

The Cape Parrot

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Natural History

(Dale R. Thompson)

The Cape Parrot is the largest representative of the *Poicephalus* parrots in Africa and there are three subspecies, two being found in South Africa. The smaller *P. robustus*

The Cape Parrot is well represented in Africa but not in American aviculture. It is in the same genus as the African Grey and shares some similarities.

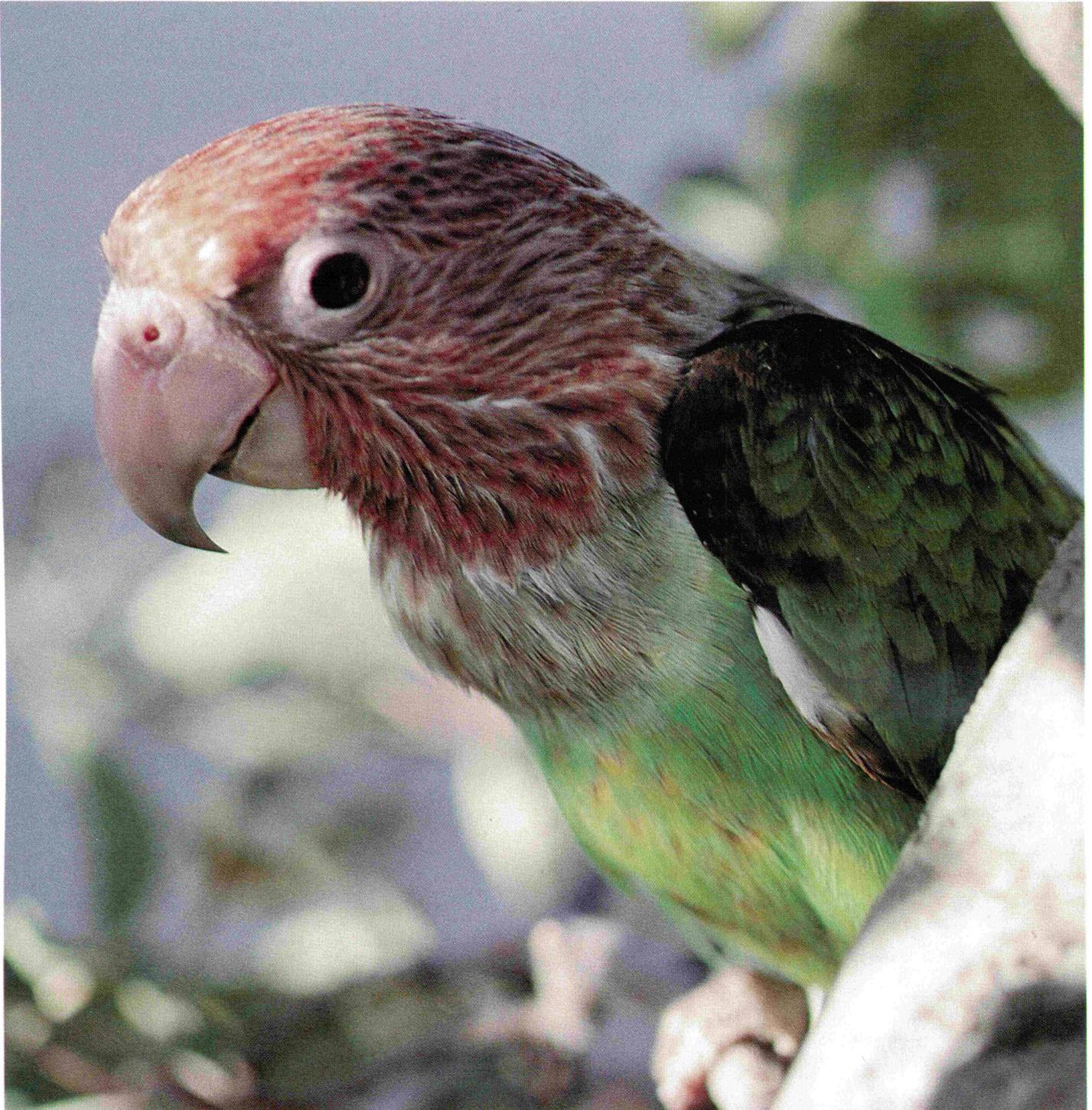


Photo by Eb Cravens

robustus is endemic to Eastern Cape and Natal where it can be found in the high altitude forests which is dominated by Yellow Wood or *Podocarpus* trees. The larger subspecies, *P. r. suabelicus* is only found in the northern parts of the country which has much drier forests.

