, and legumes. Chopped celery and grated carrot are included in the diet every day. Seasonal vegetables are added as available. Vitamin and mineral supplements are sprinkled sparingly on the mixture. Feed portions that are small enough to be eaten in a day's time. Uneaten food should be promptly removed from the cage or aviary since it provides a perfect medium for bacterial and fungal growth. Some experimentation maybe necessary to determine just how much will be eaten by the parent birds prior to the chicks' hatching.

OPINIONS

On the third day after hatch the parent birds begin stuffing the chicks with celery. Celery is rich in sodium, potassium, and the necessary fiber to get the chicks off to a good start. Carefully wash and feed extra stalks for the next 10 days in addition to the soft food mix and seed.

It may be necessary to feed soft foods more than once a day when the chicks do hatch, and there should be no food volume restrictions during breeding season. Parent birds should have as much food as they need for the growing brood. The volume of food needed at first will be small, and increase as the chicks grow.

During breeding season parent birds usually choose vegetables over fruit to feed the growing chicks. We provide fresh fruit during the summer months to all birds, including the newly weaned birds. Plum-headed Parakeets especially favor red apples, oranges and pomegranates.

The need for clean fresh water may seem to be obvious, but many aviculturists let the cleaning of water dishes slide for longer periods than what may be safe. Cool, clean, fresh water is a must and water bowls should be changed daily. With young birds, water dishes need to be changed more frequently than once a day. Young Plum-headed Parakeets have a penchant for turning the water bowl into the most disgusting soup. They'll drag or drop anything they can find into the water.

Consistency

Production is greatly improved with consistency in feeding practices and daily maintenance. Whatever routines are chosen, be sure you are consistent with them especially during the breeding season. A break in the routine of feeding soft foods for example, could mean the death of the chicks. The parents might spend all day waiting for the soft food to show up and let the chicks starve. This could happen even if seed was available.

Color Mutations

Color mutations of the Plum-headed Parakeet include lutino, pied, par-blue or turquoise, gray-green and a mutation with a gray body and plum colored head. Most of the mutations haven't been bred in enough numbers to be seen by many people, much less available for sale. In time, these Plum-headed mutations may be as widely available and popular as those of the Indian Ring-necked Parakeet. The potential for some beautiful and striking color combinations is unlimited. ➤

Dear Sheldon

I just received the July/August Watchbird and would like to proffer some points of clarification regarding items found therein.

The article by Rae Anderson was very interesting. However, there was one point, probably inconsequential, which could be clarified. I believe the journal of the Avicultural Society has always been *Avicultural Magazine* whilst that of the Avicultural Society of America was originally entitled *Aviculture*. There was some sort of liaison between the two bodies many years ago although I do not know all the details. There was also collaboration between the *Avicultural Magazine* and *L'Oiseau* in producing a work entitled "Aviculture."

Turning to the correspondence concerning Caiques, I can concur with Fran Gonzalez regarding the so-called Lime-thighed Caiques, in that *Foreign Birds* here in the UK published an Anglicized version of her paper given in New Orleans in 1995. In that, the passage is reproduced as quoted except that the word "offshoot" is used instead of hybrid. However, the meaning of that passage is totally unambiguous and the production of Lime-thighed Caiques is not condoned.

I suppose the foregoing could be construed as the pedantic ramblings of a hypercritical Englishman. So be it. Then I looked across the page to the letter from Ms. Heere.

Dear me, Ms. Heere! It certainly is pleasing to know that I and many thousands of my compatriots have suddenly been elevated in stature. Does this mean a Peerage for all bird keepers? I hope so, but only if we all suddenly have the wherewithal to go with it. I was never aware before that aviculture is solely the preserve of the rich. As in all things, a person with greater financial means can afford more expensive chattels. That does not mean that a rich person is necessarily a better aviculturist than one with more modest means. Why, even our ex-prime minister, Iron Lady, Margaret Thatcher and her *socialistic* government would agree with that. But then again, I suspect that even Ghengis Khan was a bit of a softy according to Ms. Heere.

Regarding the comments directed at Rosemary Low and John Stoodley, let me make it clear that I don't agree with everything they say—and indeed why should I? Neither am I on anything other than passing terms with them both. In

the case of Mr. Stoodley, my only conversation with him was in passing at the AFA convention in New Orleans in 1995, while my only meeting with Miss Low was nearly 30 years ago. I doubt either remembers me. That being said, surely the accumulated avicultural experience of nearly a century (and with results to back that up) can hardly be dismissed as a means of "bashing U.S. bird breeders."

It may well be, that by listening to and digesting what they have to say, Ms. Heere may just realize that there is a connection with what they say and the tale of the goose that laid the golden eggs. I believe that neither Miss Low nor Mr. Stoodley would ever wish people to stop selling birds. Indeed, what they preach can lead to birds being sold not only by this generation but by our children and our children's children. What will ever be the long term good of birds that for generations have been propagated with regard only to the numbers produced rather than to the "quality" of those birds and the quality of the life they enjoy.

I can imagine the scenario in Monmouth, Oregon (my apologies now to those good people) whereby human babies are taken from their parents as they are born and taken to a communal feeding station where they are fed perfectly nutritious formula. This formula, because of its added nutrients, allows these babies to grow faster and better and to reach puberty at a much earlier age than other children. Of course this gives them a much shorter time to do the things that children do but then again, they have an important job to do. That's right—to produce children continuously from the onset of puberty until the menopause. As soon as one baby is born then another one is conceived. There is no need for parental bonding nor parental care on the part of these parents because all these babies, too, would be taken away immediately to the communal feeding station. At the end of a productive lifetime each mother is sent off to another community as being "Proven."

Finally, there is one suggestion submitted by Ms. Heere which would certainly meet with my approval—that being to move the AFA offices (including officers?) to Europe. We can certainly do with as many hard working, devoted aviculturists as we can get over here!

Yours sincerely,
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United Kingdom ➤