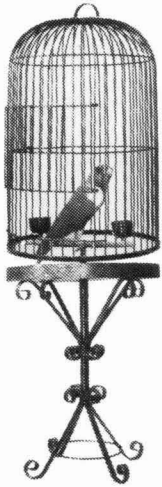
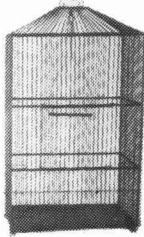


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the Black Parrots of Praslin

By Rosemary Low
England



Photo by R.H. Grantham, England

The black parrot is difficult to observe when feeding in dense, dark vegetation.

Certain remote places scattered about the globe have, since the time of their discovery, acted like a magnet to naturalists. Because of their unique fauna, islands are high on the list of such places, among them the Seychelles. Situated one thousand miles from the east coast of Africa and two thousand miles from the Indian mainland, these islands are certainly remote. The nearest land mass is the Malagasy Republic (formerly Madagascar), 650 miles distant.

The Seychelles are a group of granitic and coral islands situated about 300 miles south of the Equator. Their avifauna is fascinating. It can be divided into three groups: the introduced species which comprise the most common land birds (e.g., common mynahs and barred ground doves); the seabirds, some of them counted in millions, on the outlying islands, the migrants; and the endemic species.

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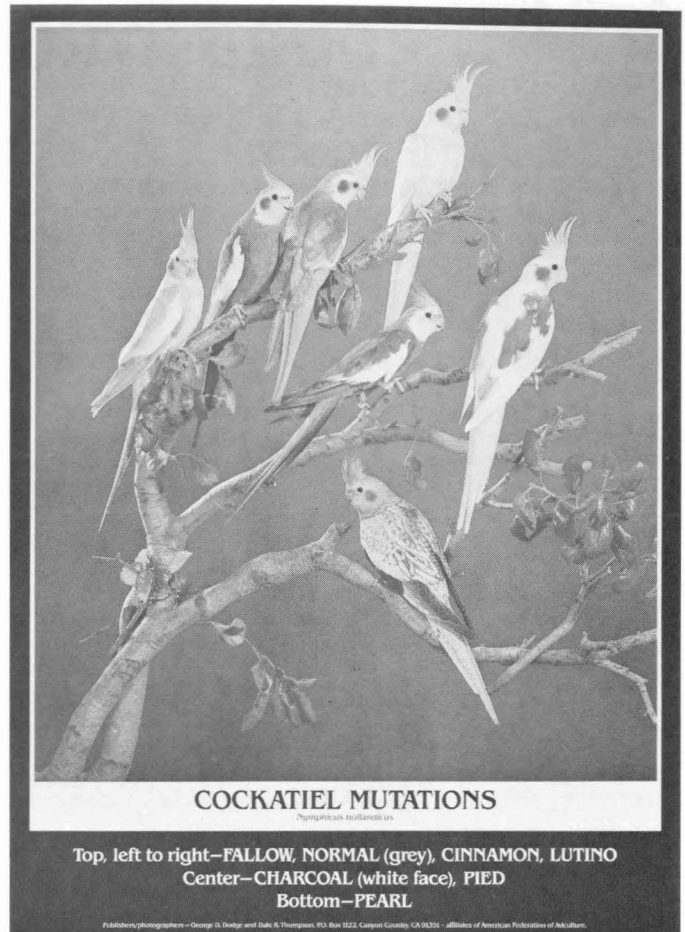
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are rare or not numerous. All the islands are small and some species are confined to a single island. On Praslin, for example, which measures seven miles long and two miles wide, is found the black parrot. The conservation of parrots found on small islands holds a special interest for me. Having seen how rapidly increasing human populations on a number of Caribbean islands have placed severe pressure on the Amazon parrots found there, bringing some species to the brink of extinction, I wanted to investigate the situation in comparable circumstances in the Indian Ocean. Could anything that I was able to learn about the black parrot aid the survival of the Amazon parrots which so desperately need man's help?

