



## The Cape Parrot Group

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Old World Aviaries

The Cape Parrot group, as referred to herein, is comprised of the African parrots *Poicephalus robustus*, *P. fuscicollis fuscicollis*, and *P.f. suabelicus*. The common names of these birds are the Cape Parrot, the Brown-necked Parrot, and the Grey-headed Parrot, respectively. Prior to 2005, these birds were all subspecies of the single species *P. robustus*. Based on DNA studies along with morphology, behavior, and ecology, in 2005 *P. robustus* was recognized as an independent species.<sup>1</sup>

### Descriptions, taxonomy, natural history, and conservation

Members of the Cape Parrot group are stocky, medium-sized parrots with large heads and beaks. (*Poicephalus*, from

the Greek, literally means made of head.) They are about 11 to 12 inches long. Weights, depending on sex and species or subspecies, vary from about 225g for a small hen to about 425g for a large male. Adult birds are clearly dimorphic; juveniles prior to the first molt only to the trained eye, if at all. In mature birds, females have orange coloration above the cere and often more broadly on the head; males do not. In juveniles, the orange coloration on the head is present in both sexes.

Of the studied species within the genus, the group is most closely related to the Jardine's Parrot, *P. guliemi*, with which they form a "superspecies cluster." Hybridization is possible and has been demonstrated in aviculture. Based strictly on

appearance and size, the group also may be closely related to the Yellow-faced Parrot, *P. flavifrons*. However, little is known about this parrot, and no scientific studies have been performed on its relationship to other members of the genus.

### *P. robustus*, the Cape Parrot

*P. robustus* (Figures 1 and 2) is restricted to two limited ranges in the Republic of South Africa (Figure 3) where it occurs in small flocks. It is the only parrot that is endemic to that country. It is most easily distinguished from other members of the Cape Parrot group by a yellowish-green hue to the feathers on the head and neck that is lacking in the other birds.

*P. robustus* is considered to be a specialist both in habitat and diet. It is restricted to montane, mixed, yellowwood forests and nests in dead yellowwood hollows. Although yellowwood fruit makes up the bulk of its diet, it also feeds on other forest kernels and fruits. It is a foraging visitor to surrounding areas, including orchards and gardens.



Figure 1. *P. robustus* hen. Note orange coloration above cere. (Photo courtesy of Peter Oderkerken)



Figure 2. *P. robustus* male. Note absence of orange coloration above cere. (Photo courtesy of Dr. Colleen Downs, The Cape Parrot Working Group).

Although not listed in CITES Appendix 1 or the IUCN Red List, because the parent organizations do not recognize *P. robustus*' taxonomic status as a separate species, it is critically endangered with less than 1600 birds remaining in the wild. Its endangered status is primarily because of the destruction of yellowwood forests. Poaching for the pet trade, predation, and accelerated climate change are also considered to be contributors to the problem. In addition, Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease has recently been discovered in the wild population.<sup>ii</sup>

*P. robustus* is the subject of active conservation efforts including scientific research, habitat improvement, and the promotion of its conservation. Dr. Mike Perrin and his group at the Centre for African Parrot Conservation, University of Kwazulu-Natal, are conducting on-going research on Cape Parrots and African parrots in general. The Cape Parrot Project, under the leadership of Dr. Steve Boyes at the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, is working both to provide nestboxes and to plant trees to preserve existing habitat and establish new reserves. To support this work, please visit the *Save the Cape Parrots of South Africa* page at the World Parrot Trust website at [http://www.parrots.org/index.php/ourwork/home/cape\\_parrot](http://www.parrots.org/index.php/ourwork/home/cape_parrot). The Cape Parrot Working Group, under the leadership of Dr. Colleen Downs at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, is also actively working in conservation. In addition to conducting an annual count, the group's aims include the promotion of: the conservation of the Cape Parrot and its habitat; law enforcement to protect the bird; local, national, and international awareness; and a captive breeding program. For more information about the work of this group or to provide support please visit the groups website at <http://lifesciences.ukzn.ac.za/research/Research-Initiatives/cpwg.aspx>.

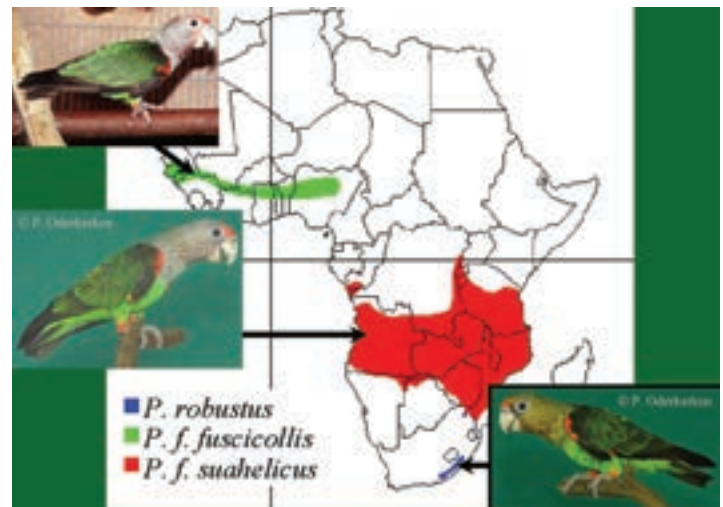


Figure 3. Range map for the Cape Parrot group. (Photo courtesy of Dr. Colleen Downs, The Cape Parrot Working Group.)



