



The Black-headed Caique

AN AUSSIE OVERVIEW

Jade Welch

Black-headed Caique
enjoys a pecan.



Parent reared Caiques

The Caiques (pronounced CAKE in the land down under) have long appealed to Australian aviculturalists and many tell of their desire to keep this species having arisen after seeing them in Parrot reference books many years ago. Their appeal lies in their overall charm, which includes their inquisitive and playing nature and beautifully adorned plumage. It is safe to say that they are widely referred to as clowns for their habit of bounding about the aviary and putting on a range of displays.

Fortunately Caiques are regularly bred within Australia and are now well and truly held in secure numbers. The Black-headed Caique is held in greater numbers than the White-bellied Caique, which is also quite popular. This article though will focus on the keeping and breeding of the Black-headed Caique within Australia and take a look at a mutation that is currently being worked on by a number of breeders. It can be said that much of what is said here about the Black-headed Caique and its care is not dissimilar to the care given to White-bellied Caiques within Australia.

Registration

Whilst native Australian bird species may require registration with a state or territory authority the same cannot be said for the exotic species. Some states have restrictions on a number of bird species entering their borders however this does not apply for the majority of Australian states or Territories. At one stage almost all exotic species with the exception of a small number of commonly held exotics were required to be registered.

These were registered with the National Exotic Bird Registry Scheme or NEBRS as it still commonly referred to. Breeders joined NEBRS and recorded any transactions, breedings or deaths surrounding exotic birds and these records were sent back to a centralised authority at a national level as it was federally controlled and not controlled by states or Territories. NEBRS was eventually dropped and other measures put in place a number of years down the track to prevent any smuggling of species into the country from occurring. Though it is questionable as to whether these measures worked as the newer scheme was and is still voluntary.

Housing

The suspended aviary is by far the most common choice of housing for many species of Parrot within Australia and this too applies for the Black-headed Caique. Although some keep their Black-headed Caiques in conventional aviaries the majority use suspendeds. It is generally recommended by breeders of Black-headed Caiques in Australia that these birds be held as pairs in their own aviary due that the aviary be a minimum length of 3 metres regardless of it being conventional or suspended. In terms of aviaries housed in banks the aviaries adjoining are usually double wired or full partitioned to prevent toe biting etc.

Suspended aviaries are ideal for these canopy dwelling birds that love to bathe and flick their food onto the aviary floor and walls. They will often take a chunk of food, fly to the perch and drop the food item once finished with it. The

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Suspended aviaries housing Caiques in Australia

benefit is that this discarded food and their feces can drop through the aviary floor where adequately sized wire is used and be cleaned up with a high-pressure hose or garden rake.

Below the aviary a floor base of cement works well for cleaning or a well draining, easy to rake substrate surrounded by concrete to prevent intrusion from rodents. As snakes, mice and rats can be quite an issue within Australia a good vermin wall may be required. This usually goes below the substrate and adjoins a skirt around the aviaries. This coupled with a smaller aperture wire works well.

Whilst Australia is quite an arid environment we do get bouts of snow in some areas. Despite this many do not need to move their birds in and out of warmed enclosures or sheds as per seasons. Some may utilise a clear wrap around the aviary, heated perches or heated nestboxes but Caiques are hardy birds and don't appear to require this in the majority of areas in Australia. On the other end of the spectrum many breeders install sprinklers and misters as well as utilising double roofs to aid in heat control.

At one stage Black-headed Caiques were exceptionally rare and sold at \$14000 a pair. At such an investment it was crazy not to install a walkway and as such regardless of the value of a bird it is and always has been good practice to install a walk way. Fortunately the majority of aviculturalist's utilize these walkways. A good size for walkway is 1.5 metres wide which allows for a wheel barrow to enter for cleaning.

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Nestbox used for Caiques with camera

The walkway is also a good place to store excess water/food bowls, a blackboard for record keeping and a range of other essentials. Many breeders utilise this area also to attach the nest boxes to the aviaries. This makes checking nest boxes far easier whilst breeding is taking place. At this point it is important to add that the majority of breeders leave their nest boxes up year round so as pairs can roost in their box both during the day and overnight.

In terms of stimulation breeders add ropes, swinging perches and toys for birds to play and plenty of tree branches. The bonus with the tree branches is often they are also providing food to the birds such as fruits, flowers, seeds, bark etc. Caiques love to clamber about the branches and hang upside down as they do on the chains and ropes. Ropes require regular checks, as they can become a danger as they deteriorate and begin fraying.

A large shallow bowl of water for bathing and one for drinking is often provided. It is often found that despite this the Black-headed Caique will still dunk food in both and so regular changing is required. Water is often delivered on an automated timer via piping and topped up as required or as programmed. On hot days this is often increased as these birds quickly empty the bowls.

