

# What Could Be Greater than the Greater Vasa Parrot?



(*Coracopsis vasa*)

by Susie Christian, Morro Bay, California

**M**adagascar! An exotic, tropical island that lies off the east coast of Africa, the land of the Lemurs, Baobab trees, all manner of flora and fauna oddities and the Greater Vasa Parrot, *Coracopsis vasa*. Their scientific name, *Coracopsis* refers to their supposed resemblance to crows and the word "Vasa" is Malagasy for parrot, in the dialects spoken in the south of the country.

For a better understanding of the uniqueness of the Vasa Parrot, it seems helpful to have a brief picture of the land from which it originates. Madagascar is the fourth largest island in the world after Greenland, New Guinea and Borneo. It has a land-mass of over twice the size of the British Isles. Approximately 120 million years ago it was a part of the continents of Africa and India, in the super continent of Gondwanaland, which also included South America. Madagascar broke free from Africa and drifted into the Indian Ocean, thereby very gradually isolating its flora and fauna. There is an actual dent in the coastline of present day Kenya and Tanzania where Madagascar split apart from the mainland. The ensuing isolation of the animals and plants has resulted in the unique and unusual wildlife that are today found only in Madagascar.

About 80 percent of Madagascar's plants and animals are endemic, that is, unique – evolved on the island and existing there and no where else on the earth. There are 258 species of birds of which 53% are endemic. For a mainly tropical country boasting a wide variety of habitats, Madagascar has a remarkably small avian population in stark contrast to Africa's teeming population of colorful birds of all kinds.

The three species of parrots found in Madagascar are all endemic to the Madagascar subregion. All of these

species are very hardy and the Lesser Vasa Parrot, *Coracopsis nigra*, is considered a pest by the government. *C. vasa* occurs on Madagascar and the Comoros, *C. nigra* on Madagascar, the Comoros and Seychelles and *Agapornis cana*, although originally probably endemic to Madagascar, has been introduced to the Comoros, Seychelles, Rodriguez, and Zanzibar. Only *C. v. vasa* is distributed in the east. *C. v. drouhardi*, however, is found in the west and south of Madagascar where it occurs in semi dry forests and savannah. Most of the Vasas exported from Madagascar are the western subspecies, *drouhardi*.

The subspecies of the Lesser Vasa from the Seychelles is highly endangered and populations are declining on the Comoros Islands. Although people eat Vasas and kill or trap any Vasa that comes near the crops, they are fortunately still abundant in Madagascar.

Vasa parrots inhabit the forests and savannah below 1,000 meters and are more abundant at lower altitudes. Vasas are dependent on the evergreen forests above 300 meters and visit the open country to feed during the day in small groups of up to 10, returning to the forest to roost in much larger groups. In Madagascar they nest during the rainy season during October and November in hollow trees, normally several meters off the ground.

The third parrot species found on this large, rather "parrotless" island, is the Grey-headed Lovebird *Agapornis cana*, a small, lively, brilliant emerald green bird.

There were very few Vasa parrots in the United States before 1984, when about 800 of them were imported from Madagascar. Because they weren't a strikingly colorful bird, many aviculturists showed little interest in them and no further large Vasa shipments were ever brought in.

Greater Vasa parrots are very unique and fascinating, although their drab nondescript appearance doesn't grab the eye of most aviculturists who look for the color and flash of the more gaudily colored parrots. I notice them described as "Black Parrots" or dark grey, but through my eyes they seen as brown colored. To me, they have a hawk-like appearance due to their proud, regal upright carriage, horn-grey, slightly elongated bill and gentle brown eye color. They are a large bird at 50 cm in length, weighing 500g or more and are well proportioned, having long necks, long straight tails and small heads.

Vasas have only melanin for feather coloration and during breeding season their feathers turn from sooty grey to light chocolate-like brown with a hint of iridescent green when viewed at a certain angle in the sunlight – rather like a piece of worn out mens' suit fabric with a greenish nap showing through the brown. This color shift is due to a chemical change in the oil, secreted from the oil gland used in preening. Vasas have very long limb bones, which give them a hawk-like appearance when they walk. Their prominent ceres are naked of feathers as are their whitish eye rings.

Vasas aren't kept regularly as pets by bird owners and few pairs that are set up as breeders are successful. I attempted breeding them for two years, but had to find my pair another home in the middle of 40 acres because of their loud, annoying off-key braying, squawking, un-oiled hinge sound vocalizations. I live in a tightly packed neighborhood and was very concerned the caterwauling during the breeding season would jeopardize my quieter species with the neighbors.

