

breeders' notes...

Abyssinian Lovebirds

(*Agapornis taranta*)

by Richard E. Baer, D.V.M.
Groveport, Ohio

The Abyssinian lovebird (*Agapornis taranta*) is described by Forshaw in *Parrots of the World* as the black-winged lovebird. A more complete description of this species of lovebird is found in Rosemary Low's *Parrots — Their Care and Breeding*. An attractive feature of the Abyssinian is its radiant-like green coloration. E.N.T. Vane in the book, *Guide to Lovebirds and Parrotlets*, claims that

there are two sub-species of *A. taranta*, but the differences he lists are so slight they appear to be insignificant. William C. Dilger in his *The Comparative Ethnology of the African Parrot Genus Agapornis*, (from the Laboratory of Ornithology, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, 1960) produced a most informative study of the behavioral patterns of all lovebirds including the Abyssinian.

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Photos by Richard E. Baer, D.V.M.



This cage, 18" x 18" x 20" high, houses one breeding pair of "Abbys." Note breeder's record card on upper left of cage, seed hoppers mounted on outside of cage for easy filling, better sanitation, and less disturbance of hands entering the birds' space.



Wooden "tunnel" nest boxes designed to simulate a tree hollow, are mounted on the top outside of the breeding cages.

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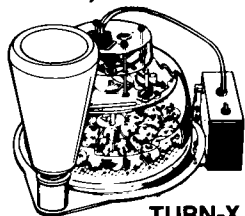
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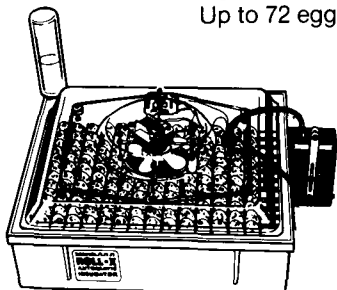
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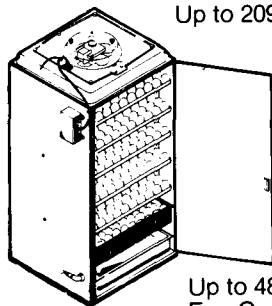
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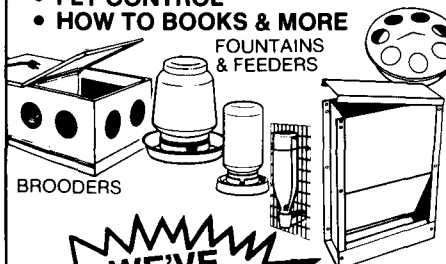
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WE ACCEPT



Rosemary Low reported she has seen two cases of abnormally colored Abyssinian lovebirds.

A native of Ethiopia, Abyssinian lovebirds inhabit the dry, highland forests where freezing temperatures at night are common. They do, however, descend to the lower altitudes. In the wild they roost in the hollows of trees and feed on seeds, berries and fruits. They are not nest builders.

Considering that this species of lovebird is native to high altitudes where it can drop to below freezing at night, it would be interesting to try to acclimate and keep these birds out of doors the year around in our more temperate climates.

In captivity, the Abyssinian lovebird feeds on the same variety of seeds that are provided for other lovebird species. They are particularly fond of sunflower seeds and eat large quantities of these. We provide sunflower seeds free-choice apart from the regular seed mix. They also relish the "soft food" mix which we give all of our birds. This consists of crumbled bread, greens (endive), shredded carrot, sweet apples, and sometimes other fruits in season. They are very fond of the apple in the "soft food" mix. Fresh water is provided daily, as these birds love to bathe and do so in their water cups. We also use vitamins in the water three times weekly.

George M. Smith made an interesting observation. In captivity, his Abyssinian lovebirds chose to nest in the smallest boxes he provided them (with internal dimensions of about 3" square). It is his opinion that, in captivity, the provision of unsuitable nesting accommodations account for the breeding disappointments often associated with this breed.

We have bred "Abbys" in bigger boxes (i.e. budgie boxes) with varying success over the years. It was when we took into account Smith's observations about the small nest boxes and provided them with a long, narrow type box, that we obtained consistent success in the propagation of the species.

Aware that these birds are not nest builders and that in their native habitat they nested in tree hollows, we devised our tunnel boxes to simulate a tree hollow and to provide maximum privacy. Our long, slanted boxes have an internal dimension (floor area) of 4" x 5" (inside diameter). We include a concave block so that the eggs will be brooded in the center of the floor space and we provide a wire

ladder for ingress and egress. The size of the entrance hole is 2" in diameter. An access opening panel is provided at the lower front for inspection and another is located at the upper back for ease in cleaning the boxes. The nest boxes are hung on the side of the breeding cages. (These tunnel nest boxes are available from a builder in Ohio.)

As previously stated, the Abyssinian lovebird is not a nest builder. When we first set up the nest box, we provided a pad of uncut sphagnum moss in the bottom of the box. This material the birds promptly threw out leaving little if any of it in the box. We feel the moss provides the birds with the opportunity for nest arrangement which, we believe, helps to bring them into breeding condition.

