

Rainbow Lorries in American Aviculture

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Lorries are undoubtedly some of the most beautiful birds in the world, and none stand out more than the popular and appropriately named Rainbow Lorries. These widely distributed birds are native to Australia and many of the Islands of Indonesia and the South Pacific. For the most part they exist in their natural environments in great numbers; however, on a few of the islands the habitat is diminishing and there may be some cause for concern. They have been heavily traded and over the years have achieved great popularity as pets and household companions. The term "Rainbow Lory" is a generic one applied to over 20 separate brightly colored birds. The Rainbow group, *Trichoglossus haematodus*, is comprised of one nominate species, commonly called the Green-naped Lory, and approximately twenty-two subspecies. Of this group about eight types appear, or have appeared at some point, in American aviculture.

Green-naped, the nominate species *T. b. haematodus*, are by the far the most commonly seen and most readily available birds in this group. They are easy to breed and appear frequently in the pet trade. Green-naped mainly inhabit the islands of New Guinea and Indonesia where they often appear in large flocks at the forest's edge. Their bodies are green. Their foreheads, crown and lores are blue, shaft streaked with green. The back of their head is purple; the breast is red with the feathers clearly tipped in dark blue. The collar is greenish yellow.

Another popular and commonly seen member of this family is the Swainson's or Blue Mountain Lory, *T. b. moluccanus*. Its head is dark

blue to violet, shaft streaked with a lighter blue. The abdomen is dark blue and the breast is orange and does not have the dark tipped feathers seen on the Green-naped. The collar is yellow-green. Several color mutations have been documented but they are extremely rare. These lorries are native to Eastern Australia where they can be seen frequently in yards and other populated areas.

The Edwards lory, *T. b. capistratus*, is becoming more common and in my opinion has the nicest temperament of the entire group. The body is green. The head is green; the forehead, crown and chin are blue, shaft streaked with a dark-

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er blue. The breast is yellow with a bit of orange edging, the abdomen is dark green and the collar is a greenish yellow. This bird is native to the lowlands of Timor. In general, Edwards lorries seem to be less nippy and aggressive than the Green-naped when mature. This increases their desirability as pets.

The remaining five species, including the Rosenberg's Lory *T. b. rosenbergii*, Blue-headed or Pale-headed Lory *T. b. caeruleiceps*, and the Weber's Lory *T. b. weberi*, appear less frequently in this country. The Weber's is the only lory of the rainbow group not as brilliantly colored. It is mainly green and yellow.

The slightly smaller Mitchell's Lory, *T. b. mitchellii*, has almost completely disappeared from aviculture in the United States and all that remains here now is a fragile population. Additionally, the wild population in its native home on the islands of Bali and Lombok appears to have diminished significantly and the existing population is in peril.

Forsten's lorries *T. b. forsteni* were imported into the U.S. periodically in the past but seem to have become scarce in recent years. Its status in the wild is believed to be declining as well. There may be a few specimens of some of the other Rainbow subspecies still in the United States but they are almost unheard of and, with no apparent viable population, they are rarely seen.

Rainbow lorries are generally 9-11 inches long and weigh about 100-160 grams; however, there is some difference in size among the different subspecies. They have long, pointed tails, orange beaks, gray feet, and red irises. They are loud and very active birds. In his 1896 book, St. George Mivart describes it as "a quarrelsome and noisy bird."

Pet Lorries

In captivity handfed Rainbow Lorries can be affectionate and entertaining pets. They can sometimes become a bit nippy as adult birds. In the wild their diet consists of pollen,

nectar, berries, fruits, and insects. Their uniquely designed tongue, covered with brush-like papillae, is designed to gather pollen. The gizzard or ventriculus of the lory is not muscular enough to manage the diet of dry seeds and hard foods of other parrots. It was this very characteristic that kept lorries from gaining the popularity of the seed-eating birds. With the creation and advancement of commercial powder and nectar diets created specifically for lorries, feeding them is no longer the challenge it once was.

A diet composed of a good quality lory food such as that produced by Lory Life or Nekton accompanied by a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables and plenty of fresh water should keep your bird happy and healthy. Their droppings will be a bit runny but with a little creativity and imagination this can be easily managed. Plastic mats used under office chairs can easily and inexpensively protect the carpet. Sheets of shower board or plastic shower curtains can protect the walls while offering a surface easy to clean. Acrylic cages or panels fastened to the outside of the cage can also be effective in keeping the mess to a minimum. When kept as companion birds, Rainbow Lorries can become fair to moderate talkers as well as become accomplished at mimicking the various other sounds that occur in their environment.

