



Black-cheeked Lovebirds

by Kat Lamke, Rochester, Minnesota

It all started almost by chance in early 1997. A lovebird breeder friend who had at the time recently purchased several Black-cheeked Lovebirds *Agapornis nigri-gensis*, let me know she had a couple of birds available for sale. At that time I really wasn't interested in getting into another species of lovebirds (as I had only Peach-faced at the time) and didn't think I was ready to tackle a rare species of lovebird. But I decided it was worth the four-hour round trip to visit my friend and to see her new birds in any case.

I was fascinated from the moment I arrived. Here in the cage before me were five of the most beautiful tiny green jewels I had ever seen. Their relative quiet (compared to the same number of Peach-faced Lovebirds) and vibrant colors amazed me. After being captivated by these birds for 15 minutes, I decided to get two of them to take home with me.

Once I got home and got the birds settled in a new cage, I began to do research on the internet and in all the bird books and magazines I owned. I was disappointed in how little current information there was out there. What I *did* learn was that this species is considered threatened in its native habitat in southwest Zambia, Africa along the northern tributaries of the Zambesi River. The area they occupy is only about 10,000 meters square.

I also learned that this species has been frequently hybridized in aviculture with other eye-ring lovebird species (Fischer's, Masked, Nyasa) and that birds of pure lineage were now harder to find. Signs of hybridization include dark black mask (instead of black-brown), any blue in the rump

color (should be green), and the salmon patch under the chin should not contain any yellow nor extend down the chest.

After doing my research, I decided I would definitely like to try breeding this species but my first hurdle to clear was that both of my birds were DNA sexed hens. I began my year-long search for a male Black-cheeked Lovebird. Eventually I found a breeder who was short on females and was willing to trade bird for bird. I was ecstatic. After the bird came out of quarantine, I set him up with my lone hen. After four weeks, I began to think there was a problem when the male began to look "eggy." Sure enough this new bird was also a female. That'll teach me not to have them DNA sexed first! By this time the weather was prohibitive to try to ship in another bird so we waited the winter and spring out. The plus was that I now had two non-related female Black-cheeked Lovebirds.

The next summer I found another breeder who had confirmed DNA sexed males available. I opted for one male since I hadn't planned on having two pairs of Black-cheeked Lovebirds. I had thought about selling a female but wanted to wait a while. After the obligatory quarantine I introduce the male to the older of the two females.

I had them set up in my largest cage – 3 1/2 feet long, 2 1/2 feet tall and 1 1/2 feet deep with a larger than usual nest-box 10 inch H x 10 inch W x 8 inch D in size. I normally use 6 x 6 x 6 inch nestboxes for my Peach-faced and Fischer's Lovebirds. I placed one inch of aspen shavings in the bottom of the box for a base and I gave them plenty of fresh palm fronds (ordered from a church supply company) for nesting material and waited. She laid a total of six eggs but all were infertile. I wasn't too disappointed as it was their first pairing and things don't always go perfectly the first time. After a break of eight weeks, I set them up again. Again she laid six eggs; again they were all infertile.

I decided to change things around by switching females. The male was now paired with the younger female in the large cage. Things were different from the first second. The pair was

together non-stop – no fighting, lots of mutual preening, and sleeping side by side. When I offered the nest box and the palm fronds, the box was stuffed with strips of palm within two weeks. They even weren't shy about mating and copulated (several times that I noted) on the perch in front of the nestbox. The hen had made a 2-room domed nest with an entry room for the male with another chamber further under for the eggs. It was fascinating to see how much work she put into the nest but at the same time it was frustrating to not be able to monitor the eggs without destroying her work. She went on to lay a total of six eggs as well (one every other day) with five of them being fertile.

All of the fertile eggs hatched but the last chick died within 24 hours of hatching.

Around the time the oldest one began to feather out, I noticed that the parents (I never figured out who was the culprit) began to pluck the feathers out of the back of the babies. I recalled hearing or reading somewhere that Black-Cheeked Lovebirds require more protein in their diet when rearing chicks and began to offer them mealworms. They wouldn't even touch them! You'd think I was trying to poison them! I instead began to offer them soaked monkey biscuits, which they devoured completely. Within days I noticed an improvement in the condition of the babies' feathers – the adults didn't stop picking the babies completely but gradually the babies were feathering in more than they were being picked.

The parents went on to raise three beautiful DNA sexed males (one died right around weaning).

Black-Cheeked Lovebirds are uncommon in aviculture but hopefully with continued breeding, this gem will become a common lovebird in the future. While I am certainly no expert on this species (or any other for that matter), I did enjoy my first successful attempt with breeding these beautiful eye-ring lovebirds. I look forward to raising more Black-cheeked Lovebirds and to hearing tips, successes and problems from other breeders of this species. 