

handraising the Lesser Vasa Parrot from day one

by Rosemary Low, Curator of Birds
Loro Parque, Tenerife, Canary Islands

The genus *Coracopsis* contains two species, the lesser vasa (*C. nigra*) and the greater vasa (*C. vasa*). They are the least typical and, perhaps, also the least admired of all parrots because they are entirely dull grey. Only those who admire parrots for their personality or who are intrigued by their behaviour will appreciate the vasas. For me, they hold a fascination which is equalled by a few but not surpassed by any other genus.

Vasas were almost unknown in captivity until the early 1980s. The lesser has been bred in captivity in four or five collections (at Chester Zoo in

Britain and in private collections in Germany and Switzerland). I do not know of any published report of the breeding of the greater vasa and would be most interested to hear from anyone who has succeeded.

Vasas, more than any parrots I know, are sun-worshippers. They assume exaggerated postures, usually with one wing outstretched and the tail fanned to one side, to soak up the sun. The climate of Tenerife, with its many hours of sunshine, suits them very well (me, too!). At Loro Parque, in a range of four large aviaries for African species, is one enclosure containing four lesser vasas

and, next to it, one for a pair of greater. Each aviary measures approximately 9 ft. wide, 14 ft. deep and 9 ft. high.

One egg was found in the nest of a pair of lesser vasas on July 2, 1987. The box is situated at a height of about 9 ft.

Three eggs were laid. Alas, on July 15 a female was found dead in the aviary. It happened to be my day off and I did not learn of her death until about midday, three hours after she was picked up. I immediately went to investigate the nest. I could feel but not see inside and removed two eggs before my fingers came into contact with the shell from which a chick had hatched. A keeper brought a ladder at once and reached inside the nest. He found a chick. It was stone cold, yet on its feet. The outside temperature was about 80°F (27°C). I placed the chick in an incubator which was operating at 96°F (35.5°C). I afterwards realized I should have placed it in a brooder at a lower temperature. When I removed it to a brooder one hour later it was continually arching its head backwards; during the afternoon this behaviour gradually ceased.

The chick was amazingly strong. This was probably its second day of life; it had been pipping three days previously. Densely covered in longish white down, it was not a round, fluffy ball like a grey parrot (*Psittacus*) but stretched high, like a king (*Alisterus*) chick. The shape of its head and beak were also reminiscent of a king. There is not, of course, any relationship between the two genera; I mention *Alisterus* for comparison only.

Very little, indeed, has been recorded about the breeding biology of *Coracopsis* species, especially the development of the young, but Becker (1987) mentioned the very short incubation and fledging period. This confirmed what Victorin Laboudallon told me of the Seychelles subspecies, the black parrot (*C.n. barklyi*) on Praslin in 1983. When I saw his record card for the only nest for which a fledging period had been recorded in the wild I felt he had made a mistake. Could a vasa spend six weeks or less in the nest and could the incubation period be less than 18 days?

The answer is yes! I was unable to confirm the incubation period exactly as only one of the three eggs hatched and the eggs were not marked as laid. One egg was infertile and measured 35 x 29 mm and in the other the embryo died about halfway through the incu-

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bation period. However, Becker had recorded an incubation period of only 13 ½ days and, in our case, there were two eggs in the nest on July 2 so possibly the first was laid on June 28.

In view of the rapid development of *Coracopsis* chicks I judged that ours would need a diet containing at least 15% protein right from the start. Contents were as follows:

Parts	Approximate Protein Content %	Food
4	25	wheat germ cereal
2	16 or more	ground sunflower kernals
2	15	Milupa mixed vegetables
1	90	soya protein
1	about 6	banana
1	11	Canary rearing food

Assuming that the chick was two days old when taken, at five days its eyes started to slit. However, Becker stated that his chick's eyes were slitting at four days. Compare this with 15 or 21 days for most parrots.

The chick was fed about every two hours between 6:30 a.m. and 10 p.m. plus a midnight and 4 a.m. feed until it was six days. I then cut out the 4 a.m. feed. I was working long hours — also I found it difficult to get back to sleep again. Only very special chicks can induce me to leave my bed!

On its third day in the brooder I moved it from a surface of kitchen towel to welded mesh (¼ in. square) because it was bleeding from a small cut on the edge of the wing. This was almost certainly due to the bleach used in the paper towel. I have often encountered this problem which has ceased when chicks have been moved to welded mesh. This surface is also far superior for the development of their feet.