The black parrot belongs to the genus *Coracopsis* which contains only two species, the larger Vasa parrot (*C. vasa*) from Malagasy and the Comoro Islands and *C. nigra* whose distribution additionally includes Praslin. The smallest sub-species *C.n. barklyi*, is found there. One of the unique features of the members of this genus is the plumage which is uniform greyish brown or brown. In coloration these are the dullest parrots in the world. A few Vasas have been kept by zoos and aviculturists but they are not well known and attract attention mainly for their drab coloration.

Little is known about the *Coracopsis* in general so, in April of this year my husband and I visited Praslin to learn what we could of the black parrot. On arrival in Mahé, the main island of Seychelles, I went to the offices of the Department of Agriculture to meet Lindsay Chong Seng who is responsible for conservation of the native fauna.

My first question to him was a leading one: was there a recent estimate of the population? He told me that in 1970 members of the Young Scientists' Society from Seychelles College had carried out some work on the black parrot from which they concluded that the population numbered about one hundred birds. In June of that year, all firearms

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Continued from page 35

were confiscated for political reasons—so had that resulted in a subsequent increase, I wondered? It is quickly evident that generally speaking the standard of living is higher here than in the Caribbean—and no one has any need to shoot birds for food. Unlike the situation in the Caribbean islands, shooting in order to take parrots alive for trade has never occurred. And Mr. Chong Seng told me that he will not issue any licenses for taking or keeping them. All endemic birds are protected by law, with fines of up to R1,000 (about \$1,700) or imprisonment not exceeding one year, under the Wild Animals and Birds Protection Act. However, no one has yet been charged under the act.

I was told that there is a growing feeling of responsibility toward wildlife, an increasing attitude of pride in the endemic species and a realization that they are attractions which can only benefit the tourist industry and therefore the people in general. The positive attitude toward conservation is a comparatively recent development here, as in most parts of the world. On Praslin, Mr. Figaro, of the Department of Agriculture, told me that until the late 1950s dead parrots could be seen by the roadside, the victims of boys with catapults. This never occurs now. Again I heard, "The people take pride in their parrot."

Human predation is a thing of the past—so are there any other predators, I asked? It is believed that rats have taken young in the nest—but to date, fewer than half a dozen nests have been found, so this is an area where further study is desirable but far from easy. I had heard it rumored that the introduced barn owl takes parrots. Mr. Chong Seng doubted this—but again an attempt to investigate the possibility should be pursued.

I then considered other factors which could limit the population: food supply and nesting sites. The former appears plentiful in the area of the Valée de Mai; the latter is an unknown quantity. Both Evans (1979) and Penny (1965) believed that the absence of suitable nesting sites, i.e., standing dead trees, might be the factor limiting population growth. Penny suggested the provision of nest-boxes and Evans, a little more realistically, believed that leaving dead *Albizia* and *Acacia* trees standing was the best policy.

Possibly, too, the parrots are competing for nest sites with other species. It was only after an intensive study was made of the Puerto Rican parrot (*Amazona vittata*) that it was discovered that it was losing the battle for nest sites

