



Black-cheeked Lovebirds

the parrot pearl
of the
dark continent

(*Agapornis personata nigrigenis*)

by Peter H. Them
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Description

This small lovebird, measuring about 14 cm, almost exactly compares to the Nyasa lovebird in the same way as the masked compares to the Fischer's lovebird. The forehead is brown and cheeks are brownish black. Throat and upper breast become more orange-red in the breeding season. Young birds still being fed by their parents also have a more distinctive orange-red upper breast. The four outer tail feathers have a patch of red. The rest of the plumage is green, darker above and olive green on the neck. Note, upper tail coverts are green, and not pale blue as in the masked lovebirds. The bill is red and the naked skin around the eyes is white. Legs are grey.

Range

A. p. nigrigenis has an extremely restricted range. There is evidence that the total area is only about 10 square km in south-western Zambia



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Habitat

The habitat favoured by the black-cheeked lovebird is a common kind of wilderness found in many areas of southern Africa: the Mopane (*Colophospermum mopane*) woodlands that are distributed in low-lying river valleys and in hot, uninhabited, arid national park areas. Work clearly needs to be done on the ecological requirements of the bird in an attempt to explain its patchy distribution as well as fluctuations in its numbers. The lovebird ranges in Zambia are virtually uninhabited because these woodland areas are infested with tsetse flies, which are carriers of African sleeping sickness. People and cattle are susceptible to the sickness, but game animals and birds are not, so the presence of tsetse ensures that the Mopane woodlands remain sparsely inhabited. Another discouragement against development of Mopane woodlands is the poor soil quality for agriculture. Mopane soils are highly alkaline with a heavy clay content. These woodlands are usually so poorly drained that they become waterlogged or flooded during the annual rainy season. The absence of agricultural development also means that lovebirds living there enjoy freedom from the harmful side-effects of pesticides, a problem that plagues birds living in the developed farming areas.

Status

Dr. Dylan R. Aspinwall, of Lusaka, advised me in 1984 that they do not know whether *A.p. nigrigenis* is rare or common within its range. It appears that early this century it was common and then became rare, perhaps because of collection for the cage bird trade or possibly from natural causes, or a combination of both factors. Its range lies in a rather remote area with few roads and this may, in part, account for the fact that there are few reports of it in the wild. However, it is reported from time to time in *Zambian Ornithological Society's Newsletter*. These reports come mainly from the southern parts of Kafue National Park in the general area around Nanzhiola. In June, 1984, Dr. W.F. Bruce-Muller of Choma, Zambia, advised me that he believes that *A.p. nigrigenis* are uncommon in the area, the southern edge of the

Kafue National Park, where he has observed them.

Sedentary Bird

Mopane occurs in "pockets" (sometimes large ones) surrounded by Miombo woodland, in which wild populations of lovebirds do not occur. Miombo is a densely vegetated bush habitat that is more widely distributed than the Mopane habitat. Miombo woodland limits the movements of lovebirds because the habitat does not provide a suitable food supply. Thus these lovebirds live all year in their respective home areas of Mopane woodland, never migrating to interbreed with other lovebird forms, even though they are capable of doing so if they were to meet. Consequently, geographical isolation serves to keep the wild forms free from hybridization. Hybrids available to lovebird fanciers are most likely produced among domesticated breeding stock confined together in aviaries.

Social Birds

As most other parrots, black-cheeked lovebirds mate for life. They spend many hours a day with their mates, flying and eating together, vocalizing constantly to one another and preening one another. They are very social birds.

Trade

Today trade in wild-caught *A.p. nigrigenis* must be very seldom; as far as I know there is trade only in the few domestic bred black-cheeked lovebirds. For the past 50 years, large-scale exports of wild-caught lovebirds from Zambia have not occurred. Dr. D. Gordon Lancaster, of the Northern Rhodesian Department of Game and Tsetse Control (acc. to R.E. Moreau: *Evolution in Agapornis*, IBIS 1948, p. 124), stated that within the area where they occur the birds have been extremely numerous. To his personal knowledge 16,000 black-cheeked lovebirds in 1929 were captured in small parts of this area within a four-week period. Yet the wild populations of these birds remain small even today.

