



Adult pair of Cape parrots in the box with two chicks a week old.

# Breeding the Cape Parrot

(*Poicephalus robustus suahelicus*)

by Alan Sharples  
Jonesboro, Georgia

The genus *Poicephalus* consists of nine species, of which only the Senegal parrot (*P. senegalus*) is kept in captivity in any sizeable numbers. Most of the other species have only been available to aviculturists in small numbers over the years, or are very recent arrivals to aviculture. The Cape parrot can be counted among the former.

Twelve inches in length, the Cape parrot is only slightly smaller than an African grey parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*) and, despite a well proportioned body, appears top heavy due to its huge beak. The head is a silvery-grey, and the body is predominately green. In the subspecies *suahelicus*, the female has the forehead and part of the crown orange. The male lacks this color.

In the wilds of Africa, the Cape parrot is a resident of woodlands,

riverine forests and thick bush. It is an uncommon bird everywhere it is found and most authorities agree that, despite the difficulty in accurately assessing the populations in the areas where it lives, the Cape parrot's status in the wild is increasingly in jeopardy.

In captivity this has always been a rare bird. The London Zoo exhibited two Capes as far back as 1869. It took another ninety-five years before the Cape parrot bred in captivity at Basle Zoo, Switzerland. Since then several zoos and private breeders have had success.

I acquired a wild-caught pair from a dealer in December, 1985. After a thirty-day quarantine the birds were placed in an enclosed carport in a cage measuring three feet wide, three feet high, and six feet long. A nestbox with

interior dimensions of twelve inches square and twenty-four inches deep was hung inside the cage.

The diet for the adults consists of apples, carrots, banana, yellow squash, canned corn, sweet potatoes, various leafy greens and a variety of soaked, heat treated beans. Papaya and mango are offered when in season. A vitamin/mineral supplement is sprinkled over the produce and it is given to the birds every morning. In late afternoon a seed mix is given including safflower, buckwheat, oat groats, and red and yellow millet. In cold weather, peanuts, walnuts and other nuts are offered and eaten avidly. As the breeding season approaches, wheat germ granules, powdered monkey chow and high protein dry baby cereal is added to the produce mix. Soaked and sprouted sunflower is offered also.

The birds were extremely shy and nervous and would dive into the nestbox at the slightest glimpse of people. Because of this behavior, we left the pair completely undisturbed except for feeding. Twice a week the nestbox was checked to make sure we still had two live birds. At each check the birds would cram themselves into a corner and emit a silent growl that one could imagine an African grey with laryngitis would sound like.

As the days passed, it became obvious the Capes were too nervous and shy to breed where we had them. The room contained Aratinga conures and Amazons and, at times, the noise was beyond belief.

In the fall of 1986, the pair and their cage were moved outside onto an elevated deck I had enclosed with wire netting. The cage was placed at the farthest point from our back door, with one end against the wall. Inexpensive plastic blinds were hung on either side of the cage, and the entire roof was covered with a translucent fiberglass panel. Only one end of the cage, where the feeding door and nestbox are located, was not shielded.

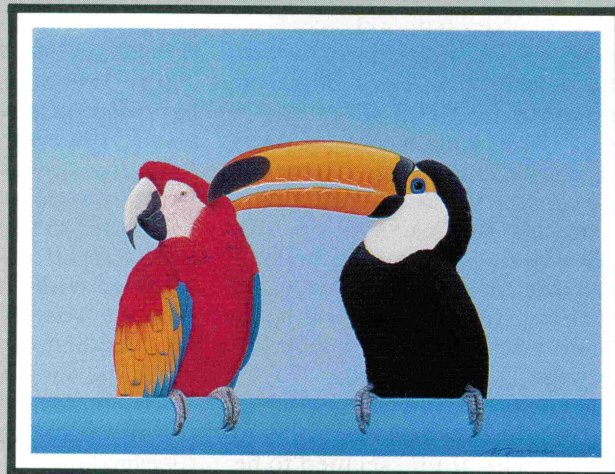
Fall turned into spring, then summer, with no change in the birds' behavior. Because of the visual barriers, the birds were almost impossible to observe. Twice weekly inspections of the nestbox always revealed the same thing: two adult parrots and no eggs.