In the wild, Rainbow Lorries move about the lowland trees, acrobatically going about their daily business of gathering food and being noisy. In captivity they are no less energetic, often requiring a cage larger than necessary for other parrots of comparable size. These birds utilize every inch of their cage, from top to bottom not just the levels on which they find perches. They not only enjoy hanging toys but also derive great pleasure from the ones that are loose on the bottom of the cage. They can spend hours flinging these loose toys around the cage, constantly rearranging them. A bath

bowl is a welcome treat for the lory. They enjoy bathing as well as dunking all their toys in the water. Bath time can be one of the loudest and most exciting parts of a lory's day.

Rainbow lorries have achieved great popularity as pets in recent years although their appeal is not just a modern phenomenon. In Nineteenth Century texts by Sir William Jardine and St. George Mivart, their beauty and temperament was recognized and well documented. According to Jardine, "In disposition they are lively, but mild and tractable, and when domesticated, fond of being caressed." He also noted that "Members of this genus are birds of elegant form, and some exhibit a great variety and richness of plumage."

The difficulties experienced in keeping lorries were obvious even in 1836 as Jardine states, "They do not eat any kind of grain, even in a domesticated state... It appears that they seldom live long in confinement, and that when caged they are subject to fits. This in all probability arises from a deficiency of their natural food." An improper diet has been known to take years off the life expectancy of a lory. As we are learning more and more about their dietary requirements, lorries are living much longer in captivity. It is reasonable to expect the companion rainbow lory to achieve a life span of 15-25 years.

These diminutive birds, while making charming companions, are quite fearless and aggressive. In the home they think nothing of facing down the family dog or a bird many times their size. If lorries are kept with other types of birds it is best not to let them socialize together without vigilant supervision, as injury is often the result of such interaction. They are curious and will get into anything and everything. They are intent on getting their own way and can be rather stubborn when facing a challenge. Often older birds can become more aggressive and a bit nippy. While

possibly not emitting the decibels of a m a c a w scream, these birds can be very vocal and their calls can reach a fairly high and uncomfortable pitch. If there is more than one, the enthusiasm is contagious. Of a flock of wild Rainbow Lorries, Mivart states "The incessant din produced by their thousand voices, and the screaming



Pair of Blue Mountain Lorikeets. Photograph by Dick Schroeder

they emit..., baffles all description, and must be seen and heard to be fully comprehended." No one who has ever encountered even a small group of rainbow lorries will disagree with this description.

Rainbow lorries are susceptible to all the diseases common to psittacines such as Proventricular Dilatation Disease (PDD), gout, fatty liver, and polyoma. There is also a strain of the beak and feather virus (Pbfd) whose mutation was first thought to be exclusive to lorries. In addition, many types of lorries have shown to be vulnerable to hemochromatosis or iron storage disease.

Breeding Rainbow Lorries is not difficult. These birds are not sexually dimorphic so they must be accurately sexed either surgically or with DNA samples. Because of their size they can be housed in cages smaller than necessary for some of the larger species. I have successfully bred them in cages three feet square.

It seems that an "L" shaped nest box is the most suitable and the best protection against broken eggs. Rainbow Lorries typically lay two eggs and the incubation period is

about 24 days. Females have been known to produce fertile eggs as young as nine months of age; however, it may be beneficial to the hens to wait a few more months before allowing them to breed. Often these lorries become prolific breeders, producing several clutches each year. It is best to allow the parents to feed the young for the first two or three weeks if possible. Doing so allows for stronger and healthier chicks and can serve to slow down the hen's rate of reproduction.

At the age of two to three weeks, the babies can be removed from the nest, banded and handfed. I start the chicks off on a commercial handfeeding formula which I dilute with Lory Life nectar and gradually switch them totally to nectar. To the nectar I'll sometimes add pureed fruit or iron free, organic baby fruit. Even when they are quite young I will offer them additional foods such as small pieces of fruit. Their natural curiosity makes it easy to introduce new foods. These birds wean easily on their own, usually within 6-9 weeks of age. There is almost always a market for young, tame Rainbow

Lories, as they have become desirable companion birds.

The brightly colored plumage and inquisitive personalities of the Rainbow Lorries have made this group of birds extremely desirable as pets. They are not terribly expensive and can be found in all regions of the United States. While lorries are not for everyone,

for those who are willing to accommodate the noise, the dietary needs, and the rather runny droppings, these beautiful and animated birds will bring great joy and delight for many years.

Sources

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