Threats

Possible threats to the birds include: agricultural encroachments at the boundaries of habitat areas, seasonal food scarcity, shortage of suitable nesting sites, disease, predation by other birds, and illegal hunting by

persons using sling shots or pellet guns.

Captive Breeding

We keep and breed our black-cheeked lovebirds in a colony in an aviary. Formerly we put a single pair to a cage. All nest boxes (same kind as used for the masked lovebird) are placed at the same level, and between each box there are placed vertical pieces of board, so that when the birds are looking out of their nest holes they cannot see their neighbors. This has reduced the incidence of fighting. Incubation lasts 21 to 22 days, and the young fledge the nest when they are five to six weeks old. The first clutch of eggs is removed to the incubator and the chicks later hand-reared; the second clutch remains with the parents.

Nutrition

Generally we give the same kind of food to all our birds, and I would advise anyone not to have more birds than they have time to keep and feed in the best way. Whatever parrots live on in the wild, they most certainly do not live on any single item that we give them in captivity. Canary, millet, hemp, sunflower, niger, wheat, oats — all domestic grains — are abnormal foods. How any parrots, on such a low protein diet that seed provides, can rear reasonable youngsters is a wonder. Most rear far better youngsters if they are also given green food and better still if they are provided with some animal protein. Besides different kinds of seeds — dry and germinated — our birds get a variety of greens, fruits, and flowers, especially flowers of the dandelion. From our table all our birds get scraps.

Future

Black-cheeks are rare in aviculture. If they are not to disappear there, it will be necessary to cooperate in breeding, both at the national and international levels. If breeders do not cooperate, the captive stock will surely die out.

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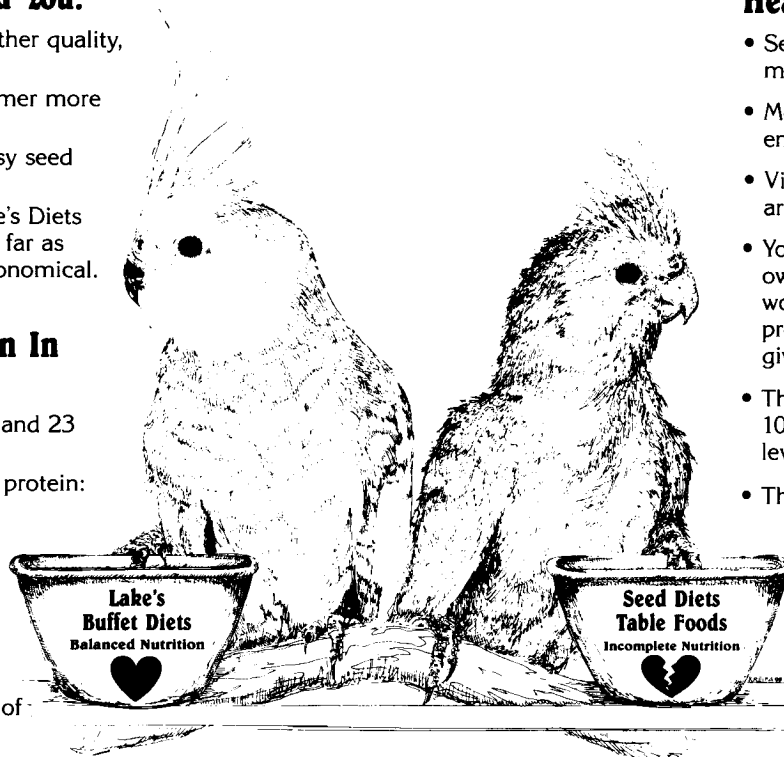
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