

Lovebirds

a guide to Africa's Smallest Parrots



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Introduction

Lovebirds have, justifiably, for many years been popular aviary birds. In the last 20-30 years, their popularity has increased tremendously and today there are around 250 different mutations recorded – spread among six of the eight species that are generally available to bird breeders.

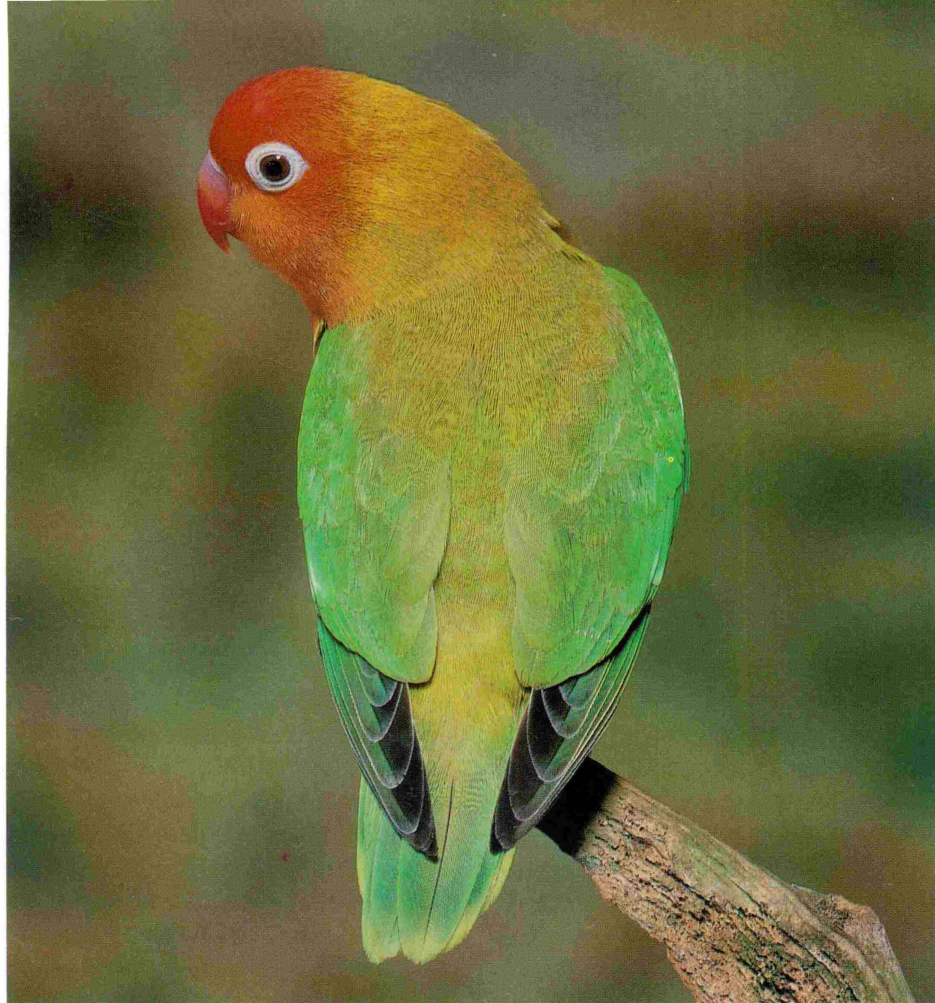
This article will deal with the general ornithological aspects of the nine species in the genus *Agapornis*. Eight of the species inhabit the African continent with the ninth found only in Madagascar.

I have followed the classification of the nine species and subspecies as listed in *Parrots of the World* by Joseph M. Forshaw. Howard and Moore in *A Complete Checklist of Birds of the World* 1991 have also accepted this classification. The nine species are:

- *A. roseicollis* - Peach-faced Lovebird
- *A. pullaria* - Red-faced Lovebird
- *A. taranta* - Abyssinian Lovebird
- *A. cana* - Madagascar Lovebird
- *A. fischeri* - Fischer's Lovebird
- *A. lilianae* - Nyasa Lovebird
- *A. personata* - Masked Lovebird
- *A. nigrigenis* - Black-cheeked Lovebird
- *A. swinderniana* - Black-collared Lovebird

The only species that has never been kept in captivity (outside of the Congo) is the Black-collared Lovebird. The other eight species have all been kept and bred by aviculturists around the world with varying degrees of success depending on the species.

The English name lovebird was probably bestowed because of the habit of two birds sitting side by side, while indulging in mutual preening, an act that may lead the uninitiated newcomer to believe that because two



The fourth "eye-ring" species, the small (5 in) Nyasa Lovebird has a green rump with some yellow. Breeders have difficulty in obtaining pure-bred wild stock of the Nyasa Lovebird, because some aviculturists have, unfortunately, hybridized the Nyasa with the Black-cheeked, and in some instances, with Fischer's Lovebird. It is rare in USA collections.

lovebirds are preening each other, they are male and female. Not necessarily so! The two birds, or even a group sitting together may well be of the same sex.