Examination of nest boxes also reveals that Abyssinina lovebirds utilize a lot of their own feathers as nesting material. These are obtained when the hen is on the nest. In this the male may help as sometimes even the head of the hen shows much feather loss.

We find the Abyssinian lovebird to be a very steady bird, quieter than other lovebirds, and not disturbed by the many visitors who come to see our aviary. The birds will continue mating on the perch even while their food and water cups are being changed.

The Abyssinian lovebird has what can be best described as a "twittering" song, and a rasping sound is made if they are disturbed or are defending their nest. Their mating sound is distinctive and is recognizable at a distance from where the birds may be copulating.

We selectively breed our birds in individual breeding cages which measure 18" x 18" x 20" high.

The daylight hours are artificially shortened for our birds during the summer and early fall seasons and then gradually lengthened to sixteen hour days in the late autumn. We like to place our nest boxes on the breeding cages the day after Thanksgiving Day.

Examination of the nest boxes begins on a weekly basis once the hen has settled into the box which is generally about three weeks after the boxes are placed on the cages.

Eggs appear to be laid every other day, although more time may elapse between layings. Often two eggs are laid at every-other-day intervals and then a period of several more days

may elapse before two more are laid. Clutch sizes average two to four eggs and pairs will often double clutch.

Incubation begins with the first egg laid. The hen is largely a solitary nester usually brooding her eggs alone while the male sits and protects the nest entrance or just perches somewhere in the breeding cage.

The incubation period lasts about 24 days with the young apparently hatching at different times. On various occasions we have found one or two fairly large babies (three to five days old) together with a couple of newly hatched chicks in the boxes. If the older babies are not removed and hand raised, often the younger ones will be trampled and die.

As previously stated, at our aviary we examine the nest boxes once weekly until we see the first egg. We then tag the cage and do not disturb the nest with further observations until at least thirty days have passed. By this time the chicks, hopefully, will have been hatched and be of sufficient size to be removed for hand feeding. If not, we wait until the smallest baby is a week to ten days old and then remove them and place them in a brooder at 95°F for hand feeding. (The brooders, which we make ourselves for under sixty dollars each, consist of the lid of a "Hovabator" incubator mounted on the top of a styrofoam tropical fish shipping carton.)

Baby birds are placed on shredded paper bedding in a one-half pint freezer container which is topped by a plastic strawberry carton — each clutch of babies in a separate container which is marked with the cage number from whence they came, so that accurate records can be maintained until they are big enough to be banded.

Depending upon their size, the babies are fed from four to six times daily. These intervals are gradually decreased until, at feathering time, they should be down to a three-times-daily feeding schedule. At this time they should be receiving from 6 cc to 6-1/2 cc at each feeding. Birds are weighed daily and should average about a two-gram daily weight increase until they reach the feathered stage at which time daily weight gains will decrease.

The feeding formula which we use consists of two tablespoons of ground monkey chow (Science Diet), one teaspoon of vegetables with beef baby food (in jar), 1/2 level teaspoon

of natural creamed peanut butter with enough water added to make 100 cc of formula. Consistency should be that of stirred yogurt and the temperature should be under 106°F.

When fully feathered, the birds should be down to at least 85°F brood temperature and at about this time should have access to seed and water and have their enclosure temperature gradually reduced to room temperature.

Young Abyssinians develop slower than peachface lovebirds. Unlike other lovebirds, they are born naked with little or no down and are more elongated in structure. At about fifteen days their eyes begin to open and about that time they are ready for banding.

Babies fledge at about 50 days after hatching and juvenile males may show some tiny red feathers in the orbital ring before this time.

Hungry babies make a rasping sound when they want to be fed, which is similar to that made by their parents when they are disturbed. The females are the more aggressive and this aggressiveness can be discerned in the babies. When feeding babies, some of the aggressiveness and biting may be the result of the birds not being fed enough food, and can sometimes be alleviated by increasing the amount of food at each feeding.

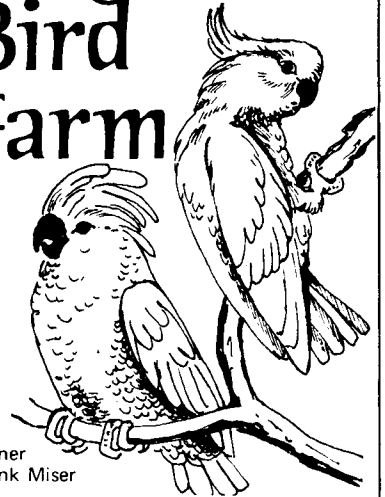
Young birds can be kept together in holding flights without problems but, as they approach maturity, females in colony collections tend to become pugnacious. Males have been kept together without fighting for over a year.

It is hoped that more *Agapornis* breeders will become stimulated to specialize in and breed the Abyssinian lovebird. At the Gilded Bird Cage Aviary we now have over fifty breeding pairs of this species with a goal of attaining a hundred pairs. Many of our birds are of second and third generation breeding and we produce a good quantity of offspring each year.

With more and more aviculturists breeding *A. taranta*, we could look forward to the day when it would be an established species as domesticated and commonplace as the peach-face lovebird.

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