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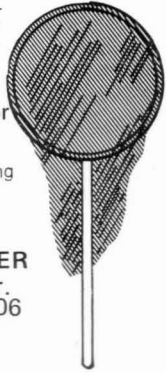
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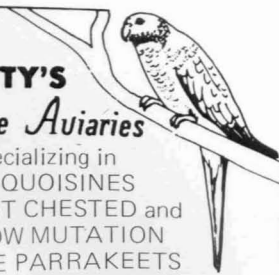
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Agapornis and the Amateur

by Sharon F. Clause

Once introduced to the *Agapornis*, the aviculturist frequently decides to add this lively little hookbill to his or her collection of birds. While it tends to be hardy, its needs differ from those of the softbill and even other hookbills. Instead of learning those differences by trial and error, the aviculturist may benefit from this guide to the selection and care of the lovebird.

SELECTION

Once decided to keep lovebirds, you need to select the perfect specimen. The best chance of success is with a young, healthy, Peach-faced or pied Peach-faced Lovebird. The Peach-faced is one of the easiest lovebirds to keep. Its engaging personality and lively manner will give you much entertainment. Choose a young bird, one with light markings across the brow, and, if possible, dark color at the base of the beak. A young bird more readily adjusts to you, your routine, and the diet you provide. The younger the bird, the easier it is to tame and train.

HEALTH

The Lovebird's health can be partly determined by observation, and partly by the seller's reputation. The bird should be alert, lively, sleek-feathered, and plump. Check both ends: eyes should be clear, and feathers around the vent should be clean. Avoid the "tame" bird huddling on a perch with its feathers fluffed out, eyes closed, head drooping or tucked under a wing. Nature's way is to hide weakness. By the time a bird displays signs of illness, it is often too ill to be helped. Because of this, any newly acquired bird should be quarantined in a part of the house separate from the other birds for a minimum of thirty days, to avoid introducing disease into your collection. If your bird should show signs of illness, try to keep it warm and quiet in a hospital cage, feed honey water, and make its favorite foods and seed easily available. Try to feed it a warm gruel. Ask advice of a veterinarian, or a fellow aviculturist. Keep a supply of pet antibiotics on hand and learn how to administer them before a health problem arises.

SEXING

Whether you choose one lovebird for a pet, or a pair, you will want to determine the sex of your bird. We all would. Un-

fortunately, only another lovebird knows for sure! Generally, the female has a broader head, shoulders, and pelvic span than the male. The first two characteristics can be observed, the third felt. To feel the pelvic area, hold the bird with the back against your palm, thumb and little finger capturing the wings against the body. The head will protrude between your second and third fingers. This leaves the belly area clear for you to insert your finger between the bird's legs. You should be able to feel two points of bone just in front of the tail. If the points are extremely close together, the bird may be a male. If you can almost insert your little finger between the points, it may be a female. You have a 50% chance of being right!

HOUSING

Choice of housing ranges from a parakeet cage to an outdoor aviary! Your purpose for acquiring the lovebird or birds will determine your choice. A large parakeet cage should be roomy enough for one bird, since your pet will be free part of each day. For breeding purposes, the double cage (36" x 15" x 24" high) will do for a pair. The habit of chewing should be considered if you build your own cage. Wood parts should be wire covered, or else plan on replacing them as the bird destroys them.

The lovebird can be an escape artist. My first Peach-faced was. He would slip head and shoulders between two bars, expel his breath, and wriggle forward a little. Then he drew a deep breath and popped through the bars like a cork. He popped in and out at will, destroying everything he got his beak into.

Because of his habit of chewing, the lovebird must be separated from all other types of birds. He is capable of maiming or killing any bird smaller or more docile than himself. Never house them with finches, canaries, parakeets, or even cockatiels, if you value your other birds.

In addition to a cage, you need hoppers for seed and gravel, perches, and a watering device. Size and type of hoppers are determined by the size of the cage. Provide various perch widths for the bird to exercise his feet. Hamster water tubes provide closed systems which controls evaporation, hang outside the cage for easy servicing, and do not allow the birds to contaminate the water. However, the

bird must learn to drink from the tube, so also provide bowls of water at first. The tube must be checked frequently, as a sticky valve will create a vacuum, withholding water from the bird. A good type of gravity flow open drinker resembles a Mason jar turned upside down and screwed into a water dispenser.

DIET

Once settled in its new home, feed your bird a good basic seed mix of finch mix, parakeet mix, and wild bird seed. Health grit is vital for digestion. If you provide fresh, insecticide-free greens, shredded carrot, and fresh corn kernels, you should not need to give vitamins, although vitamin supplements will not harm the bird. High protein dry baby food is a good supplement. Cuttlebone and mineral block should always be available. Millet spray is always a treat. Whatever diet you choose should be maintained, as the bird's digestive system will adjust to it.

BREEDING

The time may come when you and nature decide it's time for your lovebirds to breed. If possible, provide a group situ-

ation, and allow the birds to choose mates. One male + one female does not necessarily equal a breeding pair! In the fall, provide a nest box (6" x 6" x 10" high), nesting materials, privacy, and stand back. The birds attack the materials, shredding them into strips softened by chewing or soaking in water. Materials include palm fronds, newspaper, dried grasses, and straw. Whatever you use should be fibrous and uncontaminated by insecticides or pesticides. The lovebird will stuff the box with material, forming a tunnel through it to a cave-like opening.

Typically the female lays 4 to 6 eggs, and incubates them for 17 to 19 days. (If your pair lay 8 eggs or more, and incubates too many days, congratulations! You have paired up two females.) The male helps incubate, but spends much of his time guarding the nest box entrance.

When the eggs hatch, both parents feed the young. Provide foods easy for the parents to digest, like dry high-protein baby cereal, oat groats, lukewarm oatmeal, or nestling food. The babies fledge in five or six weeks. Parents continue care of the young until they are weaned two weeks later.

If your birds allow the eggs to cool, or

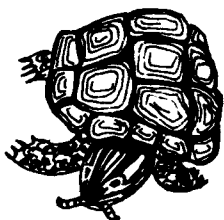
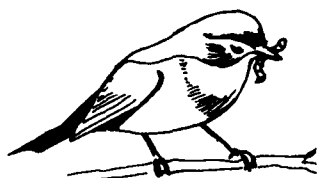
the young to die, be understanding. Parenthood is a shock to the bird with no prior experience to draw upon. By the second or third clutch, they should be able to care for their young. While lovebirds will rest themselves as a rule, take only two or possibly three clutches a year. Parenthood is hard on the bird!

RECOMMENDATIONS

This guide only touches the basics of selecting and caring for the lovebird. There are more complete publications available from your local pet store or library. One of the best ways to become more knowledgeable, however, is to join a specialty bird club with as the African Lovebird Society, an international society which devotes itself to the propagation and care of the *Agapornis*. Members receive a journal published monthly. Another excellent source of information is any bird club in your geographic area. Not only will you meet other "beak freaks", but you will have a wealth of information in the other members. You will never meet a friendlier, more helpful group than the members of bird clubs. They have faced the same experiences as you - and they're eager to share what they've learned! ■

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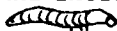


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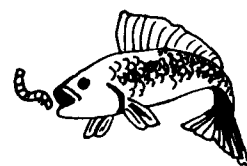
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