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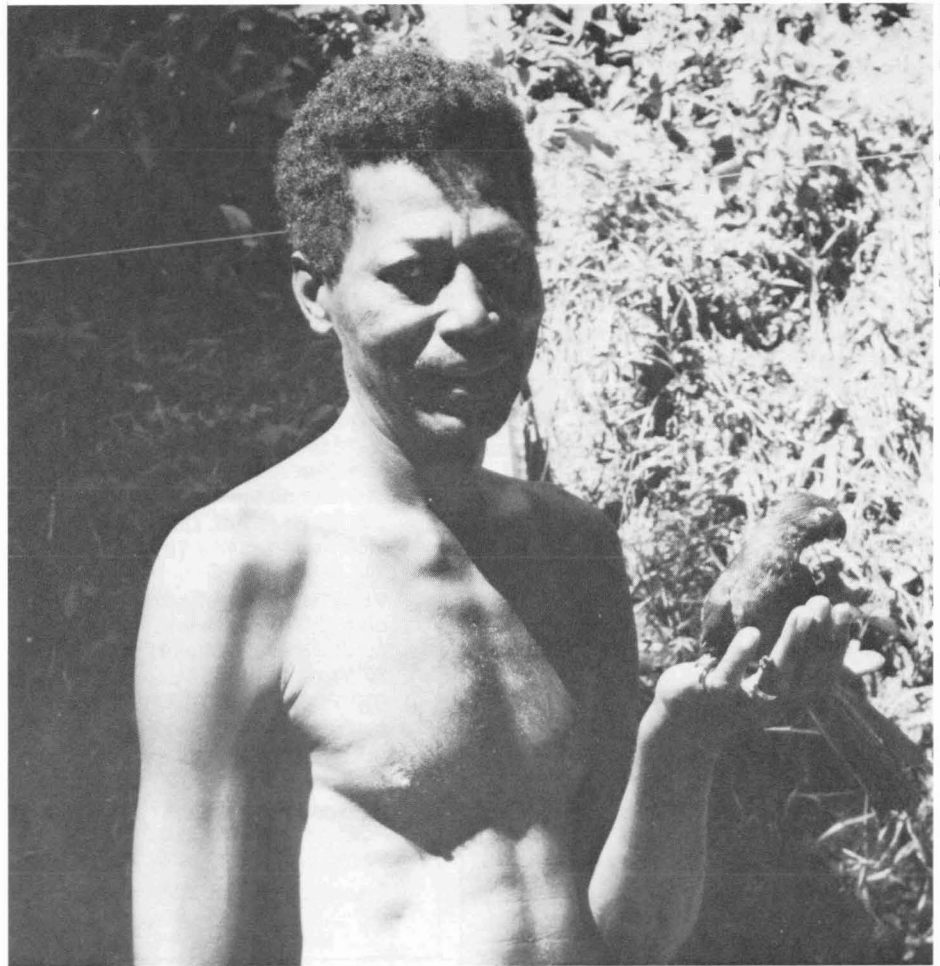
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in competition with a recent colonist, the pearly-eyed thrasher (*Fuscus margarops*). Could the same type of problem be occurring here, with the introduced common mynah (*Acridotheres tristis*) playing the role of villain? I would have thought not, as there are few mynahs in the Vallée itself; they prefer areas of human habitation.

However, Andrew Gardner, a zoology student at Aberdeen University, who spent a year on Praslin studying geckos, informed me of the following incident. "I watched a group of three parrots investigating a hollow *Pandanus hornei* stump on November 18, 1980. One bird went inside, then hopped out and performed a head-bowing display and appeared to be fed by one other, ruffling its head feathers in the process. A few days later, however, it became obvious that mynahs had taken over the hole."

It could have been that the parrots lost interest in the site, for some reason, but it seems equally likely that the more aggressive personality of the mynah would result in a victory in any altercation over nest sites. This is certainly an aspect which deserves further study. It is of interest that on another Indian Ocean

island, Mauritius, the common mynah is a nest competitor of the critically endangered echo parakeet (*Psittacula echo*) which has a smaller population than any other parrot throughout the world. Mynahs have been known to displace parakeets from nesting cavities; one had been used for at least four years by the parakeets before mynahs took possession. Only the fact that mynahs have different preferences regarding nest locations, preferring open areas to forest, prevents them from being a serious threat.

To date, the discovery of the nest of a black parrot has been an extremely rare event. The first described were two found by a forestry worker in November 1963 (Legrand, 1964). One, in the trunk of a dead *Pandanus hornei*, was destroyed when the tree fell. It contained three young. The second nest, in a dead *Albizia falcata*, was examined closely. It contained two white eggs which had been deposited on a layer of rotten wood dust at the bottom of a perpendicular tunnel which served as an entrance. The tunnel measured about 4 ft. in length.

One of the nests was found in the Vallée de Mai, the other outside it. The

Vallée, a national park which occupies an area approximately one mile square, is the strong hold of the black parrot. It existed virtually in a virgin state until the 1930s—and no one who spends a few hours inside can fail to be touched by its primeval qualities. These are accentuated by the silence, broken by the occasional trickle of a stream, the frequent clashing of the giant palm fronds of the coco-de-mer (the unique endemic palm) and the noisy calls of the excitable endemic bulbul. Sometimes, too, the joyful whistling of the black parrots will be heard.

