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Introduction to the Psittacula Family

(Asian parakeets)

by

Fred & Lyrae Perry
Corona, California

The *Psittacula* family is commonly referred to as the Asian parakeets, and comprise some of the most elegantly dressed birds of the psittacines. Their range is throughout India, Southern Asia, Indonesia, parts of Africa, and Malaysia. They are forest dwellers as a rule, but some do prefer the semi-open country at the edges of forests. They are known to eat various fruits, seeds, legumes, berries, blossoms and "bugs" endemic to their areas. They are however, opportunistic, and soon learn to take advantage of cultivated crops and orchards. They all have the long graduated tail, characteristic of parakeets.

These birds make very pleasant aviary subjects, and are generally very prolific breeders as well. The breeding and maintenance of these birds is not much different from one family member to the next. The care needed is basically the same as for other tropical and sub-tropical birds. Almost everyone who has ever had birds has encountered or kept at least one member of this beautiful family. Very few aviculturists, though, are aware that the *Psittacula* family comprises so many members. There is a fair amount of diversity in the color patterns, which can be somewhat misleading, but closer examination reveals only slight differences, and affirms taxonomic classifications. In addition, the personality traits, courtship displays, etc., of each are only slightly different.

The Asian parakeets are spring breeders, and the breeding season usually starts with the ringnecks and Alexandrines in late January and early February. The rest of the family follows suit through the spring, culminating with the Malabars in late March or April.

The courtship displays are all quite similar and are very interesting to watch. Having a "headache" most of the year, the hens rule the roost, with the males showing good sense and staying out of the way, for the hens are not to be trifled with and have on occasion been known to kill. With the advent of the breeding season, and consequent change in attitude on the part of the females, the males work up the courage to approach, display, feed, and finally mate with the hens.

In our breeding operation we use two sizes of nest boxes. They are both the "grandfather clock" style. For the majority of Asian parakeets, a 9" x 9" x 24" deep box is used. For larger parakeets, such as Derbyans and Alexandrines, we use a 12" x 12" x 24", or 30" x 24" deep box. The sizes may seem small to some, but it has been our experience that the smaller box is more readily accepted, and is adequate to hold even a large clutch of babies.

In approximately two to three weeks, two to six eggs are laid (depending on species) at intervals of one about every other day. Incubation is started with the laying of the second egg. If the parents are given an adequate supply of soft foods, they are all excellent parents, and will generally raise the whole clutch without difficulty. There are those who successfully raise babies on a diet limited to seed, but a greater success and consistency can be obtained with a more varied diet.

Indian Ringnecked Parakeet

The most familiar and prolific member of the *Psittacula* family is the Indian ringneck. They are inhabitants of India, the Middle East and Singapore,

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and are somewhat larger than a cockatiel. The body color is a beautiful shade of green. Males have a black chin and neck ring below which is a rose-pink collar. They are sometimes referred to as the "rose-ringed parakeet." Hens lack the neck rings altogether.

The bird we commonly refer to as the Indian ringneck is really one of two subspecies: *P.k. borealis*, which occurs throughout Northern India along the Himalayan foothills, and parts of Nepal, Burma, and West Pakistan, or *P.k. manillensis*, which has a slightly more restricted range through the Indian peninsula, Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), and was introduced in Singapore many years ago. Both of these subspecies have been introduced to various other islands as well.

For the beginner, looking for his first pair of "real birds", the Indian ringneck is hard to beat. It is easily bred, and is extremely hardy. It is the perfect 'step-up' from cockatiels and budgies.

For the more adventuresome (and solvent), there are color varieties and new mutations on the horizon enough to satisfy anyone. At the present, some of the color mutations (in approximate order of availability) are, first, lutinos, which are a gorgeous yellow; powder blue, true albinos (all white), olive or grey-greens, cinnamons, and various types of peds. There are also "splits" available, which are not usually as expensive as the birds which display the color mutation. A "split" is a bird that carries a gene coded to produce a color mutation in its offspring but which does not display that particular color itself. Splits offer those with limited pocket-books an opportunity to acquire a color mutation at a fairly reasonable cost.

