

The *Psittacula* of South East Asia and Indonesia

by Lyrae Perry, Dripping springs, Texas

There are six species of *Psittacula* that are indigenous to Southeast Asia and Indonesia. The habitats range from subtropical to tropical. *Psittacula* in general are hardy and healthy birds, rarely needing veterinary care. Most breed freely in captivity, and are excellent parents. Asian parakeets are generally spring breeders, but the tropical species like the Long-taileds and some of the Moustached Parakeets may nest at any time of the year if the conditions are right otherwise.

Banding

All immature *Psittacula* look similar to adult females. In adult plumage, *Psittacula* are clearly dimorphic with three exceptions – the Java Moustached Parakeets. If necessary to know the gender prior to the adult molt, surgical sexing or DNA sexing will be required. Banding or microchip identification will be necessary to avoid inbreeding. The bands we have been using on our birds range from Cockatiel size for the Blossom-headed and Slaty-headed to exotic size 10 for the Alexandrines. The medium sized birds can be fitted with a 9 or a 9 1/2 exotic band.

Housing

Housing requirements are similar for all species of Asian parakeet. My

preference is to house the birds in aviaries 4 feet wide, 8 to 10 feet high and 8 to 12 feet long, depending on species and space available. *Psittacula* species can also be successfully bred in cages. Cages ought to be a minimum of 4 feet wide, 4 feet high and 6 feet long with only one pair of birds per cage or aviary.

Colony Breeding

Colony breeding has been accomplished in very large flights, but the breeding success has been spotty. Asian parakeets are highly territorial during breeding season, and deaths from territorial battles are not unheard of. Achieving a “balanced chemistry” of pairs that will breed and raise a brood in the same aviary is not an easy task. Colony breeding is therefore not something I would recommend.

Mixed Species Aviaries

Is it likewise not advisable to put different species of *Psittacula* in the same cage or aviary. I have done it, and gotten away with it, however the aggression between the different species made it necessary to separate them.

This past year I had a group of newly weaned Slaty-headed and Blossom-headed in the same large weaning cage. They had grown up together in the nursery and had been getting along just fine. After three months in the weaning cage something changed and it was apparent that the Slaty-headed were ganging up on the Blossom-headed. Feathers were missing, toes were bloodied, and the Blossom-headed were not getting a fair shake at the food and water. The Blossom-headed were removed and placed in another cage with one year old Blossom-headed and are fine now.

Off-season Flighting

Maintaining strength and breeding condition of the birds is of utmost importance. Therefore the breeding pairs housed in small cages during the breeding season should be flighted in the off-season. In other words, they should be removed from any breeding cage or aviary and put into the largest cage or aviary possible so they can exercise and fly around. We have found

that flighting the birds without nestboxes and resting them in the off-season has improved production in all caged species. Moving them to a new cage or aviary, and then returning them to a breeding cage or aviary is actually stimulating and not negatively stressful as once thought.

When resting your birds, you want to minimize squabbles so it's best to put the hens of one species in a flight together, and males of the same species together in an adjacent flight. Very large cages can be used for resting flights if no aviary space is available. Typically, they would be 4 feet high, 4 feet wide and 8 feet long, again, females in one cage, males in another. Ten to 15 birds can be placed in a cage this size during the off-season. The birds should be observed frequently to be sure all birds are getting along, and that each is getting enough to eat and drink. I generally put more than one food bowl in a large cage for this reason. Nestboxes should never be left in resting flights.

Nestboxes

My favorite nestboxes are the grandfather clock style. They are inexpensive, easy to hang, maintain, check eggs, and best of all, the birds do well with them. I use three sizes. Small birds like Blossom-headed, Long-tailed, and Slaty-headed get a box that measures 6 in. x 6 in. x 18 in. deep. Medium sized birds like Moustached Parakeets would get a box that measures 9 in. x 9 in. x 24 in. deep. Larger Asian parakeets like Alexandrines are given a 12 in. x 12 in. x 36 in. deep nestbox. If possible it's preferable to use a #3 ground wood fiber instead of shavings for nesting material.

Diet

Asian parakeets are not primarily seedeaters in the wild. They eat a varied diet of plant materials, flowers, fruits, vegetables, grains, and probably insects in the wild. In captivity, they can be fed a seed diet, but they will not be able to raise young on a strictly seed diet. There are the occasional pairs that will feed babies on a seed diet, but these are the exception, not the rule. It's not because they are bad parents,

it's because the volume of food necessary to adequately feed the average clutch of 5-6 chicks is just incredible! The parent birds would be exhausted cracking two or three cups of tiny seed each day just to feed the little ones. So we make it easy for the parents with chicks and give them soft foods first thing in the morning.