For those prepared to make the climb, there is a vantage point in the National Park which provides an excellent view over a large area of the Vallée. Anyone who spends a little time there, even in the heat of midday, will before too long be rewarded by the parrots' whistling calls and will probably see them winging their way across the Vallée, scarcely more than specks in the distance. But this was too remote to be satisfying and I always sought the close approach which is possible when they are busy feeding. They were perfectly aware of our presence but showed no alarm as long as we kept fairly still. To me, this was an indication that no human persecution occurs, for in areas where parrots are shot a close approach is usually impossible.

Late one afternoon we explored new land in the company of Victor, who is employed by the Department of Agriculture. He has achieved local fame as a singer and told me of the charming folk song he had written about the black parrot, explaining why it has no bright colors, yet visitors to the island always seek it in the Vallée de Mai. Here was further proof of local pride in the parrot, presented in a manner which will add to the bird's popular appeal.

Victor took us up a steep track of rutted red soil, used by the forestry department for timber extraction. Some way from the path was a large tree laden with round orange-yellow fruits which Victor identified as santol *Sandoricum indicum*. Here the huge fruit bats and the parrots were busy feeding during the hour before sunset. As the setting sun colored the clouds with yellow and orange, the parrots flew out of the tree in pairs, their small wings seeming to beat furiously against the darkening sky. Yet at other times their flight might have been a different species, as they swooped and dived with effortless grace.

Another tree on which the parrots feed—probably the most important native tree—is the palm *Verschaffeltia splendida*.



**Missouri Cage Bird Association
Annual Open Show
November 4, 5, 1983**

Harley House Hotel of St. Louis
13440 Riverglen Drive
Earth City, MO
Contact: Sandy Simpson
1308 Primrose Drive
Arnold, MO 63010

**Orange County Bird Breeders
Bird Fair
November 13, 1983**

Orange County Fairgrounds, bldg. 10
Costa Mesa, CA
from 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.
Contact: Vern Nievar (714) 554-2215
or Candy Fletcher (714) 537-0408

**Greater Chicago Cage Bird Club, Inc.
Annual All-Bird Show
November 4, 5, 6, 1983**

Holiday Inn, Itasca, IL
Contact: LaVerne Krauss
2719 S. Komensky Avenue
Chicago, IL 60623 (312) 521-1961

**American Cockatiel Society
6th National Cage Bird Show
November 17, 18, 19, 1983**

to be held in conjunction with the
35th National Cage Bird Show
Regency Hotel, Denver, CO
Contact: Carter Atwood
Rt. 1, Box 120A
Pleasant Hill, MO 64080

**San Diego Bird Show
November 4, 5, 6, 1983
College Grove Shopping Center**

Hwy. 94, 7 College Grove Ave.
San Diego, CA
Contact: Mary Lannom (619) 749-3115
Rt. 6, Box 2108 Escondido, CA 92025

**Great Western Budgerigar Society
29th Annual Exhibition
November 18, 19, 20, 1983**

Rosemead Community
Recreation Center
3936 Muscatel Ave., Rosemead, CA
Contact: Sally Lawrence (213) 934-1383
141 S. Arden Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90004

**American Canary Fanciers Association
3rd Annual Show
November 5, 6, 7, 1983**

Hacienda Hotel
525 North Sepulveda
El Segundo, CA
Contact: Kelvin Clegg (213) 476-0745

**35th National Cage Bird Show
November 18, 19, 20, 1983**

Regency Hotel Denver, CO
Contact: Kevin Wirick (303) 623-5959
748 Santa Fe Drive
Denver, CO 80204

**Greater Jacksonville Aviculture Society
7th Annual Show
November 11 & 12**

Jacksonville Airport Hilton
Jacksonville, FL
Contact: G.J.A.S.
P.O. Box 14621
Jacksonville, FL 32238

**Santa Clara Valley Canary &
Exotic Bird Club
Annual Show
November 25, 26, & 27, 1983**

Peterson Jr. High School
Hans St. off El Camino Real
Sunny Vale, CA
Contact: Mary Schreiber (408) 722-6560