Continues on page 26

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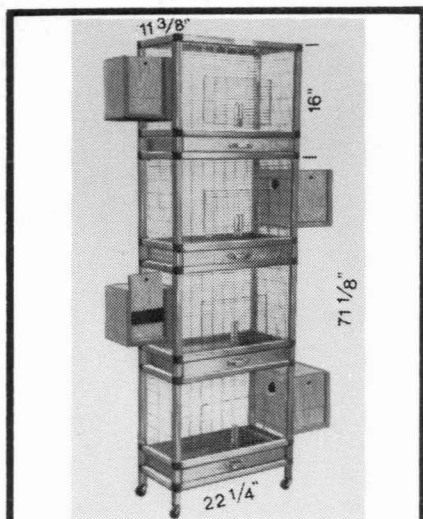
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African Ringneck Parakeet

In spite of the prolific and tenacious nature of the Indian ringneck, it is not the nominate species. That distinction is reserved for the African ringneck parakeet, *Psittacula krameri krameri*. The African ringneck heads the list as the most widely distributed of all the psittacines. It is, however, a most maligned little bird. Being somewhat smaller and quite similar to the Indian ringneck in coloration, it is very often mistaken for the Indian and has been interbred frequently. It is really an entirely different bird, and these differences are readily apparent when the two are viewed together. The African ringneck is far more gracefully proportioned and the color is a richer blueish green. They are not as commonly bred in this country, and there have been reports of this bird being somewhat difficult to breed. We have not found this to be true. We have noticed, though, that many 'pairs' that are unwilling to go to nest are mixed, Indian and African. These matings nearly always fail, since the birds really prefer their own kind. When mated properly, the Africans have been just as willing to go to nest as our Indians, and are just as devoted to raising their babies. Another subspecies of African ringneck is not imported into this country, although it may have been years ago. That bird is *P.k. parvovistris*, and is described as being a much larger bird. Very little else about this particular bird is known or reported.

Plum-headed Parakeet

Who could forget their first glimpse of a plumhead parakeet (*P. cyanocephala*)? It is, without a doubt, one of the most beautiful birds in the world. Males sport a fuschia colored head, which has an overlay of iridescent blue at the nape. They have a black chin and neck ring, below which is a turquoise blue band covering the hind-neck. This otherwise yellowish-green bird captivates anyone who views it. The long blue tapering tail is tipped with cream white. Unfortunately, most photographs fall short of capturing the iridescent colors. Plumheads are dimorphic in head coloration when mature. Females have a soft grey colored head, and no neck rings. They are fairly prolific breeders, and prove to be excellent parents.

Blossom-headed Parakeet

The blossomhead Parakeet, *P. roseata*, is very seldom correctly identified and is most often confused with the plumhead parakeet. It is equally pretty, although all of the colors take on more of a pastel appearance. The adult males have true pink feathers on the head, and a much heavier overlay of iridescent blue than any other member of the *Psittacula* family. The body color is a bright apple-green, wings are slightly darker green. Males have a maroon colored "bloodpatch" on the wings. Blossomheads, too, are dimorphic. The hens have a soft, pastel grey head. Both males and females have the long blue tapering tail, which is tipped with a cream yellow color. More often than not, it is the hen plumheads which are confused with the hen blossomheads. This problem is easily resolved...blossomhead hens have a small maroon "bloodpatch" on the wings, plumhead hens do not. Blossomheads are as easy to breed as plumheads, and also are good parents. These birds are the smallest member of the *Psittacula* family.

Alexandrine Parakeet

Looking like nothing more than a giant ringneck, the Alexandrine parakeet deserves closer scrutiny, for it is much more than that. It is distributed throughout much of India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indochina, and the Andaman Islands. There are five separate forms, although we generally see only two in this country: the nominate species *Psittacula eupatria eupatria*, and *P. e. nipalensis*. Both have only subtle differences, but the distinction is made based on the size — *P. e. nipalensis* is larger than *P. e. eupatria*. Males have an unusually long and graceful tail that balances the huge head and bill. Females have a smaller head and beak, and are more graceful in appearance. The males have the familiar black chin and neck ring, and have a wide rose-pink neck band. Both sexes have red to maroon "bloodpatches" on the wings. These birds are one of the more intelligent parakeets, and are steady, dependable breeders, worthy of consideration as an aviary bird. They will usually double clutch, if the first clutch of babies is pulled in for hand feeding at about ten days.