The nominate race is by far the rarest in captivity and is seldom kept. This subspecies is different from the other subspecies in that it has a much browner head. The other two subspecies, *P. r. suabelicus* and *P. r. fuscicollis* are distinguished by a gray head coloration. The race *suabelicus* is the most common subspecies found in captivity. Both the *fuscicollis* and *suabelicus* subspecies are sexually dimorphic in their adult plumage. The female is more colorful with her forehead up to the crown being orange in coloration. Immature Capes are similar to the adult female having the orange head coloration but during the first molt the maturing males will lose this coloration.

Cape Parrots are noted for their large oversized heads and beaks. Males usually have a larger beak than the females and this can even be observed when immature. This large beak of the Cape Parrot is very powerful, especially because of its very curved upper mandible descending to a narrow tip and powerful lower mandible used as an anvil. Cape Parrots should always be given branches of trees or even timber to chew on and they will destroy this material with great efficiency.

Wild-caught birds can have a very shy and nervous temperament and this should be considered when placing this bird in a captive breeding situation. Well sheltered aviaries assist in giving this parrot a sense of security, and having the nest entrance area dark will enhance this feeling. I personally use the L-shaped cage for this species as I do with many of my wild-caught Greys. The front foot portion of the L-shaped cage is completely divided off on the outside with plywood partitions and this is where I place their nest box.

It seems that the great lack of females in captivity is the norm and this may be part of the reason that this species is not well reproduced in captivity. Rosemary Low relates in her

writings (Avizundum, Dec. 1996/Jan. 1997) that she came across a reference to Cape Parrots in The Gambia. Hans Anderssen (1984), who had lived in West Africa for 16 years, sometimes found dead *fuscicollis* beneath the roosting trees. They were nearly all females. He carried out autopsies on them and noted that they all "had a very badly infected ovary and oviduct and the spleen was black and enlarged on all." Could this be possible with the other subspecies as well?

Due to the destruction of their native habitat, the populations of Cape Parrots are declining on a whole. There are, however, several areas where they are still fairly common. Due to farming and forestry practices, large areas of indigenous forests have been cleared or have been replaced with non-indigenous trees which do not give the parrots the nesting sites and food supplies they need. This leaves great gaps in the forests which forces the parrots to fly great distances between indigenous forest for food sources. This is especially true during nesting times in which the parent birds may have to fly to far distant new forests to satisfy the feeding needs of their growing progeny. There are still some inaccessible forest where *P. r. robustus* exist in some numbers.

It is *P. r. suabelicus* which has really suffered from the destruction of its habitat and from the demand for captive birds.

It has been found that handfed Capes do have some excellent pet qualities. But keeping this species as pets should not be encouraged as the captive populations of the Cape Parrot are extremely low in their numbers. Young Capes should be held back as future breeders, especially the females. If this is not done, this species may easily disappear.

Cape Parrots are similar to the African Grey Parrot in voice and behavior. Male Cape Parrots will often drop their wings during courtship as do male Greys. When frightened, both birds will make a growling sound and try to get away and hide. Both the African Grey and the Cape Parrot have pleasant sounding voices when not disturbed and will often make melodious whistling sounds (especially in the

evening).

The diet given to Cape Parrots should consist of seeds and nuts, fruits and vegetables and any type of the "soft-type" of food diets. They are similar to the African Grey Parrot in their high Vitamin A requirement. This will assist in eliminating recurring upper respiratory infections, sinusitis and sinus abscesses. In fact, this is important for all *Poicephalus* species. Rosemary Low found Capes need a fairly high fat diet but sunflower and nuts can fill this need. Capes are especially fond of pine nuts. While she was at Palmitos park, Low found that orange was their favorite fruit and she fed the fruit of the *Arecastrum* palms which were oily and orange in color.