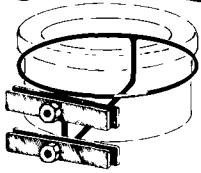
**Cleveland Canary & Cage Bird Club
Bird Show
November 12, 1983**

Puritas Lutheran Church
13812 Bellaire
Cleveland, Ohio 44135
Contact: Ray Ptak
7102 Wilber Ave., Parma, OH 44129

**Maryland Cage-Bird Society
Roller Show
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Baltimore, MD 21229
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There are many specimens of this palm inside the Vallée de Mai where the closely knit forest canopy makes parrot-watching difficult. One day I saw two parrots not far from the westernmost point of the nature trail, from which visitors can explore the Vallée.

The birds were soon lost from view in the dense vegetation. However, I knew that they were very close as their arboreal trail could be followed by means of the small fruits of the palm which were raining down around us and hitting the ground—or the dead fronds covering it—with a crack. When they took to the wing we discovered with some surprise that they had been only a few feet away from us, having fed in total silence.

Occasionally parrots perch boldly in the bare limbs of a dead tree; indeed, our very first sight of this species was of a pair in such a location. It was the hour before sunset of the day we arrived in Praslin. For an hour we had searched the valley for our first glimpse of black parrots. As we drove off, disappointed, I saw a pair perched high in a tree near the roadside. They were totally unconcerned by our presence and preened and whistled, one perched a few feet above the other. When we had gazed and filmed to our hearts' content, my husband clapped his hands so that we could see them in flight. They merely peered down, as though to wonder at our antics, and did nothing but give a melodious whistle. They even answered when he mimicked their call!

During the six days that followed we appreciated how lucky we had been to encounter parrots in an open location where the light permitted photography. Although on subsequent occasions we were able to approach them within a few feet as they fed on the small green fruits of the introduced bilimbi (*Averrhoa bilimbi*), the dense, low vegetation admitted little light.

It was fascinating to watch the parrots feed. They would nip off a fruit—which grows from the trunk in small clusters—and sit nearby rapidly taking large bites out of it. They would drop it after perhaps half or two thirds had been eaten, select another fruit and repeat the process. The ground beneath a bilimbi tree in which they had fed would be littered with partially eaten fruits. Out of curiosity I sampled one; it was juicy but amazingly acid and bitter. And yet this apparently is the black parrot's favorite food.

They also have a taste for cultivated fruits. The Figaros told me that every day they feed on the guavas in their garden, and that elsewhere they favor bananas

and mangos. Mr. Figaro emphasized that while between ten and twenty birds was the normal number which visited his garden, double that number could regularly be seen at a place called Marie Louise near the southern tip of the island, more than a mile outside the Park. Indeed, he believed that parrots can be seen in almost any area where their favorite trees are fruiting. Apparently, however, there are extensive areas which they do not visit. Perhaps they never have made use of the lowland forests which contains few trees to their liking. Andrew Gardner told me that he spent much time in the remnant patches of natural forest behind the Côte d'Or in the northern-central part of the island, and in Anse Kerlan on the west coast. During a period of more than a year, he never saw parrots there. The Vallée de Mai and the south-eastern corner of the island are therefore the main stronghold of the black parrot.

Assuming that it is confined to this area, the question that continuously revolved in my mind was: is the population truly as small as one hundred or has it been underestimated? Interested local people are not prepared to commit themselves on this point. They will tell you, as the Figaros did, that the number of parrots visiting their garden to feed on guavas, has increased during the four years they have lived there. But more than that they are not prepared to say. Having seen the terrain in which the black parrot is found, I believe that it would be an impossible task to estimate the population accurately unless a survey was carried out at dawn by several hundred people simultaneously, a number of whom were equipped with "Walkie-talkies."

The parrots are conspicuous in flight above the forest canopy or when they make their presence known by their whistling call, but can be hard to distinguish when perched. Their small size and dull coloration renders them liable to confusion with the endemic bulbul (a common bird in the Vallée) when perched. They are not likely to be confused with the Seychelles pigeon, the most colorful of the endemic birds, with its deep blue plumage, white breast and red wattles above the beak. The pigeon is easily distinguished, even when high in the tree tops, by its larger size and much heavier build. It is also closely associated with the bilimbi tree. On one occasion we saw a pair drive off a pair of parrots from a large bilimbi, Perhaps they were nesting there.

