

# Breeding Attempts of the Greater Vasa Parrot

(*Coracopsis vasa*)

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Greater Vasa Parrots (*Coracopsis vasa*) are unique and enchanting birds, although drably, dully and funearily plumaged in shades of soot, charcoal, and plain old dirty grey and blessed with a stentorian, unvoiled hinge/demented donkey type voice. They are not exactly birds which delight either the eye or ear, however, their lack of rainbow hues and dulcet tones are the only negative things that can be said about them. Large, well proportioned and (in repose), elegant, they are active and engaging birds with very distinct characters and behavior.

Native to Madagascar and the Comoros Islands, they are described by Forshaw (Parrots of the World, 1973) as being "found in the forests and savannah below 1,000 metres, being more abundant at lower altitudes (Rand, 1936)", and on the Comoros "Benson (1960) found that they are largely dependent on evergreen forests above 300 metres, frequently visiting open country to feed but probably not remaining there permanently".

All of our birds appear to be of the nominate form *Coracopsis vasa vasa*, which are confined in the wild to eastern Madagascar.

Salt Lake City is fortunate in having an avicultural society which maintains an Endangered Species Committee. One of the functions of this committee is to acquire rare birds for placement in one of three regional zoological collections, in a concerted effort to develop breeding programs

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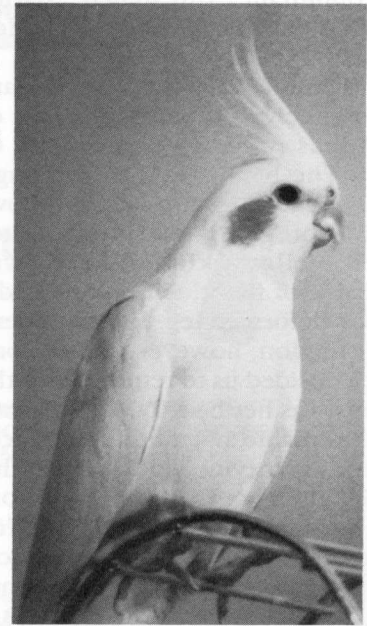
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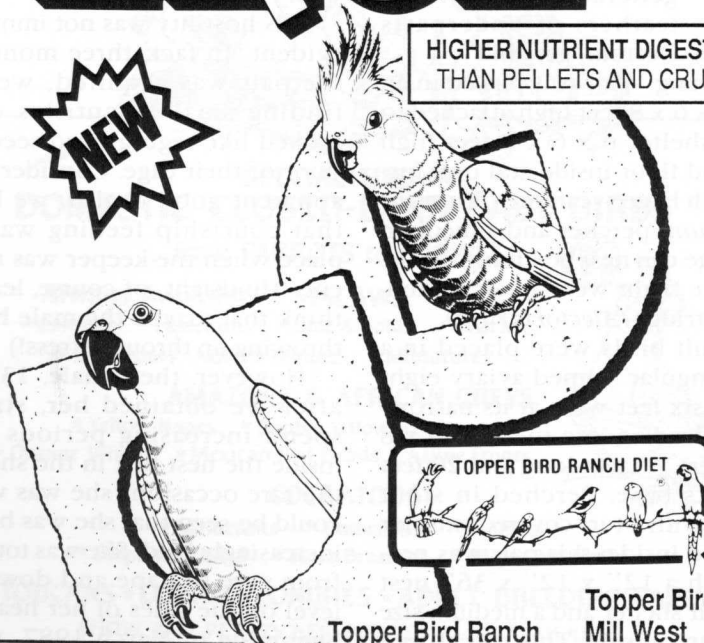
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for these species. Greater Vasa Parrots were selected as the initial project species, primarily because of their (limited) island distribution with its concomitant "threatened" status, its avicultural rarity and the sudden flux of availability.

With funds raised by the Endangered Species Committee, a pair of birds was purchased in August of 1986. The hen of this pair, though clearly bonded to her mate and showing her breeding condition in her naked, yellow-skinned head, was incapable of flight, tailless and had a grossly deformed leg. Her most serious affliction, however, and the one which decided us to return her to the vendor was her heavily pied appearance. Available avicultural references and the "grapevine" indicate that this partial albinism is indicative of ongoing, increasing and debilitating metabolic dysfunction. Her replacement, a bird in good, though non-breeding, condition was promptly sent upon her return.

A second, immaculate pair was obtained from the Lin-Deco Bird Farm in Florida on October 3rd, 1986 and acquired by the Tracy Aviary.

All of these birds were surgically sexed prior to shipment, as there is no sexual dimorphism apparent. The second pair was not so large as the first and gave us all the clear impression of being quite young birds, although they did not display the juvenile plumage described by Forshaw, "general plumage more brownish, feathers of underparts edged with chestnut, grey bill".

The "young" pair was placed in an aviary 10 x 6 x 8 feet high attached to a heated shelter 6 x 6 x 8 feet high with a sand floor inside and out, furnished with large sycamore (*Platanus americanum*) perches and a medium size garbage can nest box hung inside. Sharing the flight were a pair of Red-legged Partridge (*Alectoris rufa*).

The adult birds were placed in a large, triangular shaped aviary eight feet high, six feet wide at its narrowest point (leading into the 6 x 15 x 8 foot shelter), 30 feet long and 20 feet wide at its base. Perched in stout Sycamore with a turf covered exterior and sanded inside, this pair was provided with a 12" x 12" x 36" nest box in their shelter and a medium size garbage can outside. This pair shared their flight with two male Black Korhaan Bustards (*Afra afroides*).