By late August I was about to write off the Cape parrots for another breeding season. On August 22, 1987, I checked the box, fully expecting to find no change from the dozens of previous inspections. Then I spotted two

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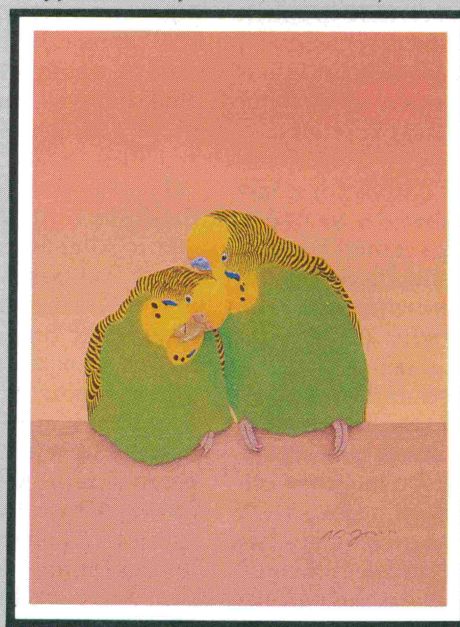


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eggs under the hen. I quickly finished feeding and got out of the area. After thinking about it for awhile, I decided to continue my normal daily routine as though nothing had happened.

On September 5, a third egg was seen. Since I did not know the exact days on which each egg was laid, I estimated the first egg would hatch no earlier than September 17, assuming a thirty-day incubation period.

I'll never forget the feeling of joy and disbelief when I first saw a chick on September 19. At first I was afraid it was dead; the parents were very vocal and aggressive and were stepping all over the baby, which did not appear to move. The next day it became obvious the chick was alive. One unhatched egg was seen, but no sign of a third egg or second chick. Another baby was spotted on September 26. The remaining egg was gone.

On September 30, inspection revealed two big, naked chicks next to the parents. The adults seemed to be calming down; they no longer cowered and they growled only if the inspection lasted longer than thirty seconds. We were even able to touch the chicks with impunity. White down had appeared by October 3, and their eyes were first seen open on October 19. The chicks were fully feathered by December 1.

We removed both chicks for a few minutes on December 10 to check their progress. They seemed healthy and alert despite having their feet and feathers covered in droppings. The chicks were very docile and did not resist handling at this stage.

A chick was found out of the box on December 12, seemingly disoriented. The nights were becoming quite chilly, so the chick was replaced into the nest-box. On the 17th, both chicks were brought into the house overnight while our weather became seriously winter. They were given back to the parents the next morning, when another excursion into the flight would be less dangerous.

The next few nights were milder and we left the babies with their parents while we kept a worried eye on them. On Christmas eve my wife found one chick weak, thin and uncoordinated on the floor of its cage. Although often seen near the feed pans, it must not have been eating on its own. The parents seemed to have relinquished their responsibility before fully weaning this chick.

The chick was brought inside and placed in a 10 gallon aquarium, on a

heating pad set at medium. At 3:00 p.m. the chick was tube fed 12 cc of Lafeber's Nutri-start and a small amount of powdered Mini-friends Parrot chow. These ingredients were mixed with boiling water and/or warm apple juice. Another 6 cc were given at 6:30 p.m. The next feeding was at 1:00 a.m., again consisting of 12 cc. Although still weak and hardly struggling, somehow the chick appeared on the rise. At 7:40 a.m. we tube fed 18 cc. There was steady improvement in overall vigor throughout the next week. However, on December 30, the left wing appeared paralyzed. At this point one drop of Vitamin B complex was added to the formula at each feeding. Partial use of the wing was regained within a few hours. The supplement was discontinued after only four feedings when we saw that full use of the wing was restored.

The next day the chick was seen eating apple and sunflower seed, so all tube feeding was discontinued.

The remaining youngster was brought inside on January 4. It was in perfect health and had been seen eating on its own from the day it fledged. It is apparently the older chick. At the time of writing (March 1988) both are alive and well and living in our dining room, getting used to every-day human activities.

I feel the key to success in breeding these shy birds is in providing both a quality diet and a private, secure territory and box. I look forward to seeing how much more adaptable and stress-free breeding captive-raised Capes can be compared to their imported parents.

I recently read an article on African parrots in which the rarity of Cape parrots in the wild was questioned. I feel, that regardless of speculation, we should treat all our birds as future candidates for the Endangered Species list. Every day we lose more wilderness and with it the creatures that live there. I am, therefore, far from complacent about the future of any species to be found in our aviaries. I apply this depressing reality to the management of our aviaries. I attempt to maintain at least two or three pairs of each species. With rare birds with an unbalanced sex-ratio (such as blue-headed pionus in which hens are nearly impossible to obtain) only individuals of the commoner sex are sold as pets — the rest being retained as breeding stock. It is our goal to make some small contribution to the establishment of the Cape parrot in aviculture. ●

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