The name lovebird could be thought to be a misnomer, because anyone who keeps and breeds lovebirds will know how spiteful they can be among themselves. It is therefore not a good idea to mix different species together.

General Ornithological Notes

Lovebirds are small green, stocky, short-tailed parrots between 5" to 6.6" (13cm to 16.5 cm) in length - with one distinguishing feature - a sub-terminal black band on the very short, rounded tail. The colored barring on the lateral feathers above the black sub-terminal band is red, yellow, orange, or a combination of these colors. The color marking is best seen when the bird fans its tail when excited or displaying, or is either in flight after taking off, or

about to land with its tail spread.

Three Groups

Eye-ringed. There are two well-defined groups in this genus. The first, the "eye-ring" group, consists of the four species – Masked, Fischer's, Black-cheeked, and Nyasa Lovebirds, all of whom are sexually monomorphic and impossible to sex visually. These four have a naked, broad white ring around the eye, which is a diagnostic feature – hence the name "eye-ring" group.

Sexually Dimorphic. The second group consists of three species that are sexually dimorphic – Red-faced, Madagascar, and Abyssinian Lovebirds. The Red-faced and Abyssinian, have feathered rings around the eyes, but the Madagascar does not. The difference in the sexes is dealt with under each individual species. Even though it is easy to sex this group, they have a reputation of being more difficult to breed than the four sexually

monomorphic "eye-ring" species.

The Remaining Two Species. Of the remaining two species – the Peach-faced Lovebird is an intermediate species, while the Black-collared Lovebird is a little known, aberrant species.

The Black-collared Lovebird is only 5" (13cm) long and is the smallest of the lovebirds. It has apparently never been seen alive outside of the Congo. Very little is known about this species in the wild. They inhabit lowland evergreen forests but are easily overlooked because they blend in with the foliage when feeding in the treetops. Small flocks are generally seen and it is their soft twittering calls that often give away their presence. Their nest has yet to be described, but is either in arboreal termite mounds, or holes in trees. There are three different areas of distribution. The nominate race *A. s. swindermiana* is found in the forests of Liberia. The subspecies *A. s. zenkeri*

occurs in Cameroon and Gabon eastwards to the Central African Republic and the Congo. The third subspecies *A. s. emini* is found from the central Congo through to western Uganda.

The only record of Black-collared Lovebirds being kept in captivity was recorded in Forshaw's *Parrots of the World*. Father Hutsebout – a Belgian missionary in the Congo – could only keep them alive on wild figs, which, if not available, resulted in their dying within three or four days. They would not accept any substitute foods, even though they are said to feed on millet occasionally in the wild.

It is therefore highly unlikely that the Black-collared Lovebird is ever to be seen in aviculture.

Beak, Leg, Eye Coloration

Most of the lovebirds have fairly wide and large beaks, which vary in color depending on the species. The Peach-faced Lovebird has a horn-colored beak with a green tinge on the



An endangered species in the wild, the Black-cheeked Lovebird is reasonably well established in European collections, with many mutations recorded - a number of which are transmutations within the "eye-ring" group. It is rare in USA collections.

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cutting edge of both mandibles. In the "eye-ring" species, the Masked and Fischer's have bright red beaks, while the Nyasa and Black-cheeked beaks are bi-colored - horn-colored at the base and midway through the upper mandible, the horn color gradually becomes bright red towards the tip. The Black-collared Lovebird has a blackish beak. Both the Abyssinian and Red-faced Lovebirds have bright coral-red beaks.

Their legs are generally gray, grayish-brown, or grayish-white, except for the Black-collared, which has dusky greenish-yellow legs. Eight species have brownish irides - the only species that is different is the Black-collared, which has a yellow iris.

Natural Distribution and Habitat

The different species inhabit a variety of habitats. The following is a summary of the habitats frequented:

- Peach-faced Lovebirds frequent arid, semi-desert country from sea level upwards.
- Madagascar Lovebirds are found in coastal plains and mountain slopes, and also in arid country.
- Abyssinian Lovebirds frequent highland forest habitat.
- Red-faced, Masked, and Fischer's Lovebirds are seen in savannah grassland with acacia trees.
- Black-collared Lovebirds live in evergreen tropical rainforest.
- Nyasa and Black-cheeked Lovebirds inhabit mopane and acacia woodland, interspersed with grassland.

Lovebirds are gregarious by nature, and can often be seen in small (5-20) and large (25-100 +) flocks. They are noisy, and can be aggressive and quarrelsome - but, in contradiction of this statement, they can often be seen indulging in mutual preening.

Feeding in the Wild

Generally, lovebirds feed on a variety of seeds, grain, berries, leaf buds, and fruit. Insect remains have also been found in the stomach contents of a Black-collared Lovebird, along with seeds of figs, which is their staple diet.