Slaty-headed Parakeet

Another *Psittacula* family member which is enjoying a fresh round of popularity is the slatyheaded parakeet,

P. Himalayana. These birds are from the colder highland climates of the Himalayan foothills of Northern India, Afghanistan, Northern portions of Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Southwestern China. There are two distinct forms, the nominate species, *P. b. himalayana*, which is larger than *P. b. finschii*. We have more commonly seen the latter imported in recent years, but there are some of the *P. b. himalayana* available from time to time. These birds have suffered in much the same manner as the Indian and African ringnecks, in that they have been confused and in some cases interbred. We should make every effort possible to keep these two separate and distinct from each other. The basic body color is a soft leaf-green, and both males and females have a slate-grey head and full neckring. Both also have the red and yellow beak, but the sexes are in fact dimorphic. The males have a maroon colored "bloodpatch" on the wings, while this is usually absent in females. As would be expected, *P. b. himalayana* and *P. b. finschii* are slightly different in coloration from each other as well. The most striking feature of these birds is the exceptionally long tail. In two year old males the tails measure between 15 and 18 inches long. This beautiful tail is a violet blue on the dorsal side, and yellowish-orange on the underside. *P. b. himalayana* has a cream-white tip, and *P. b. finschii* has a yellowish tip. They are very good parents, and consistently average four to five babies per clutch.

Moustached Parakeet

The moustached parakeet has been frequently imported over the years, but to date has not been bred in sufficient numbers to be considered "well established." They have never really achieved the popularity they deserve, and only recently have become quite popular as handfed pets. They have a calm and friendly nature, but should be first established here before any birds are allowed to be sent out for the pet trade. There are at least eight different forms of the moustached parakeet. Five of the eight have dimorphic bill coloration, i.e. males have red bills, and hens have black bills. In the remaining three forms both sexes have red bills. It is interesting to note that the three subspecies with monomorphic bill coloration are often grouped together and referred to as the "Java parakeet". Only one of the three is in fact from the island of Java. The other two are from the

Photos on next 2 pages,
text continued on page 30



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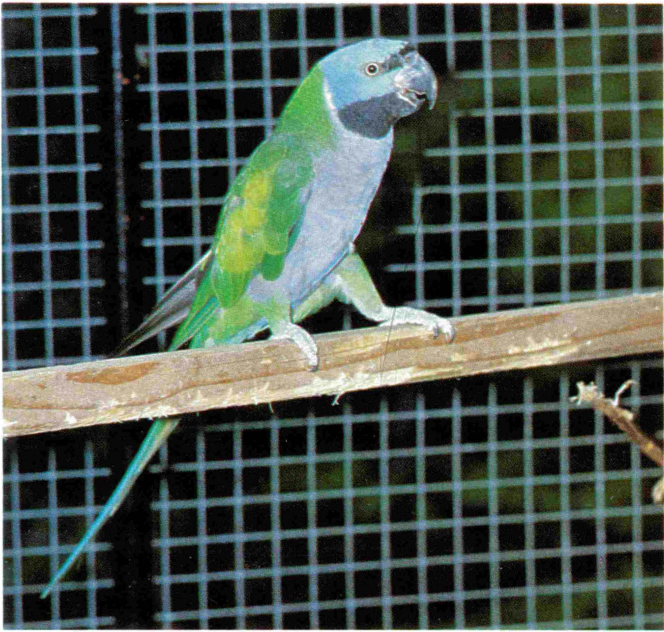
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Photo by George D. Dodge and Dale R. Thompson



The moustached parakeet is similar to but much smaller than the Derbyan. The dark bill is characteristic of the female in 5 of the eight subspecies while the males have a bright red beak.

Photo by Alfred Perry



*This slaty-headed parakeet is a male of the smaller, more common subspecies *P. b. finschii*.*