### *P.f. fuscicollis*, the Brown-necked Parrot

*P.f. fuscicollis* (Figure 4) has a limited range in sub-Saharan northwestern Africa and is generally scarce in its range. It is a dietary generalist and inhabits low-lying woodlands. Little additional information is available, probably because of the location of its occurrence. Because of its limited range and scarcity in that range, it is considered to be vulnerable.

The head and neck of *P.f. fuscicollis* has brown tones and the orange coloration on the head, wings, and anklets is a bright, intense orange to reddish orange. Mature birds often have more orange coloration than other members of the group.



Figure 4. *P.f. fuscicollis* hen. (Photo courtesy of the Cape Parrot Working Group.)

### *P.f. suahelicus*, the Grey-headed Parrot

*P.f. suahelicus* (Figures 5 and 6) has the broadest range of the members in the Cape Parrot group. It is a dietary generalist and inhabits low-lying woodlands. Although it is relatively scarce in its range, it is considered to be the most secure member of the group because of the extent of its range.

*P. f. suahelicus* is the largest member of the Cape Parrot group. Hens typically have less orange coloration on the head than *P.f. fuscicollis* hens, and, in both sexes, the orange in general is often less intense. The head and neck lack the brown tones of *P.f. fuscicollis* and the yellowish-green tones of *P. robustus*.



Figure 5. *P.f. suahelicus* hen. (Photo courtesy of Peter Oderkerken.)

### Aviculture

The Cape Parrot is present in limited numbers (200+ birds) in South African aviculture and in even more limited numbers in European aviculture. It is not present in U.S. aviculture or, to the best of our knowledge, anywhere in the western hemisphere. However, Brown-necked and Grey-headed Parrots are present in the U.S. and, at least Grey-headed Parrots, in very limited numbers in Canada.

Brown-necked and Grey-headed Parrots are not common in the U.S. However, several breeders are working with them. We have kept both in our aviary since 1994 and started with a pair of imported Brown-necked Parrots that won the U.S. first-breeding award for their previous owner. In our experience they have no special requirements and are typically hardy, healthy birds.

Our pairs are set up in 4' X 4' X 6' California-style cages with relatively large boot-style nestboxes. However, they are not picky about nestboxes. Our first breeding success employed a tiny nestbox provided by the pair's previous owners that would not hold both birds at the same time. They do well on a diet consisting of a seed mix, pellets or Zupreem Primate Diet for those that aren't enamored of pellets, and a variety of produce. They are not picky eaters.

We have bred both imports and domestic birds, including ex-pets. History as a pet does not, in our experience, impede breeding potential, affect parenting ability, or encourage mate aggression, which aggression we have never observed in any of our pairs. However, our males are often defensive towards humans about their cages, including humans that they know well. Clutches are usually two or three eggs with incubation



Figure 6. *P.f. suahelicus* male. (Photo courtesy of Peter Oderkerken.)



Figure 7. Baby Brown-necked Parrots.



Figure 8. The same babies at a later date.

periods typical for medium-sized parrots. Our pairs, which are outside, typically lay once a year but occasionally double clutch. Except for avoiding the coldest months of the year, they are not particularly seasonal. All are good parents. We have never seen aggression towards or injury of babies nor have we ever had to pull early because babies were not being properly cared for.

Babies (Figures 7 and 8) eat well, are easy to handfeed, and have no special formula or supplement requirements. We have successfully raised healthy babies on regular, unsupplemented Roudybush, Kaytee, and Zupreem handfeeding formulas. Weaning is at 4 months give or take.

Brown-necked and Grey-headed Parrots make good pets. They have good talking potential, are typically outgoing, typically do not display aggression towards humans or other birds, and are relatively quiet. We recommend them for apartments. Serious chewing seems to depend on the individual bird. Some are chewers; some aren't. In all the years we have been breeding the birds, we have never received a complaint about one of our babies sold as a pet.

We have experienced good demand for babies as pets. Our handfed, weaned babies are priced at \$1,795, and we usually have deposits before they are fully weaned.

Our friend Jean Pattison (African Queen Aviaries) calls them gentle giants, a description with which we agree.



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- <sup>i</sup> Perrin, M. R., A review of the taxonomic status and biology of the Cape Parrot *Poicephalus robustus*, with reference to the Brown-necked Parrot *P. fuscicollis fuscicollis* and the Grey-headed Parrot *P. f. suabelicus*, Ostrich: Journal of African Ornithology, Volume 76, Issue 3-4, 2005.
- <sup>ii</sup> Downs, Colleen T. (Chair, Cape Parrot Working Group) and Lorina Heart, 16th Annual Parrot Count – Report on the 2013 Cape Parrot Big Birding Day, School of Life Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Scottsville, South Africa.

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