To the best of my knowledge Praslin's parrot is unknown in aviculture. It is not,

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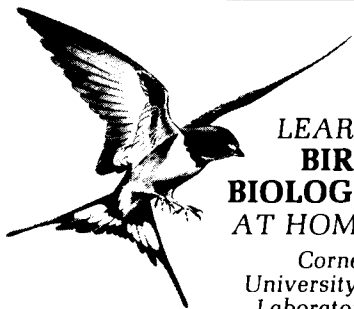
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however, entirely unknown in captivity on the island. Several young birds, rescued after falling from their nests, have been kept, with varying degrees of success. One lived for five years at semi-liberty, before being accidentally killed. About 40 years ago two were liberated on Mahé, after being caged for ten months. Their fate was a sad one. Either they were released in the wrong type of habitat or they lacked the ability to fend for themselves, as they soon died of starvation. It might be asked why they were released on Mahé, when (as far as is known) this species never occurred there. In 1960 two young birds were taken to the botanical gardens there and kept in an aviary. They were fed on guavas, bilimbi, banana and other fruits. One lived only a few months and was replaced. The new pair apparently survived a long time.

In recent years captive parrots have been extremely rare, yet it was our fortune that there was one at the time of our visit. Being cared for by the Figaros, it had been picked up several months previously with a broken wing. Extraordinarily gentle, it was removed from its cage and sat contentedly on my hand, giving a little whistle when I scratched its head.

On being taken from shade to sunlight, it adopted the sun-bathing posture, with one wing outstretched, which I have noticed in the Vasa parrots at San Diego Zoo. It welcomed the sun in a manner more reminiscent of a dove than a parrot. Fruits formed its diet, especially bilimbi and guavas.

In this instance a bird in the hand really was worth many in the bush for it enabled me to examine it closely. Everything about the black parrot is brown—even the feet, nails and the iris of the eye. If ever a bird was erroneously named it is this *Coracopsis*. The only part of its plumage which is not brown is the whitish underside of the wings. This was often evident in birds in flight, especially in sunlight. I was pleased to have the opportunity to measure a living specimen and found that from beak to tail its length was a mere 9½ in. (24 cm). The head and bill are small in proportion to the body.

What, I wondered, has the future in store for this intriguing little parrot? In recent years the problems of co-existence between parrots and man in overpopulated places have become very evident. Praslin is not yet overpopulated but large families there are the norm (the Figaros had 12 children) and there is little room for expansion. Nevertheless, I believe that the story of Praslin's parrot is

one of hope and that even allowing for substantial increases in the human population, the parrot will survive. There are three reasons for this belief. First, the area which is its main stronghold is set aside as a reserve. (This was originally created to protect the world's only forest of coco-de-mer palms (*Lodoicea maldivicea*). Secondly, education of the people has resulted in pride in the parrot's existence and a strong desire to protect it. It is featured on stamps, coins and tee-shirts. Thirdly, a fortuitous event—the banning of firearms for political reasons.

In bird conservation false optimism is highly dangerous. We actually know very little indeed about Praslin's black parrot. A carefully organized, sustained study into its breeding and feeding habits and its predators and competitors for nest sites is urgently needed. Until that is carried out it will be impossible to assess whether some factor is inhibiting the growth of the population. This knowledge would be of far greater value than attempting to estimate the total number of parrots on the island.

Before concluding this account of the extant parrot of the Seychelles, mention should perhaps be made of the one extinct species.

The Seychelles parakeet was formerly classified as a sub-species of the Alexandrine parakeet (*P. eupatria*), although it is now generally given specific status. The differences between the two birds, however, are minimal, as I found when I examined the three skins of *wardi* in the British Museum (Natural History), collected in 1880 and 1881. They were marginally smaller, with the red on the wings slightly less extensive and less dense. The tail of each bird was about 2.5 cm (1 in.) shorter, an adaptation for forest-dwelling. Cooper's plate in Forshaw (1973) is misleading; its small beak lends the bird the appearance of a ring-neck, when in fact it is clearly an Alexandrine, with the large beak of the latter. The male differs from the male Alexandrine in lacking the pink half-collar but differs from the ringneck in its darker shade of green and in having the red wing patch.