Photo by Alfred Perry



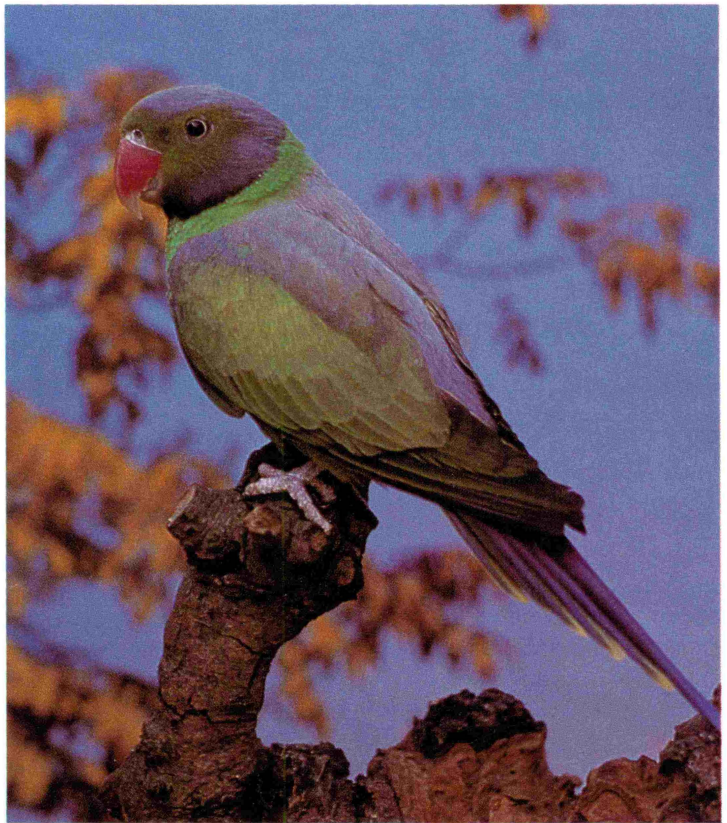
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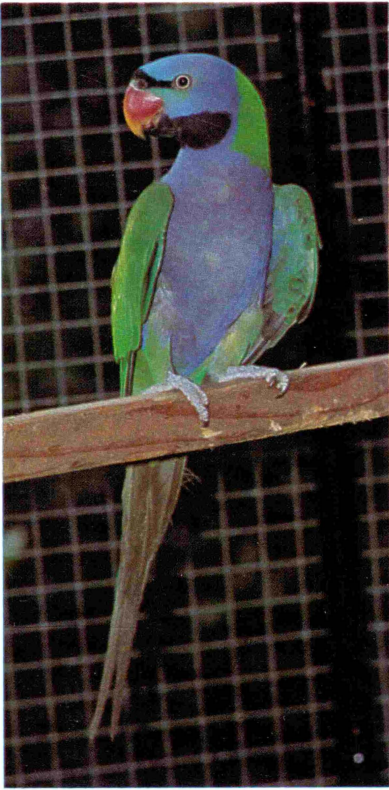
A pair of Alexandrine parakeets. Note the massive beak.

In the Malabar parakeet both the male and the female sport neck rings. The male, of course, has the bright red beak.

Photo courtesy of Sheldon Dingle



The Layard's parakeet is almost unknown to present day American aviculture although several pairs were around a few years ago.



The Derbyan parakeet is a fine aviary subject but only if you have stout aviaries and no close neighbors. They are industrious chewers with vigorous vocal chords.



The plum-headed parakeet is a very beautiful, usually shy aviary bird.

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Kangean and Karimundjawa islands in Indonesia. The bird from Java, *P. alexandri*, is the nominate species, although we have very seldom had this bird in captivity. The birds we see most often are quite similar in appearance, but are definitely dimorphic in bill coloration. Those two subspecies are *P. a. major*, and *P. a. faciata*, which has the larger distribution. They have a heavy black 'moustache' crossing the cheeks, hence the name. The underbelly is a light turquoise blue, and the upper breast is a salmon pink. The wings and back are a lovely emerald green, and both sexes have yellowish wing patches. The face is a soft grey, with an iridescent blue overlay.

Derbyan Parakeet

The Derbyan parakeet, *P. derbiana*, is one of the largest parakeets in the world, and one of the most beautiful as well. The Derbyan is a native to the coniferous forests in and around the Himalayas in mainland China. It is somewhat unusual in that it prefers a colder environment than some of the other members of the *Psittacula* family. It is adapted very well for cooler climates and is more resistant to frostbite than its more tropical cousins. The black markings on Derbyan parakeets are almost identical to its smaller cousin, the moustache parakeet. Derbyan parakeets are approximately twice the size, and the chest coloration is different. The Derbyan has a dusty lavender colored breast and underbelly, which is a rather rare color in birds, but which is most pleasing. The body and wings are a deep emerald green, and the wing patches are yellowish green. Their long tapering tail is royal blue. They are very good breeders, and we have found them to be exceptional parents. They will double-clutch if the babies are pulled in for hand feeding at about ten days old. They require a bit more substantial housing arrangements than most of the other members of this family due to their size. We have successfully kept them in 1/2" x 1/2" welded wire, but we recommend that at least 1/2" x 1" welded wire be used instead, and cover all exposed wood — they have powerful beaks that can turn a 2 x 4 into matchsticks in short order.