The soft foods can be any of the following: frozen mixed vegetables (thawed before the birds get them), cooked brown rice or whole grains of any kind, seasonal vegetables like squash, snow peas, snap beans, New Zealand Spinach. We feed grated carrot and chopped celery every day to our Asian parakeets. The parent birds will appreciate extra celery for the hatchlings after the third day. It has been my experience that the parents rarely choose to feed fruit to the chicks. They prefer to feed vegetables instead.

Since vegetables alone will not provide enough protein for the growing chicks, the birds should be offered the proper foods for complete protein groups. This is easily accomplished by feeding cooked legumes along with corn or preferably brown rice.

It should be noted that legumes are not digestible unless completely and thoroughly cooked, and we have had evidence that undercooking beans may be linked to visceral gout in birds. Some of the seed coatings on legumes are toxic when undercooked, primarily the red beans. Legumes are cooked well enough if they are the texture that is pleasing to humans, which is very easy to do.

Soybeans are a legume, and while they very high in protein and look like they are easy to handle, they are not. Soybeans need to be cooked twice as long as other legumes, and it must be at a prescribed temperature for a specified period of time just to make them digestible. This is beyond what most of us have time to do for our birds anyway. There are many other legumes that are much easier to handle than soybeans and they offer adequate nutrition.

Some of the most nutritious legumes to use are lentils, black-eyed peas, and black beans. Black beans were not favored much by my birds, but lentils and black-eyed peas were. When cook-

ing legumes, it's best to cook them separately since the different sizes require different cooking times. If you cook lentils and black-eyed peas together, you would end up with a pot of black-eyed peas in thin lentil "gravy" – this is because the lentils take one-third the time to cook as the black-eyed peas and they just cook down to a fine mush.

You might want to sprout the lentils instead. It is easy to do and the birds love them.

Species Profiles

Slaty-headed Parakeets

Psittacula himalayana himalayana and *P.h. finchii*

The Slaty-headed Parakeets are often overlooked by breeders because they lack the brilliant coloration so typical of the other members of the *Psittacula* genus. They are still quite elegant birds. Slaty-headed of both subspecies are unusual in that both males and females have the same colored bill, head, body, and both have full neck-rings. But they are still dimorphic in adult plumage. Males have a maroon alar, or wing patch, and females do not. Both hens and cocks have a coral red bill with a yellow tip. The dorsal side of the tail is blue, and the ventral side is yellow tinged with orange.

Identification between the nominate and the subspecies is little more difficult than distinguishing between the sexes. It is almost necessary to view the two birds side by side. The tail tip color is often chosen as a method for distinguishing the two, but this is not reliable since the tail tips of both tend to wear off and both take on a creamy yellow color in a very short time. The underside of the tails also have an orange tinge which adds to the confusion.

If you are so fortunate as to be able to view the two subspecies side by side, you would find that *P.h. himalayana* is larger, and lacks most of the iridescent turquoise on the hind-neck that is quite obvious in *P.h. finchii*. *P.h. himalayana* also holds the head with the beak closer to the chest and the feathers of the nape slightly raised when resting. Both birds are capable of holding the head in this position, but it is *himalayana* that is most often taking that characteristic

pose. The two different subspecies are keenly aware of their differences even if we are not, and breeding success is always improved when the birds are paired with their own kind.

Himalayana and *finchii* both are available in this country, and they are reasonably good breeders. They have a good disposition and have the same requirements for care as do other *Psittacula*.

Slaty-headed Parakeets are spring breeders like most other *Psittacula*, and they lay 3-4 eggs per clutch and they are easily handled.

Blossom-headed Parakeets

P. roseata roseata and *P.r. juneae*

It is difficult to make clear identification between the two Blossom-headed species based on the descriptions in Forshaw's *Parrots of the World*. Forshaw states that *P. roseata roseata* intergrades with *P. roseata juneae* in the Tripura area of Southern Assam. It is likely that *P. r. roseata*, the bird with the smaller alar patch on the wing, is the only Blossom-headed Parakeet in American aviculture. There may have been a few individuals brought into the United States that belong to the subspecies *P. r. juneae*, but I have not had the privilege of seeing any of them in the last 20 years.