The young pair have always been compatible. They have been seen at

times playing like puppies, rolling around on the ground, growling and playing with twigs and with each other. They are much more frequently vocal than the adult pair and seem prepared to vigorously feed each other at any time of the year. The male (who is a little larger than the female in this pair) boisterously bounces around from perch to perch, braying loudly as he goes, lands suddenly by the female, grabs her bill and pumps his head in a feeding manner. Copulation has never been seen, neither bird has ever become bald and, despite long periods spent in the nest box, no eggs have been laid by this pair.

The adult pair have totally different characters. Although not nervous, they are much more secretive and sedate than the young pair (possibly due to being wild-caught adults as opposed to wild-caught babies or juveniles). The pair has never bonded. Worse, the female has intermittently harrassed the male into oven-ready baldness over his entire body, i.e., the male has plucked himself down to the skin as a stress reaction to the female's attitude. We have twice removed him from the aviary, whereupon he has allowed his plumage to regrow perfectly. We have also tried removing the female from the aviary with a similar regrowth of feathers in the male. Curiously, she has never been seen to attack the male physically, simply intimidate him with voice and posture.

This hostility was not immediately evident. In fact, three months after the pair was acquired, we started finding small quantities of what looked like regurgitated seed on the floor of their cage. Considering their apparent good health, we believed that courtship feeding was taking place when the keeper was not present. (Hindsight, of course, leads us to think that maybe the male had been throwing up through stress!)

However, the female, 13 months after we obtained her, started to spend increasing periods of time inside the nest box in the shelter. On the rare occasions she was visible, it could be seen that she was becoming increasingly bald. She was totally bald from cere to nape and down to eye level on the sides of her head by the beginning of March 1987, with the exposed skin a creamy yellow color. No eggs were laid though, and the hen left the nest box mid-summer.

She was again noted as starting to

go bald in January of 1988 and to be spending time in the nest box. Little was seen of her over the next few months beyond a regular checking on her health and appearance, since she virtually lived in the nest. The male's condition again deteriorated at this time to the point where we had to remove him in late May, as he spent all day hiding behind the door leading to the outside flight and had plucked himself extensively over his body. Four weeks later, the female finally left the nest, still bald, and abandoning a clutch of three porcelain white and shiny, almost spherical eggs.

The male Vasa molted in isolation and grew perfect plumage prior to us returning him to his mate. Actually, we played "musical cages" and moved the young pair to the old pair's flight and put the old male into the "new" flight by himself for a couple of weeks, to try to induce territorially assertive, if not dominant, behavior when he again met his mate. This did seem to work to some degree for in mid-September a note was made that the male was showing aggression to the female!

However, this assertiveness was only transitory for by late November he again had to be removed. This time he did not regrow all of his plucked plumage and continued to look raggedy. He was returned to the hen in early February of 1989, still in rough feather, but for the first time with the naked skin around his eyes (periorbital ring) a pale cream color and with his bill bone white — paler than the hen's.

The hen actually seemed pleased to see him and became quite vocal for days afterwards.

In late February it was noted that while defecating and at other times, the male's cloaca became everted, protruding as much as one and a half inches from his body for up to 15 seconds at a time. This was no cause for alarm, rather the reverse since it would seem to indicate an improvement in the sexual conditioning of the male (cloacal prominence in breeding is one of the peculiarities of this species). We were, therefore, even more encouraged to note that he was starting to lose feathers from his forehead in early March, exposing yellowish skin.

In early April, the female again started to spend time in the nest box (actually a medium sized garbage can this time), raising all of our hopes. The male, though, started to assume

his "dog in the manger" demeanor, hiding behind the door and looking continuously miserable, but this time we left him where he was for the time being.

May 1st an egg was found on the floor of the aviary. Rather than disturb the hen who we believed to be incubating, we decided to place the egg in an artificial incubator — at least until we could establish its viability. Late May the hen left the nest, leaving a clutch of three infertile eggs. The egg in the incubator had also proved infertile.

At this stage, we started looking around for a replacement male for this apparently terminally incompatible pair. After an extensive search and considerable telephoning, a bird was finally tracked down and obtained from Pet Farm in Florida.

A fine bird in perfect feather and at least six years old, the new male was initially quarantined for a three week period before being transferred to his permanent aviary. After living there alone for a further three weeks, we introduced the hen on September 20th. No problems, so far.

This male has not yet been intimidated by the hen and the pair has actually been seen sitting together, which was never seen with the previous male. So, as always, hopes are high for next year!

At the AFA Convention in Phoenix this year, I had the pleasure of meeting with Will and Jerry Pace who also have a pair of Greater Vasas. Their pair actually went to nest in their overwintering cage, which is only 2 x 3 x 3 feet, using an African Grey nest box with cedar shavings as nesting material. Jerry tells me the male in this pair is also a plucker and it was only he who was seen to be bald. A clutch of three eggs was laid, all proving fertile but sadly, on June 10th, the entire clutch was smashed by the pair when they were distressed by visitors.

The Paces were feeding a very wide range of foods to their birds including cooked rice and beans, alternating with a fruit and vegetable mix, Purina puppy chow (beef and chicken) and Pro-Plan high protein feed. No seeds were given. The diet has recently been changed, however, to reduce the protein level and introduce a seed mixture.

As recently as 1988, Greater Vasa Parrots were bred for the first time in captivity at the "Birds International" facility of Mr. Antonio de Dios at Manila in the Philippines. ●

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