

Abyssinian Lovebirds

a species that needs to be established

by Peter Them
Dragor, Denmark

The world's avicultural situation is deteriorating. Birds are less and less available to aviculturists. A similar situation took place with Australian birds more than 20 years ago. As birds from various countries become harder and harder to obtain, aviculturists are seeing signs indicating all importation may soon cease forever. As existing bird stocks are depleted, prices for birds for aviary stocks rise. As prices for the dwindling numbers of available birds rise, aviculturists find incentives to breed avian species.

One bird that has benefited from the current situation is the Abyssinian Lovebird, *Agapornis taranta*.

Danish Imports

Over the past 20 years, at least 5,000 Abyssinian Lovebirds have been exported from Ethiopia. Only about

one percent of those birds are alive today. I know of two shipments of Abyssinian Lovebirds that were imported into Denmark. Less than 5% of these birds were still alive within one year following arrival.

Stress

Newly imported Abyssinian Lovebirds are under heavy stress and in some sort of trance. The birds are sedentary in the wild and as a result are extremely vulnerable to environmental changes. Importers must understand that these birds should be handled with great care and understanding, otherwise shipping losses will be high.

Description

The male bird weighs about 44 grams and the female about 53 grams.

The great difference in size between sexes is evident. The birds are 16 cm long. The male is a rich green, somewhat paler on the rump and under parts. The forehead, lores, and a narrow ring around the eyes are carmine-red. The under wing coverts and flight feathers are black. The tail has a sub terminal band of black, while the outermost feathers have a yellow base. The iris is brown, the bill is as red as if made of sealing-wax.

The female has no red on the head. The under wing coverts are green in young hens. Older hens may have a few black feathers mingled with the green.

Sexing

Immatures can be sexed. The males have black under wing coverts. A careful examination of the head (easily carried out if the bird is held in the hand) will enable the person doing the sexing to see one or two extremely small red feathers about the eye or near the very base of the bill. Normally the *Agapornis taranta* acquires adult plumage when about one year old. I, however, had a male that first acquired such feathers

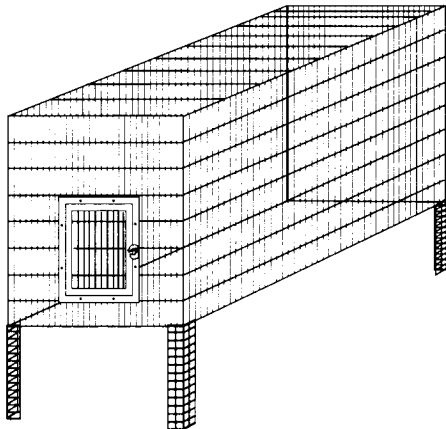
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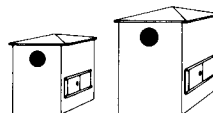
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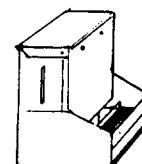
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at an age of almost two years.

Unlike all other *Agapornis*, this particular species definitely belongs to the highland zone (1,700 to 2,600 meters) of Ethiopia. The birds frequent the relatively dry juniper forest, euphorbia thickets and cultivation.

The western population is slightly smaller in size. The species has been awarded subspecific status, *Agapornis taranta nana*. Difference in size alone does not merit the designation.

Habitat-nesting

The nest cavity is used for roosting all year round. Not surprisingly, therefore, they are said to form a largely sedentary population. The birds tend to live in rather harsh country; yet flocks of the birds are easily observed. Flocks tend to con-

sist of 20 individuals. Mr. A. King found the birds in Acacia and wild fig country, between 1,500 and 2,000 meters. King also reports some of these birds live at altitudes over 2,500 meters, sometimes in parties of as many as 50 birds. Other observers have reported the species in juniper, euphorbia and hypericum woodland. At the 2,500 and above heights, the trees can be enveloped in cold, with night temperatures dropping below freezing. All this despite daytime temperatures that often soar as high as 27°C. As the birds fledge, the parents, in the wild, urge their young to return to the nest. In captivity the parents do the same. Moreau, 1948, and others seem to indicate an overlap between *A. taranta* and the Red-faced Lovebird (*A. pularia*), in southwestern Ethiopia.

Voice-temperament

The Abyssinian Lovebird has, perhaps, the least obtrusive voice of any of the *Agapornis*. They also tend to become much tamer in captivity. Such virtues ought to give them favor in the eyes of bird breeders.

The birds are, however, quarrelsome creatures and take delight in arguing with each other. Away from their nesting sites they are very territorial and are far more sociable.

The large sized females are extremely dominant. This might, perhaps, be some of the explanation for the disproportionate number of male deaths in captivity. Breeders, including myself, have found males dead without any sign of sickness.