Long-tailed Parakeet

One of our favorites is the longtailed parakeet, *P. longicauda*. There are five distinct subspecies, two of which are occasionally imported into this country. They occur in Borneo, Sumatra, the

Andaman and Nicobar islands, and the Malay peninsula. They are prolific and dominate those areas they occupy. Not very many people have had the pleasure of viewing a male longtail in full adult plumage — it is a real treat. The different subspecies vary in color slightly, and in size, but the basic body color is yellowish green, rump is varyingly tinged with blue (depending on subspecies). The bird we see most often is the nominate species, *P. longicauda longicauda*, and is distinguished by an almost perfect circle of bright green on the crown. The face and cheeks are brilliant coral with a blackish-green moustache that is quite a bit thinner than that of the moustache parakeet's. The wings are also bright green on the outside and the underside is a brilliant yellow. The tail is very thin, being about 1/4" wide the majority of its length. It is a deep royal blue. The hens are not as spectacular in coloration as the males, but are certainly not drab. Longtail hens are bright emerald green over most of the body, with only the slightest touch of coral on the cheeks. Their tiny moustache is a very deep shade of green, and the bill is dark brown, whereas the male's bill is red at maturity. Unfortunately, success has been very limited in establishing this bird in captivity. Hopefully, someday we will see this bird as commonly kept as the ringnecks.

Layard's Parakeet

The Layard's or emerald collared parakeets, *P. calthorpeae*, are also rare in this country, but do not seem to be in danger of extinction in their native Sri Lanka (Ceylon). At one time, there had been a few pairs in this country, but the Layard's was not established, and they have not been imported in many years due to a ban by the government of Sri Lanka.

Malabar Parakeet

The dusty blue Malabar parakeet, *P. columboides*, is rarely seen in aviculture, but is a real prize. The colors are soft and diffused. These birds are dimorphic: males when mature have a coral colored bill, and the hens have a black bill. This is one of the few members of the *Psittacula* family wherein both male and female have full neck rings. The hens tend to be more of a 'sea-green', whereas the males are a dusty blue-green. Adult males have an additional neck ring that is a most beautiful iridescent turquoise. They do not seem to be difficult to breed, but there are not many available and the gene-pool at present is very limited, so

Careful breeding is a must if we are to maintain strong and healthy birds.

Blyth's Parakeet

There are some members of this family which we have not seen in aviculture, but which deserve to be mentioned. *P. caniceps*, the Blyth's parakeet, the giant of the family, is one such bird. It is described as having an all green body, with the markings on the head and neck very similar to the Derbyan parakeet. The bill color is dimorphic, males having a red bill and the hens a black one. One very important difference that would distinguish it from the Derbyan is the color of the iris, which is described as being orange-red, the Derbyans have white-ish gold irises. The Blyth's parakeet is found in the Nicobar islands, and prefers the treetops. Not very much else is known about this bird, but indications are that its habits would be similar to the longtail parakeets.

Extinct or Vanishing *Psittacula*

The Seychelles Parakeet, *P. wardi*, and the Newtons parakeet, *P. exul*, are listed as becoming extinct sometime

during the 1800's. Very little is known about these birds' habits, and what is known is very sketchy at best. Both of these birds fell victim to indiscriminate shooting, and the clearing of virgin forests, i.e., destruction of habitat. The most recent member of the *Psittacula* family to join this list is the Mauritius parakeet, *P. echo*. The Mauritius, or echo parakeet, as it is sometimes referred to, is for all intents and purposes extinct. At last word, there remained only five individuals which were part of a larger group that was captured and protected by the government of Mauritius in the hopes that the species could be saved. There had not been any emphasis on captive breeding until the population sank far below that which would have provided a gene-pool sufficient to re-establish the species. Sadly, the efforts have not been successful.

The government of Mauritius certainly had the right idea, captive breeding is the answer, but they were not in time to save the echo parakeet. There can be many other birds added to this roster if we choose to ignore the warning signs. The most important thing we as aviculturists must do is develop and practice sound husbandry techniques to

firmly establish the birds we now have available. Today's "junk birds" are going to be tomorrow's rarity. Regardless of how much we all want to believe that these birds can be left to their own devices in the wild, and survive (as many wildlife groups believe), all indications point to exactly the opposite! We cannot ignore the problem of habitat destruction — this is the real enemy. Those who are attempting to save the wild habitats of the world have only been marginally successful so far. Finding the balance-point between the needs of the people and the needs of the flora and fauna of the Third World countries, where most of the *Psittacines* come from, is going to be the greatest challenge humanity has ever had to face — I hope we are up to it.

We may not be able to rechannel the course of 'progress' in time to save very much, but affluent as we are, we are charged with a duty to preserve and protect what we can. We have an opportunity to make a difference if each aviculturist would choose one type of bird, or perhaps one family of birds to specialize in, we would be able to amass enough information to help save many species. ●

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