

Notes on King Parrots

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Author's aviary with pair of Amboina King Parrots.

In the fall of 1986, I obtained my first pair of King Parrots, Australians, *Alisterus scapularis*, from Bill Rattray. King Parrots have been a part of my life ever since, a great pleasure.

Several factors contributed to my decision to begin with Kings. I had known about Australian Kings from childhood, but Amboina Kings, *Alisterus amboinensis*, were new to me. I was introduced to Amboinas through Sheldon Dingle's 1981 article in the *AFA Watchbird*. About that time, I had my first sight of Amboinas at the San Diego Zoo. I vividly recall a group of Amboinas climbing actively around their aviary. The magnificent blue of their backs, almost iridescent, struck me.

After a less than successful experience with Stella's Lorikeets in 1986, I was pondering which birds to obtain as a replacement. I chose Kings because of their easier care (they require a diet similar to that of conures or Amazons), their quiet voices, (which ordinarily would not be a problem in a residential neighborhood) and especially for their elegant color pattern, quite similar to that of the Stella's Lorikeets which I



Amboina
King Parrot

Photo courtesy of Bill Rattray

was selling.

Regarding the basic King Parrot color pattern – green wings, dark back, and red head and chest (female Australians and two subspecies of Green-winged Kings are more quietly colored) – I have often been struck by the presence of variations of this pattern in a number of psittacines of the Pacific Distribution, i.e., Australia, New Guinea, the islands west of New Guinea, and the South Pacific islands. For example, besides the Stella's Lorikeet and other *Charmosyna* lorikeets, the Kuhl's Lory has a variation of this pattern, as well as the Collared Lory and several of the *Lorius* lories. The Red Shining Parrot has a variation of this pattern, with more of a maroon shade. To me, this color pattern epitomizes the beauty of the psittacines of the Pacific Distribution.

It would seem that, given the presence of this pattern in diverse groups of psittacines of the region, this pattern was quite likely present in the common ancestors which gave rise to the current forms. Perhaps this is quite an ancient color pattern, well suited to the preservation of the birds: the predominantly dark dorsal color would act as camouflage and protection from predators from above while the bright head and chest coloring would facilitate interaction of the birds with others of their species. (This seems like a good subject for an doctoral dissertation in ornithology!)

I decided to get Amboina Kings, but when I visited Mr. Rattray in the summer of 1986, I was amazed to see that he kept and bred Australian Kings, birds which I had not known were available to private aviculturists. That year, I purchased a pair of Australians. In later years, I added three pairs of Amboinas.

King Parrots can be quite aggressive, and I have read that Amboinas are more aggressive than Australians. My flight cages are 16 and 20 feet long, my older ones in the walk-in style with a cement floor, and my newer ones of the suspended type, which I much prefer. In these large aviaries, I have not noticed much difference between the temperaments of my Australians

and Amboinas. The Australians are somewhat more sedentary. Pairs are generally harmonious (if the female knows her place – especially noticeable with the Australian pair). When there is some bickering, plenty of room for flight precludes harm. Introducing birds unfamiliar with one another can be difficult, and could result in serious injury if not closely watched. Partial clipping of both wings to slow down the aggressor has worked well for me.

My aviaries are in a tropical jungle setting, easy to attain here in Southern California. I try to keep the cages very clean, and to keep the perches renewed as necessary. My philosophy and pleasure is to keep a few significant birds under the best conditions, rather than many birds under less than ideal conditions. My aviaries are open with a covered shelter area protected from wind, traditional in Southern California. For my older pairs of Kings, I provide some heat during the colder months, using an infrared heat source covered with porcelain to emit heat but not light (Pearlco Heat Elements, from Avitech).

The birds receive washed *Eucalyptus* branches to chew, ideally once a week. They especially love the flowers and seed pods. Their dry diet consists of a large hookbill seed mixture, safflower based, without sunflower seeds, along with a mixture of two pelleted diets: Scenic Jungle Diet from Marion Diagnostics and Zu Preem Fruit Blend for parrots and conures. They do not eat this pelleted mixture well. I would warn any aviculturists interested in pelleted diets to be cautious when introducing these to birds. It could be possible for birds to starve to death with a pelleted diet before them, not recognizing it as food. The birds receive unlimited spray millet, which they relish, along with romaine, celery, endive, or occasional broccoli attached to the wire near a perch.

The daily soft -food dish consists of fruits (grapes, apple, papaya, or pomegranate), cooked squash, sweet potatoes, and carrots; a cooked bean, grain, and peanut mixture; and peas.

All these items except the fruit are prepared in advance and kept in the freezer in bags for each day. The frozen food is microwaved before being given to the birds. Make sure that the food is warm, not burning hot, when they get it!

I use small-size ground oyster shells for calcium, as well as powdered bone meal from the health food store. The bone meal, as well as several vitamin and mineral supplements, are sprinkled on the soft-food dish every few days. Please do not use grit. It is unnecessary, and birds can die of crop impaction from grit. I lost my first male Australian King from grit impacting his crop. As a precaution, to ensure adequate salt in the birds' diet, I buy horse trace-mineral block, reduce it to powder with a hammer, and put a small amount of the salt in a corner of the soft-food dish about twice a week.

A fresh paper plate is used for the soft-food dish every day. The water dishes are soaked in an approximately 1:20 dilution of bleach for about five minutes each day, rinsed well, and left for 24 hours before being reused. Each aviary has two plastic patio tables 1-1/2 feet x 1-1/2 feet x 1-1/2 feet high. One is for the soft-food plate, one for the dry-food dish; the water dish is placed on a built-in shelf, under cover. Kings love to bathe, but not in standing water. They go wild in water sprinkled from above from a garden hose.

My nest boxes are like an artificial tree trunk: one foot square by six feet tall, resting on cinder blocks on the floor, tied to the aviary wire so they do not topple. The entrance hole is 3-1/2 inches in diameter, and a door at the bottom facilitates checking the eggs or young. A wire ladder leads to the bottom of the nest box, where wood shavings are placed. I use industrial strength pyrethrin spray and Sevin powder to preclude mite infestation, and would advise aviculturalists to check with their veterinarian about the proper use of these insecticides.

My three pairs of Kings which are currently breeding every year (one Australian pair and two Amboina pairs) would produce clutches of eggs two or three times during the breeding

As a postscript, I must say that I earnestly hope that Stella's Lorikeets will soon return to my avicultural endeavor, to make my backyard Pacific Paradise complete. 