The Blossom-headed Parakeet is the smallest member of the *Psittacula* genus. They have a pleasant nature and are easily bred if given favorable conditions. These birds are dimorphic when fully mature. Adult plumage and coloration is attained at about 27 months of age. The Blossom-headed Parakeet is sometimes mis-identified and paired with the Plum-headed Parakeet which has similar markings. Blossom-headed are handsome birds in their own right, and deserve to be maintained as the distinct species they are.

Males have a rose pink colored head with a heavy iridescent blue overlay and a thin black neck-ring. Females lack the pink on the head, (theirs is a silvery gray) and have no black neck-ring, but do have a slightly yellowish band of feathers encircling the neck. The body and wings are a bright green and both hen and cock have maroon wing patches. The tails are long and

tapering with a cream white tip. The dorsal side of the tail is a rich blue.

The Blossom-headed also begin pairing in the late summer or early fall, but have been known to wait until early spring before getting serious about nesting. They usually are on eggs around March or April at the latest. They typically lay from three to four eggs in a clutch and are good parents. They will double clutch if the first clutch is pulled in for handfeeding when the oldest chick is 14 days.

Alexandrine Parakeets

Psittacula eupatria, five subspecies

The Alexandrine parakeet is a beautiful bird and a wonderful aviary subject. They are seldom offered as pets, because the birds are purchased quickly by other aviculturists wanting the birds for their own breeding program. Alexandrines are about twice the size of a Rose-ringed Parakeet, and the overall body coloration is similar. The rose pink band on the hindneck is considerably wider at the nape on the Alexandrine male than on the Rose-ringed Parakeet. The thin black moustache-like line that runs from the base of the lower mandible across the cheeks is also wider. The males have a large head and heavy red bill, with a yellow tip. Both male and female birds have maroon red wing patches, and beautiful long tapering tails that are light turquoise blue on the dorsal side and yellowish green on the underside.

Alexandrines are dimorphic in adult plumage which is attained at about 27 months. There are some domestic stocks that are molting into the adult plumage earlier than this however. Alexandrine hens are only slightly smaller than the males. They lack the heavy head, bill and neck-rings. Young birds look similar to females, and, although it is sometimes possible to distinguish the sexes based on the size of the head, this method of sexing young should not be relied upon. There are many variances between individuals and subspecies.

Forshaw lists five subspecies and at least three have been imported into the United States. The three we can verify are *P. e. eupatria*, *P. e. mag-nirostris* and *P. e. nipalensis*. There are

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many crosses and it may be nearly impossible to identify subspecies in all cases especially without benefit of comparison. The problem of identification for breeders may be even more complex as there is evidence suggesting "tribal" or geographical variations within subspecies in the wild.

Alexandrines breed from November to April in the wild. In captivity, we have found the breeding season is typically begun late summer with the pair bonding. The first eggs appear late December or January. Alexandrines lay two to four eggs per clutch depending on subspecies and will produce a second clutch if chicks are pulled in for handfeeding when the oldest chick is 14 days old.

Handfeeding Alexandrines is quite a pleasant task, as they are not high strung, fearful or aggressive.

Moustached Parakeets

P. alexandri, eight subspecies

There are eight different subspecies of the Moustached Parakeet. The nominate race, *Psittacula alexandri alexan-*

dri and two subspecies *P. a. kangeanensis* and *P.a. dammermani* are the only *Psittacula* where the sexes are not clearly dimorphic as adults. Both males and females have coral red bills and look so similar in appearance that most are taken for adult males of other five Moustached subspecies.

In the remaining subspecies, males have a coral red upper mandible with a yellow tip. The lower mandible is black. The hens have black upper and lower mandibles. Descriptions given for the various Moustached Parakeet subspecies are remarkably similar. The variances are slight and involve shifts in coloration of the breast, lower abdomen and the head. There is some difference in size between the subspecies and personality can vary somewhat too.

Many of the Moustached subspecies come from small islands and therefore have restricted ranges. They typically inhabit foothill and lowland areas, preferring light secondary jungle to the dense forest. It is interesting to note that the territories of the Moustached

and Long-tailed Parakeets are clearly defined. They occupy areas immediately adjacent to one another, but each species occupies a specific area with little or no overlap.