The first year I had the Vasas, I mistakenly paired a wild caught older hen with a captive raised three-year old male. She was very domineering with him and guarded the food dish so he couldn't eat. Every day when I put food in the bowl I had to stand there and give her the evil eye to keep her away long enough for him to dine. If I gave them two bowls she would try to guard them both, running quickly from one bowl to the other.



Photo by Susie Christian

*A pair of Vasa Parrots in the cage, with "Headly," the handfed Vasa perched outside. Headly is slightly handicapped but doesn't seem to know it.*

Of course mating season was a great exciting event. The pair were housed in a 4 X 6 X 6 foot cage, outdoors in our perfect California climate. We gave them a choice of two nest boxes. The boxes were 12" X 12" X 36" deep. One was hung vertically and the other was hung horizontally. Because she was such a hag, I felt she at least had to have a pretty name. I named her Camille. Well Camille chose the vertically hung box to nest in. She made a great deal out of the whole breeding thing and was the classic drama queen.

I would marvel over their style of courtship (they didn't care if I watched as long as I remained still) and the weird and uncanny sounds that were a part of it. They would face one another on the perch and swing their very long necks around each other in a large semi circle. I prayed they wouldn't get them permanently entwined! They also did a unique courtship dance with the hen bending down indicating he should mount her, then throwing her head back wildly, biting the bend in her wing with a gobbling reflex, signaling him to feed her.

The breeding cycle here seems to start about February with the increased vocalizations and more aggressive behavior. The hen's ovary begins to grow in size and by the peak of breeding season, in the late spring, her ovary grows to fill a third of her body cavity.

The cloacas of both sexes also enlarge and the male's cloaca actually protrudes when they are ready to breed. The males have control of the amount of protrusion and can retract the cloaca back into their body. A fully extended male cloaca is about the diameter of a hot dog and can be up to two-inches long. The hen's cloaca does not normally protrude but can do so while defecating.

Another lovely feature of the breeding cycle is the skin color on their heads and necks turns a lovely brilliant mustard yellow on both sexes. The cere, which is usually white on the male, turns yellow too. The female Vasa's head also becomes completely bald and continues part of the way down her neck.

Camille laid a total of three eggs. One I found on the floor in front of the nest box and the other two actually made it into the box. The egg laid on the floor was slightly dented and obviously too far gone to put in the box, but she sat on the other two eggs for at least a month. Upon inspection, they were infertile and she didn't re-clutch. I marveled at the appearance of her eggs. Each of the three eggs were different in size, shape and overall appearance. They actually looked like reptile eggs and had a certain roughness to them as well as being not exactly round. Very primitive looking!

When I realized that I had an incorrect match, I sold the wild caught hen and bought another to replace her before the next breeding season. This new hen was a year younger and was still immature so no eggs were laid the next year, although they did get along much better, both being domestic birds. This pair now reside in the Sierras and have been said to out-scream the Macaws that are their neighbors.

At this time I have one three-year old Greater Vasa male that lives with me as a house pet. He had his top

beak removed by his mother during the first week of his life and was given to me as a chick by the breeder. Headley seemed to be the perfect name for him, all things considered. Having no top beak to defend himself with, he would never have lasted with any hormonal raging hen, considering the fury they exhibit during the breeding season. He makes a great pet. Headley whistles and talks very clearly but only during the approximate five months around the time of the breeding season. The rest of the time he just screams an occasional loud squawk when he is startled or to signal he wants to be brought in at night-time.

Vasa Parrots love water in all forms from cavorting in the pouring down rain to jumping in a large shallow bowl and drenching themselves. I always provide a large bowl of water for them, available all the time. They extend their wings, hop and prance around the cage in an exuberant dance step, flapping their wings simultaneously. Their feathers don't take to water very well and they look very water logged and bedraggled until

they dry out.


Sunbathing is also a favorite pastime with them and I was shocked the first time I saw a Vasa stretched out absorbing the sun's rays. I thought it was dead! They will lie on the ground or a large branch and stretch their wings out, one held out like an upraised arm and the other thrust down and backward over the body. Their pose looks much like that of a chicken having a sunbath.

In the wild Vasas eat seeds, fruits, berries, nuts and can be crop pests destroying corn and millet crops. I feed Vasas the same diet my Eclectus get. My remaining beakless wonder pet gets sprouts, fruit, vegetables, and can even master the technique of shaving small, edible size chunks from more challenging things like nuts and pellets. He holds the food item in his foot and hacks away at it with his lower beak, pulverizing it between his tongue and his lower beak.