Foodstuffs are usually provided under the sheltered section of the aviary near the nest box and back perch. For some breeders the preference is to utilise swivel feeders that they can swing in



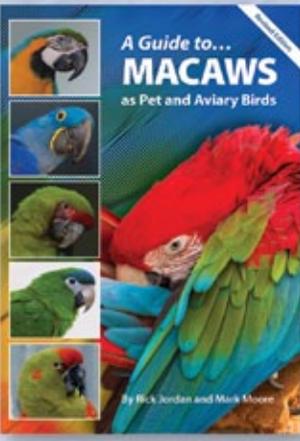
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or out. This aids in preventing bites from birds during breeding. Though at times breeders can fail to lock the swivel feeder and arrive back to find chaos and a pair of Caiques on the lose.

Feeding

The Black-headed Caiques inquisitive nature means it is a species that will often be open to trying new things. In general breeders within Australia will feed a variety of foodstuffs but for the most part it will be dry seed and or pellets along with fruit and vegetables and sprouted and soaked seed. Some of the other foodstuffs offered by some breeders include bush foods, wholegrain bread, mealworms, weeds, egg and biscuit (soft food), dog biscuits, grit and charcoal. One particular breeder's feeding regime is as follows

Morning Non-Breeding—Fresh water and a large bowl of fruits, vegetables, soaked and sprouted seed.

Afternoon Non-Breeding—Fresh water and a small bowl of pellets with half an almond per bird.

Leading up to and during breeding the breeder increases the amount of fruits, vegetables, soaked and sprouted seed fed. When chicks are in the nest this increased amount is fed 2-3 times a day including along with the afternoon feed. Nuts are increased to 1 almond per bird but the pellets remain the same.

It has been found that these birds particularly enjoy chilli (peppers) and passionfruit. Passionfruit that ends up flicked all over the walls but none the less sees the birds enjoying themselves.

Breeding

The breeding season for many birds in Australia has been all over the place for the past few years. This has been put down to the change in weather patterns and Australia it can be said does not have seasons like the typically defined summer, autumn, winter, spring. In fact the aboriginal people recognise a variety of seasonal events throughout the country that may better suit.

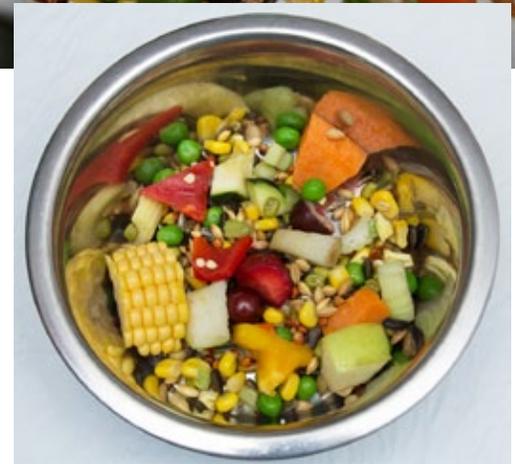
We've seen birds start earlier than normal or later and longer than normal in recent years and some birds that would breed right through to the next season if given the chance too. Black-headed Caiques though as a general rule start around July-August and run through till January. Usually by January they are concluding their breeding and have young on the perch.

A variety of nest boxes has proven to work well for this species such as the boot or L box, A frame box, Z box etc As mentioned earlier many breeders hang them in the walk way. During this time pairs and in particular cock birds can become quite territorial even towards the keeper and this is another reason for utilizing suspended aviaries.



Above: 53 day old Black-headed Caique trying food for first time at Perky Parrots

Right: A selection of fruits and vegetables for Caiques



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Whilst they do become quite territorial during breeding season many breeders happily allow pairs alongside each other to still be able to see one another. They will often opt for half the side of the aviary to be clad so as privacy can be had near the nest box and feed station.

Sexual maturity is normally experienced in the third year however some birds have bred at the age of two. The hen works the nest in the lead up to laying and will often flick some of the nesting material out of the nest. It is advantageous to not only have a wooden ladder in the box but also chew blocks for the hen to chew. Cocks will join the hen in working the nest and watching a pair work the nest via an infrared camera can be hilarious.

Hen birds develop a swollen vent during breeding. This is often referred to as an egg bum. Mating takes place on the perch and in the nest box. Cocks are quite attentive and visit the hen in the nest to check the progress and feed her as is required. During breeding the pair can be monitored but should be given adequate privacy. The benefit of using quality cameras is priceless and can teach the keeper many things not just overall about the species but about individuals too. It is safe to say that these cameras used on captive birds by aviculturalist's have a lot to offer researchers too.

A clutch of 2-4 eggs is usually considered the norm with an incubation period of 25-27 days. 70 days is the approximate time it takes to fledge and Black-headed Caiques in general do a good job of rearing their young. For the most part breeders use stainless steel leg rigs and or microchips to identify their birds. Hand rearing is frequently undertaken in Australia and the Black-headed Caique is seen as a bird that can be hard to rear if done from the egg. It is widely seen as a species that is not for the inexperienced hand rearer that is for sure.

Pet Bird Demand

For a long time there was a large ratio of cocks bred and many of these went to the pet market. Hens were shall we say rare as hen's teeth and fetched as much as 7 if not 8



Above: Mature pair of Caiques.

Right: 1 day old Black-headed Caique.

Photo by Jade Welch at Perky Parrots.