All adult Moustached are dimorphic in adult *plumage* (not to be confused with the bill colors in the three subspecies mentioned above). Adult hens all have a "bib string." This bib string is a continuation of the breast feather color that forms a thin line running between the moustache marking on the face and the feathers of the nape. In the adult male birds, the moustache marking touches the nape feathers which are either green or gray depending on subspecies. The back, hindneck and wing color is a medium green and wings of both sexes have a large yellow-green patch. The tail is blue on the dorsal side and more yellowish on the underside. The upper chest is salmon pink with a variable amount of lilac or blue suffusion depending on subspecies. The abdomen is turquoise or blue-green, the intensity of which will also vary with subspecies. The head color can be pale silvery gray to bluish-lilac. The hen Moustached Parakeets will generally have a more intense iridescent blueish color on the head than the males of the same subspecies.

Reproduction has been reported in all months of the year for the wild stocks of the birds with monomorphic bill coloration. The nesting season for those birds with dimorphic bill coloration is roughly from December to June. Moustached Parakeets lay two to four eggs per clutch. The babies can be left with the parents and they will do a fine job of raising them. Our Moustached pairs have not been inclined to double clutch when the chicks were pulled. This may be due to the year-round breeding season in the wild.

Blyth's Parakeet

P. caniceps

This bird is indigenous to the Nicobar Islands of Kondul, Montschall, Great Nicobar and Little Nicobar. The Blyth's Parakeets reportedly prefer perching in the tall leafy trees. Little is known of these birds except that they are commonly kept as pets in the Nicobar Islands. None have ever been



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There were 10 specimens of this species captured and described as referenced in Forshaw's *Parrots of the World*. These were all presumably adults. The males and females are dimorphic. The overall length of the Blyth's Parakeet is about 56 cm., just slightly longer than the Derbyan Parakeet, although they are not quite as heavy bodied as the Derbyan. The upper mandible of the males is red, lower mandible black. The females have an all black upper and lower mandible. The Blyth's parakeet is the only member of the *Psittacula* genus with an orange-red colored iris.

The head color of both sexes is gray. The females facial feathers are more strongly tinged with blue than the males, a characteristic shared with Derbyan and Moustached hens alike. Blyth's Parakeets also have a moustache like marking crossing the chin and lower cheeks. The body color is green, with a long tapering tail that is grayish on the dorsal side and tipped in yellow. The bird is thought to be closely related to the Moustached Parakeets.

Long-tailed Parakeet

P. longicauda, all five subspecies


Long-tailed Parakeets are incredibly beautiful birds. They don't have the iridescent feathers like most of the members of the genus, but they more than make up for that with a complex pattern of brilliant colors. In the wild these birds are said to be restless and unpredictable in their movements. Long-tailed parakeets are acrobatic flyers and enjoy dashing from one tree to another. There are four distinct Long-tailed Parakeet subspecies, but it is the nominate species *Psittacula longicauda longicauda* that we see in the USA today. This bird is indigenous to Singapore, Borneo, Sumatra, Nias, Bangka, and Anambas islands as well as the southern part of the Malay Peninsula.

The establishment of this species in aviculture has so far eluded American aviculturists. These birds are difficult to keep alive for long periods of time, especially the males. I have been fortunate enough to have had several pairs

go to nest and produce young. They were good breeders and attentive parents if chicks were left for them to raise. Chicks can also be pulled in for hand-feeding at 14 days. They are as easily raised as Indian Ring-necked Parakeets. The handfed birds were similar in personality to the Moustached Parakeets. The little males begin talking during the weaning period and are quite feisty.

Whether handfed or parent raised, the domestic birds manage to live to breeding age, and then promptly drop off the perch just as breeding season commences. They will be in perfect feather and of good weight. Necropsy and tests have been inconclusive. I have talked with other breeders and it is possible that these birds are extremely susceptible to PDD. According to

Rick Jordan, a veteran breeder and expert on management of neonates, Long-tailed Parakeets are extremely susceptible to *sarcosistis*, a parasite transmitted from opossum droppings carried to the birds by various insects and flies. *Sarcosistis* cases have been reported from all areas of the USA where the opossum can be found.

The problem of keeping the Long-tailed Parakeets alive may also be dietary even though the birds are not picky eaters. They may be eating something containing a vital nutrient in the wild of which we have no knowledge, and there is little research data in this area. Most of the imported birds have been lost, and there are just a handful of breeders who still have a chance at reproducing them. 

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