Seed is the most important ingredi-



Photos by Cyril Laubscher

Even though it is a sexually dimorphic species, the Red-faced Lovebird from west Africa is undoubtedly the most difficult of the eight lovebird species to breed. The female has a duller orange head and grayish-green under wing-coverts. Males have black under wing-coverts and brighter red heads. This is a rare species in Europe and the USA.

ent, and most species search for seed on the ground among grasses, and also in grass clearings.

Agricultural land is an important feature for lovebirds. Millet crops are raided by a number of species, as is maize. What is of greater concern is that the crops are occasionally those of African villagers, who try to eke out a subsistence living on the land. This presents social problems for the villagers' survival, but it is not only the lovebirds that add to the problem because there are a number of seed-eating species, including Red-billed Quelea, *Quelea quelea*, that wreak havoc on cereal crops when they descend in their millions - compared to the limited flocks (20-100) of lovebirds.

Water is of great importance to all lovebirds, and the availability of water, and food, often dictates local movement.

Unusual Nesting Habits

Lovebirds build nests in a variety of places, depending on the preference of the species. Nesting hollows, holes, cavities in trees, crevices in rocks, bridges, and buildings, other bird nests, palm fronds etc. provide suitable places for lovebirds to rear a family. Red-faced Lovebirds use arboreal -

and occasionally terrestrial - termite mounds in which to excavate a tunnel and nesting chamber, which is then lined before eggs are laid.

Some lovebirds, (along with their close relatives, the hanging parrots) have an unusual nesting habit. A female Peach-faced Lovebird nips off small pieces of nesting material, picks them up in her beak, places them in the lower back and rump feathers, before flying to the nest. However, females of the four "eye-ring" species only carry nesting material in their beaks, and not in the body feathers. Madagascar, Red-faced and Abyssinian Lovebirds all carry small pieces of nesting material - placed in various parts of their body - back to the nest.

Scientific Study Conducted on Black-cheeked Lovebirds

The only species of lovebird that is listed on CITES 1 is the endangered Black-cheeked Lovebird, whose population decline has been a cause for concern in scientific circles. It is therefore welcome to hear of a scientific field study conducted by Louise Warburton under the auspices of the Research Centre for African Parrot Conservation at the University of Natal

in South Africa.

Professor Mike Perrin, who is in overall control of the conservation programme, has disclosed (in litt.) that Louise Warburton has found roosts and nest sites in Acacia trees in the study area - usually of about five pairs together. The lovebirds are using seeds of trees and woody shrubs prior to the rains. Later in the year, they feed almost exclusively on fallen grass seed. Water is essential and they drink every day. This is also where the birds flock together and socialize.

Black-cheeked and Nyasa Lovebirds are thought, by some scientists, to be close relatives. In fact, some even think that they are simply color forms of the same species. If taxonomists eventually accept this in general, it would change their status to being a subspecies, compared with the species classification that they currently hold in most scientific reference books.

The Black-cheeked Lovebird has a very restricted distribution. In Zambia, it is limited to the tributaries of the

Zambezi River, and its range extends on to the Caprivi strip near Botswana. The population has diminished to the point of where this species is now listed as Endangered.

The scientific study is being conducted in Zambia. The Parrot Society in England is sponsoring part of this study by committing funds from their conservation fund to ensure that this valuable study is possible.

Warburton states "The specific objectives of this project are to assess the status of the Black-cheeked Lovebird and identify its ecological requirements so that a conservation strategy for its survival can be prepared."

The first year has already been completed and it is envisaged that this study will continue for a while yet. This year, as part of the project study, "Particular attention will be paid to the Black-cheeked Lovebirds use of village crops and their interaction with human neighbors." This will then provide Louise Warburton with a comparison to the study completed at the end of

1998, in which the lovebirds had almost no human contact at all.

As far as I can ascertain, there has been very little, if any, scientific study ever done on a single lovebird species. Moreau wrote on aspects of evolution in the genus *Agapornis* in 1948, but that appears to be the only *Agapornis* study done in the past. Therefore, any new work will be invaluable.

Scientific field studies provide a wealth of information for future reference. In many instances, this work requires a large degree of dedication and hardship, because there is usually a complete lack of home comforts while the scientists are out in the field. Everything that we take for granted is often a luxury in the field.

I am confident that when this study is eventually completed and the information forthcoming, it will be of benefit to lovebird breeders worldwide, even if only to highlight how important it is that we protect the remaining Black-cheeked Lovebirds that are currently being bred by specialist and other breeders.

The question may well be asked by some breeders "How can we as aviculturists assist the wild population of Black-cheeked Lovebirds?"

Although it is CITES 1 protected, it is the breeders who currently have breeding stock who will finally determine how it is possible to avoid future importations of wild-caught Black-cheeked Lovebirds.

The ideal way would be to have an International Stud Book to assist in keeping breeders in touch with each other, to circulate the existing gene pool, and provide unrelated blood into a breeding program. This will eliminate the need for any further importation from the few remaining wild birds!

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The Madagascar Lovebird is another small (5 in) species that originates from the island of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. This sexually dimorphic species - only the adult male has a gray head - has proved quite difficult to breed and needs establishing in aviculture worldwide.