I am very grateful to keep a Greater Vasa as a pet but am sorry I can't have the pair with me. I find Greater Vasas to be strange beauties and they should be set up as pairs for breeding and not

kept as pets, unless of course they are missing their top beaks.

About 80 percent of Madagascar's rain forests have already been cut to make charcoal and the land cleared for farming and ranching. At this rate, in another 35 years Madagascar will be stripped bare. It is unlikely that either subspecies of Vasa can survive with so very little of their native habitat left. We need to promote the breeding of this unique species so they can be saved for future generations. In spite of the fact Vasas are outwardly a plain drab appearing parrot, I believe their exciting personalities, wonderful intelligence, and fascinating breeding habits are the most colorful of any parrot I can think of. I would recommend them as a wonderful addition to any aviary. Much more entertaining than TV!

My thanks to Olaf Pronk, Centre Soafiavy, Antananarivo, Madagascar for his help in contributing and authenticating my information on Vasa Parrots. Olaf, who lives in the capital city, says there are no Vasas there but he sees them often on his trips to the east and west. 

## New Zealand Bird Tour - Top to Bottom

Having led numerous bird tours through South Africa, after three years of research and traveling in my new country I am proud to offer a bird tour of New Zealand. Join me to see this beautiful country from the north to south and the unique species and environment in which they occur. Some excellent photographic opportunities are to be had on tour. We will experience a host of some of the rarest bird species in the world, which have been saved from extinction by world leaders in avian conservation. Endangered, endemic species such as **takahe**, **black stilt**, **blue duck**, **kokako**, **stitchbird**, and more feature on the itinerary. Sitting quietly on a beach at sunset we will view the unique **brown kiwi** feeding.

Meet the four parrot species, which occur on the islands, as well as forest species such as **yellowhead**, **rifleman**, **tui**, and the large endemic **New Zealand pigeon**. The wetlands will provide species such as **fern-bird**, **Royal spoonbill**, and **shoveler** while tidal estuaries are home to such as **wrybill**, **tattler**, and **New Zealand dotterel**. From our Alpine Lodge we will meander through alpine highlands where the **kea** parrots, **New Zealand falcon**, and **rock wren** survive.

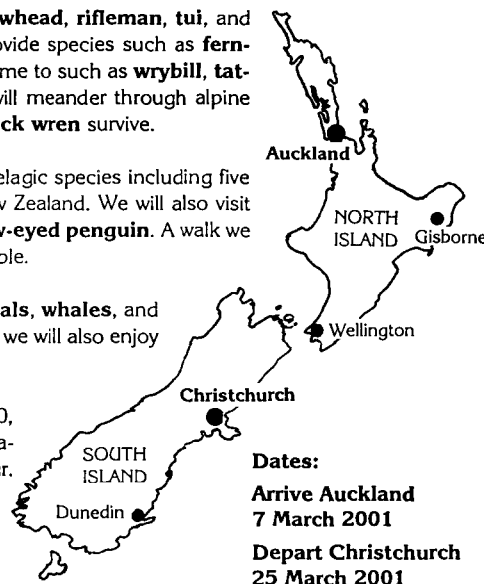
The tour includes two seabird trips to experience the wealth of pelagic species including five species of **mollymawk** and two **albatross** in the waters off New Zealand. We will also visit two penguin breeding colonies including the rare, endemic **yellow-eyed penguin**. A walk we do amongst a breeding colony of **Royal albatross** is unforgettable.

We will visit six different islands and stay on five. I expect good views of **seals**, **whales**, and **dolphins** as well. Apart from the scenery for which the country is famous, we will also enjoy an authentic Maori cultural experience and meal.

**Total cost:** New Zealand \$5,295 (approximately US \$2,550, and UK £1,700, subject to exchange rates in March 2001). Includes all meals and accommodations, six internal boat trips, and three airfares. Maximum of seven guests on tour.

### Bookings and Information:

Glen Holland, National Wildlife Centre, RD1 Masterton, New Zealand  
phone: 06: 375 8332 res. • 06:375 8004 bus. • 06: 375 8003 fax  
e-mail: wildlife@winz.co.nz



### Dates:

**Arrive Auckland**  
**7 March 2001**

**Depart Christchurch**  
**25 March 2001**

