

Breeding Hand Reared African Cape Parrots



Poicephalus robustus fuscicollis

by Greg Bockheim
Disney's Animal Kingdom
Bird Department
Kissimmee, FL

Many of us have read the interesting articles published over the past several years concerning the intriguing members of the genus *Poicephalus*. The Cape Parrot, being one of the rarest psittacines in aviculture, as well as declining in its wild habitat (Wirminghaus 1994), is in need of a dedicated captive breeding program.

As with many parrot species, the Cape Parrot is one in which hand-reared offspring, especially males, often lack the social and reproductive skills necessary to effectively reproduce once they have matured. I am aware of several pairs of hand-reared Capes which have not bred successfully.

Fortunately there are a couple of hand-reared pairs which have proven to be exceptions to this lack of breeding success. I own a hand-reared pair of *P. r. fuscicollis* that have bred successfully and reared their young. I also know of another hand-reared Cape pair, *P. r. suabelicus*, which has done the same. These are the only two hand-reared male Cape Parrots, that I know of, to have successfully bred in captivity, although there are a handful of hand-reared females that have successfully bred when paired with wild caught males.

It has become clear that hand-rearing and human imprinting is interfering with the breeding future of this species. This article will review the information gathered from the reproductive success of the hand-reared *fuscicollis* pair.

Identification

The Cape Parrot subspecies can be difficult to identify if you have not seen the two perched side by side. My male Capes, *fuscicollis* and *suabelicus* subspecies, show very obvious color difference on the head and neck. The head and neck of the *fuscicollis* is less silvery gray and is suffused with burgundy from the cheeks through the throat. A size difference also exists between the males with *suabelicus* being larger. In my collection *suabelicus* subspecies have weighed 330-400g, and *fuscicollis* 320-340g. I have not found as clear of a difference in size and color to exist between females of the subspecies.



Photo by Greg Bockheim

P. r. fuscicollis chicks 53 and 56 days old. They were reared by their parents.

Pair History

The complete history of my *fuscicollis* pair is not known, therefore critical information with regards to the techniques used to hand-feed them, the methods in which they were housed after weaning, and other parameters that may influence the level of human imprinting are unavailable. The birds were purchased from a pet store in Ohio in early 1995 by Florida Cape breeder Kathy Millikin. They were then placed in an outdoor aviary measuring three feet square by six feet long. Kathy described the pair as having a strong pair bond, having occasional noisy battles, and frequently squabbling through the wire with the Cape pair in the adjoining aviary.

I have found most of these behaviors to be typical of the members of the *Poicephalus* genus regardless of

the way they were raised. A notable difference between hand-reared *Poicephalus* and wild caught birds is that hand-reared pairs rarely enter their nestboxes outside of the breeding season whereas wild caught birds often hide inside of theirs.

While in Kathy's care, when they were four years old, the pair began to show interest in a metal nestbox. At this time they were housed outdoors alongside an older, nonbreeding, hand-reared pair of Capes. By the end of 1996 they had laid two infertile clutches of eggs. The following year the pair laid two successive clutches of fertile eggs (when they were five years old). The chicks were pulled for hand-rearing at two weeks of age.

I purchased this pair several months after the chicks from their second clutch had been pulled for hand-rearing, when they were just over six years old. My intention was to take on the challenge of parent-rearing Capes in order to exchange parent-reared young for the same produced by California breeder Ben Cooper. At the time, I was successfully breeding Jardine's Parrots *Poicephalus fantsiensis* and was prepared to foster the Cape Parrot eggs, or chicks, to the Jardine's should the Capes have difficulty incubating or rearing their chicks.

Until recently my *Poicephalus* collection had been housed indoors. At that time all five species of *Poicephalus* that I had kept, including this breeding occurrence with the Capes, had bred successfully in flight cages measuring four feet long by two feet wide by three feet high. Each of these cages is placed on steel conduit legs which raises the cage floor to four feet above the ground. Nest boxes are fastened to the outside of the cages allowing for easy inspection.

The staple diet fed to the birds, year round, is 50% Cockatiel seed and 50% Pretty Bird African Parrot Select pellets. Added to this mix daily are fresh fruits and vegetables including: Corn (fed on the cob), apple, carrots, and an additional seasonal item. During the cooler weather additional sunflower seeds and whole dried corn are added to the dry seed mix. Leafy branches of eucalyptus, acacia, willow, citrus, and Japanese

blueberry *Eleocarpus decipens* are rotated throughout the week and offered every other day.