Captive Notes

(Eb Cravens)

I have been keeping *Poicephalus robustus suabelicus* in my aviaries since 1992, after being very taken with a pair on display in the exhibition hall of the AFA National convention in San Diego. Those birds were the nominate *P. r. robustus* subspecies.

It is a considerable privilege for me to be involved with this rare captive psittacine. Yet, it is also a relief and joy to maintain a parrot species at my facility which is strictly off-limits to the pet trade. All the handfed chicks I have known, fed or been involved with have been carefully placed with conscientious aviculturists who sustain an ongoing commitment to the Cape Parrot. This is as it should be.

Poicephalus robustus is undoubtedly a psittacine under attack in its wild habitat. As long ago as the mid-1970s, Joseph Forshaw reported that South African flocks were being pressured by trappers and those stealing young from nests to sell into the pet trade. Rosemary Low notes that wild-trapped Capes were being offered for sale in Great Britain the latter part of 1996. It would benefit the species greatly if, worldwide, we were able to increase the captive bred numbers and eliminate the trapping altogether.

The Cape Parrot is generally not an easy species to reproduce in captivity. Certain pairs in the U.S. and abroad have proven quite prolific and reliable. but we have found only a 25-40% suc-



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cess rate in pairs set up for breeding—especially when one or both of the birds is a second-generation handfed chick. To my knowledge, there is still no record of a handfed male *robustus* having successfully reproduced in captivity.

This is an extremely sensitive species of psittacine. Imported birds are nervous. It is important that handfed Capes are raised with other psittacine companionship and are not too closely bonded with their keepers. If this is not the case, mate abuse, weak bonding, and confusion of natural gender roles can occur.

The Cape Parrot is noticeably similar to the Grey Parrot in behavior and intelligence. They tremble easily, growl, hide and bolt if forced to live in an environment of frantic activity or insecure cage privacy. Feather plucking is at least as frequent as it is in Greys. Hiding in a nest box hour after hour can become habitual (to the detriment of daylight/calcium need as in the Greys).

Capes are avid chewers and destroyers of organic materials. They should be kept with an abundance of fresh, leafy boughs and rotting wood stumps, etc. to satisfy their gnawing urges.

Keepers should beware of aluminum bands to ring their birds. The strength of a Cape Parrot beak can damage or destroy such bands, creating a dangerous situation. Furthermore, we know of at least two instances where the aluminum has caused some sort of allergic irritation which led to feather plucking on that leg and belly side.

Any aviculturist who presumes to obtain and try to reproduce *robustus* in captivity should be solidly devoted to

the species. If we aviculturists are not dedicated or make too many casual mistakes with this species, we may well lose it to captive preservation.

Cape Parrots should be kept in a stable, long-term situation with plenty of privacy, some dim light and security. The emphasis should be on getting pairs to make the transition to parent-rearing their last clutch of the season. We are years away from having the numeric base sufficient to release this psittacine into the pet trade.

There is little reason to handfeed all the babies, especially if handfed babies are proving to lose some of the natural savvy necessary to successfully reproduce. It is interesting to note that the typical *Poicephalus* "greeting" of opening and closing the beak in a silent "ya-ya-ya" is not firmly passed on in the handfed Cape Parrots I have been around. They do re-learn it somewhat when introduced to a wild-caught bird, but it is not quite as pronounced.

So, this is a clarion call to all conservationists/aviculturists. It is not too late to save this species. Let us campaign to leave the rest of the wild Cape Parrots in the wilds. Let us pair up every single imported Cape Parrot we know of, and keep them in professional conditions providing the best opportunities to reproduce. And let us do it without the need of selling them into the pet bird business to finance and reward our successes.

Those of us who keep birds of this species need to join with others in the upcoming stud book, and make a commitment to pass any Cape Parrot on to an experienced and resolute keeper. Believe me, these birds are worth it. ➔

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