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times more than cock birds at times. Fortunately this is not the case today and pairs are selling for around \$2500 with similar numbers of cocks and hens being bred.

The end result of all this breeding is that many of the Black-headed Caiques still go to aviaries to be used in breeding programs. The demand though for pet Caiques has continued to grow and these birds have reached a favourable price. As these are incredible pet birds the demand continues to increase.

New Mutation

A few years ago a mutation of the Black-headed Caique was bred on the east coast of Australia. The mutation was and is still incorrectly called blue. As the bird still displays light patches of yellow in parts it is not a true blue as such but a par blue. There appears to be a true blue mutation I am told in South America.

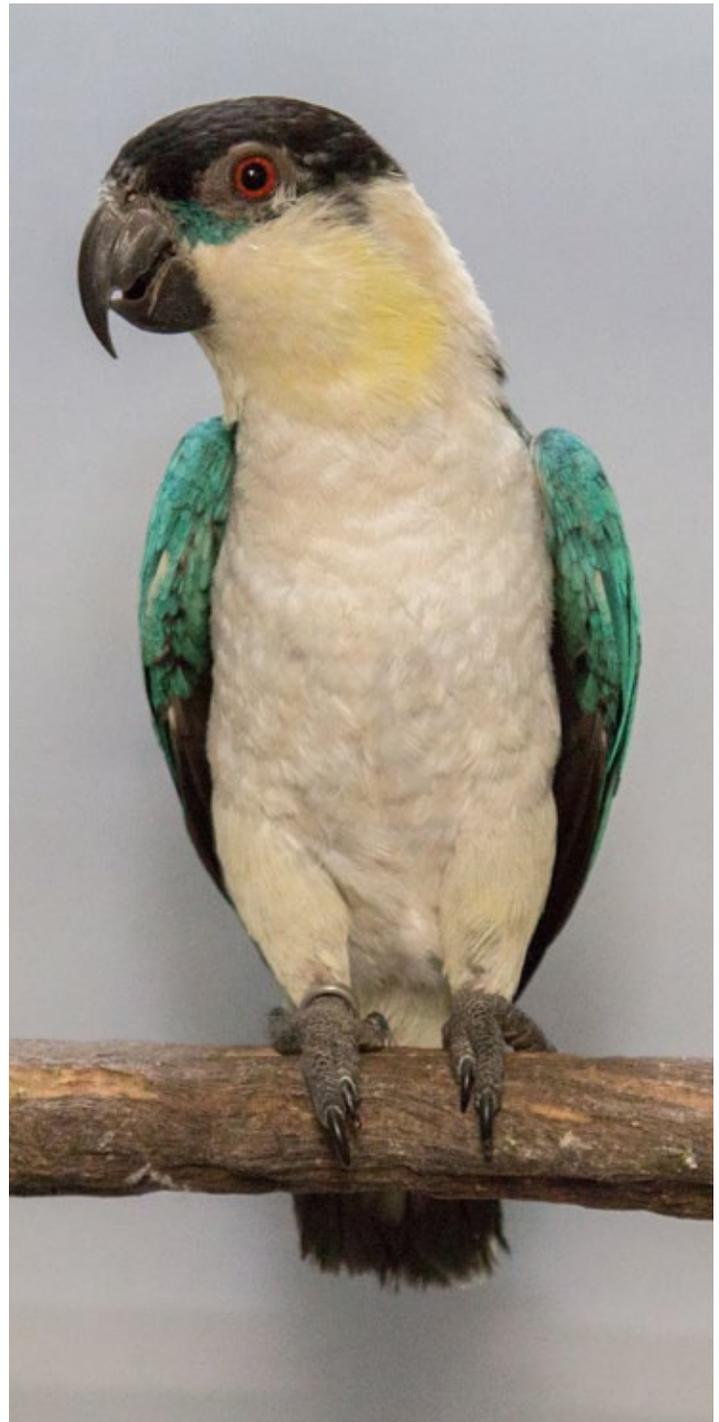
The par blue is recessive in inheritance. This means both cocks and hens can be either visual par blue or split for par blue. To get a pair to produce only par blues both parents would need to be visually par blue. A pair of normal split to par blues would produce par blue, normal split to par blue and normal non split young. A par blue and a split par blue pair would produce par blue and normal split par blue young.

By chance the same par blue mutation was bred in at least 3 other collections shortly after the appearance of the first including a collection a vast distance from the others. As such there are a number of breeders who are now working on the mutation and outcrossing for strength. Over all the birds appear strong and without issues but outcrossing is important and a number have been released onto the market.

Funnily enough some view the birds from the different sources to be different mutations and not necessarily the same mutation. Having photographed birds from 3 separate sources and viewing photos of one other source I cannot see a difference. Whatever the case this mutation is assured of a bright future and will combine nicely with a number of mutations when they pop up in time.

Conclusion

The Black-headed Caique is a popular pet and aviary bird within Australia. They are small, intelligent and highly desirable and straight forward in their care and requirements. The appearance of the par blue adds another dimension to the keeping of this little South American species and assures them of a bright future within Australian aviculture.



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