The lighting provided for the birds was full spectrum fluorescent shop lights cycling for 14 hours on and then 10 hours off. The lights come on just after daybreak allowing the birds the earliest morning light through windows. I always provide four-watt night lights in my bird room allowing the birds to quickly recover from any "night frights."

Although I prefer wooden nestboxes, on this breeding occasion I was given an all metal nestbox in the shape of a flattened "Z." Since the birds had previously bred in metal nestboxes I decided to stay with what had proven to be successful. The box contained a built-in inspection door in the lower portion of the "Z" which opened directly over the nesting chamber.

Reproductive Behavior

In behavior this pair acts like any other hand-reared, mature, and bonded pair of Cape Parrots. The male could be described as fearless outside of the breeding season, posturing aggressively and frequently rushing the door when I come to feed. On many occasions he displaces his aggressive behavior, directing it toward his mate by lunging in her direction. During the nesting season this male could be described as savage, attacking me every time I feed the birds, and on more than one occasion actually making contact with my hands and doing serious damage.

Cape parrots, like many other species of large psittacines, exhibit pair bond behavior and reproductive behavior well before actually getting down to the business of copulating and laying eggs. The male of the pair was observed inspecting the nesting site for five months prior to the female laying her first egg and the pair was observed copulating 40 days before an egg was laid. Although the female was not observed to enter the nestbox until the week of laying. The male had been observed preparing the nest site, by forming a slight depression in the pine shaving substrate, more than 30 days before his mate laid her first egg.



A two-year-old pair of *P. r. fuscicollis*. Note the darker heads and grey bib.

For just over two weeks prior to laying their first egg, the pair was observed to copulate every other day around 8:00 P.M. (I was not able to make midday observations). These bouts of mating lasted from 1-4 minutes and neither bird was vocal at the time. As with another pair of Capes that had laid eggs for me, the female suddenly retreats to the nestbox within a couple of days of laying and is only seen out of the nestbox to defecate. It is likely that the male takes on the responsibility of feeding the hen while she is laying and incubating eggs as she was never seen to eat during the incubation period.

The female laid her last clutch of two eggs in November, when she was just over seven years old. At this time she also plucked her ankles slightly, the feathers growing in soon after the chicks weaned. The eggs were laid with a day interval in between and hatched after 28 days of incubation. The birds tossed the dry and empty eggshells from the nest two days after the chicks hatched.

The chicks appeared pink, and aside from wispy down they were nearly naked. Down feather follicles did not begin to grow in until the chicks were a week old and began to open at 14 days, covering them in dense white secondary down.

Parental Care

The female of the pair was described as being a messy chick feeder by the previous owner, getting food all over the chicks' faces and suggesting that she was likely overfeeding, possibly due to her lack of experience. Soon after the chicks did hatch the female's beak, and

area around her beak, became caked and messy with food, although the chicks did not become excessively messed by food so all was left alone. The food on the beak and facial feathers of the female and the chicks was absent by the time the chicks were 30 days old. No food was ever observed on the male's facial feathers.

The chicks' eyes began to open from the time they were 16 days old but were not fully open until 20 days of age. Soon after this they could be heard vocalizing from the nest. The male began to spend long periods of time in the nestbox from the time the chicks were 16 days old. No vocalizations were heard by the pair or the chicks while they were all in the box and I suspect that the male was feeding the female and possibly the chicks and then resting within.

When the chicks were two weeks old I became concerned that the parents were not feeding them often enough because early morning and early evening inspections of their crops revealed little or no food. But as with some cockatoo species, with which I have some experience parent-rearing, the Cape parents filled the chicks crops at about 8:30 A.M. and 7:00 P.M. (I was unable to monitor mid-day feedings). These chick feeding times were up to 90 minutes after the adult birds received their morning and evening feedings.

The parent Capes began sleeping outside of the nestbox at night when the chicks were 28 days old. The chicks were robust and covered in down at this time so this was not cause for concern. The chicks primary flight feathers began to open when they

were one month old. They could be heard playing inside the nestbox from the time they were just under six weeks old. Also at this age, when the parents entered the nestbox, the chicks would vocalize loudly until they were fed. The parent birds never entered the nestbox while I was in the room unless I attempted to inspect the chicks, at which time they both would aggressively posture and then run into the nestbox to attack me.