On July 20 I observed a phenomenon in this chick which I am reluctant to record, knowing that others will be sceptical — but it should be related for the benefit of anyone else who may be fortunate enough to rear this species. At 7 a.m. an organ was protruding about ½ in. (1.25 cm) from the chick's cloaca. There was a little blood on the paper which lined the side of its container. I could not believe a prolapse had occurred because a) I had never heard of this in a chick under one week old and, b) it did not look like a prolapsed organ. A couple of hours later the organ was partially retracted and by noon it was no longer apparent. The only explanation was that even a six-day-old *Coracopsis* has the ability to protrude its sexual organs. Never again did this occur. It should be



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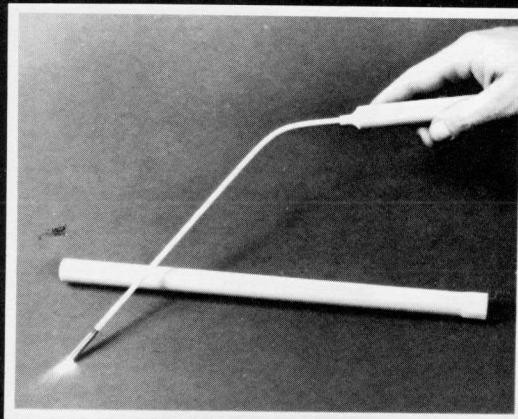
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Lesser vasa parrot chick aged 37 days.

pointed out that vasa parrots of both sexes have this ability, unique among parrots, when in breeding condition. I observed this many times in my own pair of greater and was very surprised at the large size of these organs.

After this incident the rearing of the lesser vasa never caused a moment's worry. By July 23 its eyes and ears were open. By July 27 the white down was still profuse only on the lower back; the wings were darkening with the

growing feathers under the skin. With its very long neck it was still reminiscent of an *Alisterus* chick. As well as the egg tooth on the upper mandible, it also had a V-shaped projection on the middle of the cutting edge. This can be seen in some of the photographs I took at the time. Its feet were then dark grey and the cere was as light as the beak. It had a thin, piping call and was extremely active, making photography difficult.

By August 8 the scapulars and the feathers of the crown were erupting. The egg tooth was still visible. By August 21 the young vasa was fully feathered, except for the shorter tail. It was five weeks old and weighed 249 g. which was to be its adult weight! Then the beak was still light; it began to darken from the base of the upper mandible and by the beginning of September was partly dark grey. By the middle of that month it was entirely dark grey. At the time of writing, March 1988, it is completely light.

On August 20 the young vasa was seen eating a pea; it very quickly learned to feed itself. Green seemed to attract it as peas, mung beans and alselgar (a large-leaf spinach) were eaten first. It was extremely fond of alselgar, also peanuts in the shell. It soon ate almost everything in the normal food which included boiled maize, boiled peanut kernels, sunflower seed, gorbanza beans (not favoured), carrot, apple, orange and other fruits in season such as pear and cactus fruit.

On August 20 the young parrot was moved from brooder to cage. Almost silent previously, by the beginning of September it was becoming vocal, making squeaky sounds accompanied by jerky movements. It preened its breast feathers with quick little pecks like a pigeon; its plumage was wonderfully soft. Small, dark hairs protruded around the eyes, nostrils and side of the head. At this age it was gentle except when new food was put in the cage when it would nip in its impatience to reach it.

Rearing this vasa was, for me, an absorbing experience. Probably the first of its species to be hand-reared, it gave me an insight into the development of this genus which reinforced my belief that *Coracopsis* may be a link between the parrots and the pigeons. I hope to have this confirmed or disputed before long. Dr. Marc Valentine, the American cytogeneticist, responded to my request for information on the cytogenetics of *Coracopsis* with the promise to try to study the genus in the near future. To date, no one has sent him feather material for sexing purposes which would have enabled him to study the chromosomes. An interesting spin-off of Dr. Valentine's work of sexing birds by preparing a culture from a blood feather is comparative cytogenetics, used to interpret evolutionary relationships. In this way Dr. Valentine will, hopefully, unravel one of the most intriguing avian mysteries. ●

AFA is Conservation too!

Name: Venezuelan Black Hooded Red Siskin, *Carduelis cucullata*

Range: Northwestern and northcentral Venezuela

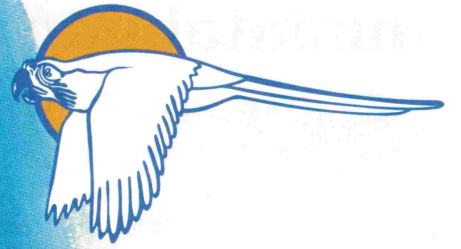
Status: Endangered. Isolated pockets in the wild may total 600 to 800 birds

Conservation Action: Through its Siskin Sub-committee, AFA is developing a Spanish language manual for propagating siskins. This will be distributed to aviculturists/conservationists in Venezuela and Puerto Rico. The sub-committee is also developing a captive management plan for specimens held in captivity in the U.S. as well as supporting field studies on the species in Puerto Rico where a remnant (feral) population thrives. See *Watchbird* April/May '86, page 8.



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