The exact distribution of the Seychelles parakeet is unknown, but it certainly occurred on Praslin and Silhouette. When I was in the Seychelles I learned of an optimistic ornithologist who had searched the relatively undisturbed forest on the tiny island of Silhouette (a few miles northwest of Mahé) in the hope of finding that the parakeet still survived. Such is not beyond the bounds of possibility—but,

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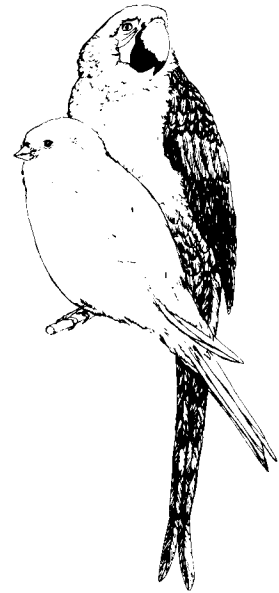
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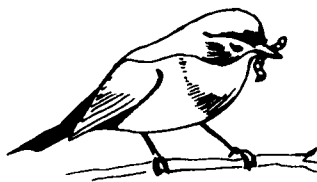
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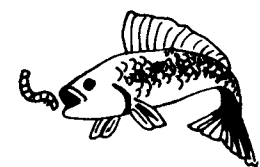
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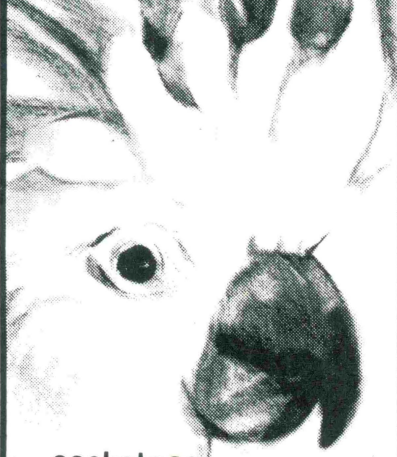
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Young captive
black parrot.



Black parrot habitat on Praslin.

alas, it was not to be. It would not have been the first of Seychelles birds to be reprieved: in 1962 the zosterops (a small inconspicuous insectivorous species) was rediscovered, after being declared extinct in 1936.

The fate of the Seychelles parakeet was sealed by its habit of raiding maize plantations (resulting in it being shot) and in the destruction of its forest habitat during the 19th century. Competition for nest sites from introduced species, especially the common mynah, probably also had an adverse effect by limiting its

population growth. When the ornithologist Michael Nicoll visited Seychelles in 1906, he failed to find the parakeet. Its extinction must have occurred during the closing years of the 19th century. ●

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HANDFED FROM EGG, Blue and gold, and Military macaws, Double yellow heads, White capped Pionus. Reasonable. Also mature female black swan. Wanted to buy: Luzon bleeding heart females, yellow nape females. George Lackey, Texas. Phone (512) 787-1479.

LEADBEATER COCKATOO BABIES (Major Mitchell), domestically bred, handfed, will be weaned mid-July. Call A. Chandler, (213) 454-6971. Los Angeles area.

3 BOOKS—The Cordon Bleu, The Fire Finch, Green Singing Finch. Each covers complete step-by-step care and breeding instructions for cage or aviary. \$5.00 each. (Please specify) Postpaid - handfeeding baby finches, formula and easy-to-follow directions, \$2.50. Gretchen Barker, 7837 Gladstone, White City, Oregon 97503.

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HANDFED Green wing macaws, Moluccan and Umbrella cockatoos, others... S.A.S.E. for list. WANTED, Banksian hen. Bill Rodgers, P.O. Box 822, Gibsonton, FL 33534. Phone (813) 677-1137.

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WANTED — Lutino ringneck parakeet. Mature female. Iris Finz, Star Route Box 198, Dulzura, CA 92017. Ph. (619) 468-3660.

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