

The Damaraland Meyer's Parrot

Text and Photo by Terry Irwin

Eshowe, Kwazulu/Natal

South Africa

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The Damaraland Meyer's Parrot *P. m. damarensis* was named by Neuman, (J.f 0 p.501) in 1898. It was described from specimens collected in the area of Ochimbora Damaraland, South West Africa, now Namibia. The scientific name of *damarensis* is descriptive of the type locality.

The description of this subspecies distinguishes it from all but one (*reichenowi*) of the other subspecies in having no yellow on the forehead. This particular diagnostic feature is universally ascribed to this subspecies in all modern literature. Juniper and Paar in *PARROTS - A Guide to Parrots of the World* say of this subspecies that it "Always lacks yellow crown."

Both the type locality and the diagnostic description of no yellow on the head have led to considerable debate recently. At present it is widely accepted that there are no Meyer's Parrots in present day Damaraland and some individuals do develop yellow feathering on their foreheads.

My research has revealed that the town (or place) of Ochimbora either no longer exists, or was incorrectly spelled in the original records. Also, from all the available distribution records, it appears that Meyer's Parrots do not today occur in Damaraland. Most locality descriptions and maps record a distribution from southern Angola to central Namibia and to north-western Botswana. The distribution map in *The Atlas of Southern African Birds*, which is probably the most recently revised, has the western limit of Meyer's Parrot not extending anywhere near Damaraland. The distribution descrip-

tion also mentions that "The distribution limits of this parrot do not appear different from those given almost a century ago (Stark & Sclater 1903)." One wonders if the original specimens could have been collected somewhere else and not in Damaraland? If so the name *damarensis* is incorrect.

The issue of the yellow on the head is even more confusing. I first noticed the appearance of one or two yellow feathers on the heads of two individuals in my collection after about five years. These birds were wild-caught specimens obtained in the south west of their range in Namibia. As all records indicate that *damarensis* extends into western Botswana one can presume that all the Meyer's in Namibia are *damarensis*. It is, however, well documented that where *transvaalensis* and *damarensis* overlap, in the Okavango delta, hybridisation occurs.

This begs the question: do some individuals of *damarensis* get yellow feathers on their heads? If so, is it possible that the original specimens from which the race was described happened not to include any individuals with yellow on the head? If so, to describe *damarensis* as never having yellow on the crown is incorrect.

There is considerable variation in the colours of Meyer's Parrots throughout their range. Clancy (1977b) considered the whole area between the Motale River in northeastern Transvaal and the Save River in Southern Zimbabwe to be extensively populated with hybrids between the Meyer's and Brown-headed (*P. cryptoxanthus*) Parrots. However, Rowan (1983) pointed out that such atypical specimens are found throughout the range of Meyer's Parrot

and fall within the natural colour variation present in the species, and that natural hybrids may, in fact, be rare. This would support the theory that it is natural for some *damarensis* to have yellow on their heads. Incidentally, I have seen specimens of both the Brown-headed and Rüppell's Parrots with the odd yellow feathering on the head!

The extent, however, that varying amounts of yellow on the head appear in the present wild populations of Meyer's Parrots in Namibia is surprising. Observers such as Patrick Lane venture the opinion that up to 25% of the birds in most flocks have yellow on their heads. He has numerous photos of wild birds in the Kavango Province and the Ethosha Pan area, which show Meyer's with varying amounts of yellow on their heads.

Another observer told me that he believes that by the time they reach eight years of age all *damarensis* will have some yellow on the head. Some breeders have told me of wild-caught, apparently pure, *damarensis* producing offspring that, although hatched without yellow on the head, develop some yellow feathering after a few years. I have noted, with my captive birds, that yellow feathers may appear on areas of the head where the skin has been damaged by banging against the wire of the cage or fighting, but others develop yellow feathers without being damaged. In the case of captive-bred birds that develop yellow on the head, I have found that the yellow is not as bright as that on the shoulder, but more a whitish-yellow. Also, this appears in the form of small patches or individual feathers and not in a band across the



This Damaraland Meyer's Parrot has developed a small yellow feather on the head. The author suggests that this happens occasionally but the true damarensis would never develop a clear "Alice Band" across the head.

forehead.

Another reason for the appearance of so many birds with yellow on their heads could be the spread of the hybrid, *transvaalensis* x *damarensis*, from the Okavango area of Botswana into neighbouring Namibia. It is a natural progression for a species, so dependent on the watercourse vegetation, to spread out along all the tributaries of the system. It should, therefore, follow that the hybrids from the Okavango would spread up the Okavango River and all its tributaries. In so doing these birds would populate the Caprivi Strip, the whole of the Kavango, Province and, with their known local migratory habits within Namibia, much further south and west. It is possible that, since *damarensis* was first recorded, there has been a gradual influx of hybrids into Namibia until today most flocks, in all localities, can be expected to have some of these individuals.

Both these questions are dealt with in *The Birds of Damara Land* (1872) by C.J.Andersson, edited by J.H.Gurney. Regarding the distribution Andersson writes:

"This Parrot is a rare bird in the middle portion of Damara Land; but further north, at Okamabute, it is common,

and also in the Lake-regions; with the occasional exception of a few stray individuals, it does not occur further south than Omabonde, which may be said to constitute its usual southern limit."

Gurney, who was a widely respected ornithologist of his time, added this editorial comment:

"This species is subject, in both sexes, to variation of colour in the plumage of the head, an irregular bar of pale yellow, which transversely crosses the crown, being present in some specimens and entirely absent in others."

These two observations, made over a hundred years ago, of Meyer's Parrots in Damaraland confirm that they did, in fact, occur there then. It also indicates that some specimens are found with yellow on the head be it that this was "an irregular bar" of "pale yellow."

Given that *transvaalensis* and *damarensis* can both have yellow on their heads, 'similar blue breasts both with varying amounts of darker barring, and all the other plumage descriptions similar, how does one distinguish between the two subspecies?

Measurements show that

damarensis, on average, have a longer wing. This would give the impression that they are slightly larger than *transvaalensis*. Some aviculturists have also observed that the *transvaalensis* has a greenish breast as apposed to the *damarensis*'s blue. This is not diagnostic as the type description for *transvaalensis* records it as having the underparts blue. Further confusion can arise from the fact that the amount of blue in *damarensis* has been known to vary seasonally, or with age, from bright blue through turquoise to green. The yellow on the head of *transvaalensis*, however, is as bright as the shoulder patch and takes the form of a distinct "Alice band" across the crown. Some individuals may have extensive yellow covering almost the whole of the top of the head. A pure *damarensis* should have no yellow on the head at all or only pale yellow patches or single feathers.

My advice to aviculturists, who want to keep *damarensis*, is to collect only those specimens with no yellow on the head or, at most, a few scattered pale yellow feathers. They should also endeavour to keep the subspecies pure by not crossing them with any birds with extensive bright yellow colouring on the head. ❖