It was very amusing to observe the parent birds when they were unaware that they were being watched. When they were traveling to the nestbox to feed the chicks they would crouch low, and very quietly creep over the perches to the nestbox entrance and go in. On many occasions I watched as the male and female would sneak into the nestbox, sometimes staying for just a couple of minutes and other times remaining inside for 20 minutes or more. Once inside the nestbox no vocalizations or sounds could be heard that revealed that the parents were actually feeding the chicks, only the chicks silence suggested that they were being fed.

At the young age of 45 days the chicks were seen peering out of the nestbox entrance. They were very timid and would fall crashing to the floor of the box if I entered the room. I feel the design of the nestbox, being a gradual sloping incline (about a 45 degree angle), allowed the chicks easy access to the nestbox entrance. The oldest chick left the nestbox on only one observed occasion when it was 10 weeks 4 days old, but returned to the box by that evening. Neither chick was again seen outside the box until they were both 12 weeks old. The chicks were good flyers within their first week of leaving the nest and, unlike the parent birds preference for climbing, the chicks took the more direct route and flew most of the time.

The chicks often returned to the nestbox, perhaps to rest or to roost for the night. The head and neck of each chick was gray washed with brick red. The tips of their flight and tail feathers are still, at 11 months of age, orangish yellow. The head of one of the chicks was more extensively orange than the

other, something that might denote sex but this was not so, as both chicks were determined to be females after DNA sexing.

After leaving the nestbox, each of the chicks begged for food from approaching parents. And soon thereafter they would meet the parents at the food dish and beg for food. They were observed feeding on their own when they were 13 weeks old but were still observed being fed by the parents for another month.

When the chicks were four months old both they and their parents ignored the nestbox which was then removed. And when the chicks were five-and-a-half months old they were moved to an aviary of their own. No aggressive behavior has ever been observed between the parent birds and the chicks.

Juvenile Behavior and the Future

The Cape chicks, now juveniles over 18 months old, are nervous and secretive when in close proximity to humans. They behave in very much

the same manner as wild caught members of their genus. Using binoculars to observe the birds from a window, I can see that the juvenile Capes are very playful, swinging from branches and leafy limbs and frequently harassing their parents in the aviary next door. They pay little attention to the breeding Jardine's Parrots housed in the neighboring aviary.

I feel that parent reared Cape Parrots will become the future stronghold for the species in captivity. I strongly suggest that other owners of these amazing birds allow their pairs to parent rear a clutch of chicks each year, thereby producing birds that will be behaviorally competent and able to reproduce successfully when mature. A totally different attitude is observed when comparing wild caught bird behavior to handfed adult bird behavior. The greater the difference between what is normal in wild caught behavior and what occurs in a handfed bird, the greater the risk of losing the species (Thompson 1997). Giving your birds the opportunity to rear their own

offspring is an experience that you will not soon forget. As described by Lany Rickman "letting your birds rear their offspring is a partnership effort, pairing the keeper with the parent birds." It is time to assess our philosophies as aviculturists and become members of this partnership.

I would like to hear from any Cape Parrot breeders interested in trading parent-reared birds to establish unrelated pairs or any aviculturist who would like to pair up single wild caught specimens. I can be contacted through the editor of the *AFA Watchbird*.

Bibliography

- Cravens, E., Low, R., Rickman, L. & Thompson, D. 1997. Considerations in Parent Rearing: Roundtable Discussion. *Journal of the American Federation of Aviculture "Watchbird."* pp. 2631.
- Low, Rosemary. 1997. Identification of Cape Parrot Subspecies. *Journal of the American Federation of Aviculture "Watchbird."* Sept./Oct. 1997. Pp. 61-62.
- Thompson, Dale. 1997. The Cape Parrot. *Journal of the American Federation of Aviculture "Watchbird."* pp. 4-7.
- Wirminghaus, Olaf. 1994. World Parrot Trust "PsittaScene." United Kingdom.



A five-year old P. r. suahelicus weighing 400 g. Note the silver-grey head.



A five-year-old female P. r. suahelicus weighing 380 g.