In mutual preening, the area groomed is mainly confined to the forehead and throat; although the birds will sometimes attempt other areas. Any such attempt is greeted by an angry response. In some cases, the feathers of the face and lores can be stripped bare by the vigor of the mutual preening.

Hatching Information

Eggs in the nest brooded successfully pip about 48 hours before hatching. During this time the young bird may be heard peeping and making faint ticking sounds within the shell. This sound is presumably caused by the egg tooth striking the shell.

The eggs fracture in a line running around the larger end. As soon as the end is free, the chick's head falls out. Movements are feeble. The chick will then completely free itself by vigor-

ously kicking its legs. First feeding usually takes place within an hour or so after the chick comes out of the shell.

Egg shells are usually broken up by activities of the birds within the nest and become incorporated into the nest lining. Occasionally the shell will be carried out of the nest cavity. At other times the shell parts may be eaten by the adult birds.

Chicks up to four or five days old assume a variety of postures, lying on their sides, backs or bellies. Later they assume an attitude that appears unvarying. They face one another with their heads interlocked, one hooking its bill over the nape of one of its siblings. They demonstrate a very strong behavior and reassume this attitude if they are separated. At this stage, the chicks' eyes are not open. They tend to locomote in a clumsy, random fashion until another chick is encountered, then their heads probe about in a wobbly manner until the interlocking attitude is assumed. At this point the birds become motionless. No vocalizations attend this behavior. Even after the chicks' eyes are open, they tend to have no particular orientation with respect to their siblings. The chicks huddle close together. Chicks' eyes open about 15 days after hatching.

The chicks show overt signs of fear until the eyes are open. After the eyes open, the chicks show some tendency to avoid the observer. This avoidance response grows stronger as the birds grow older. It is probable the change is not so much due to increased fear as it is to increased locomotory ability.


The young, while still in the nest, preen themselves, each other and are preened by their parents. Most of the reciprocal preening takes place between members of a pair, but it is also common among siblings still dependent on their parents.

Nest Feeding

The young continue to beg for food for some days after fledging. Begging consists of rather harsh, repetitive squeaks while proffering an open bill to another bird. Ordinarily, one of the parents is so solicited but a sibling may be solicited as well. Occasionally, one young bird will feed another. In such cases, the feeding bird bobs its head in adult fashion.

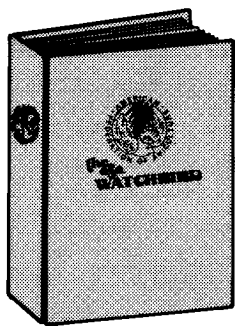
Characteristics

Agapornis taranta has stretching



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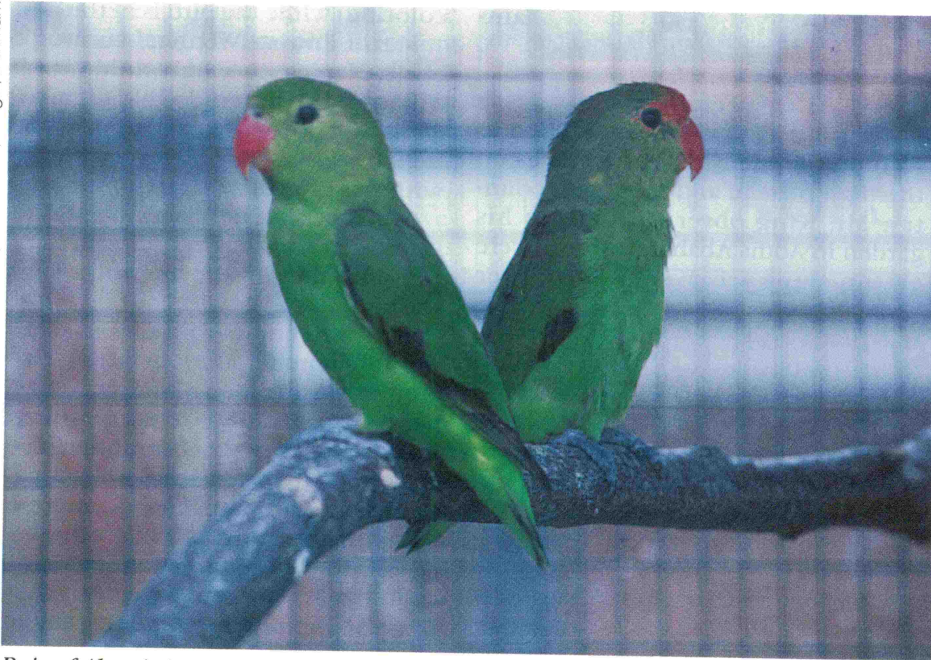
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Pair of Abyssinian Lovebirds (*Agapornis taranta*), hen (L) and male (R), is also known as Black Winged Lovebird.

movements similar in nature to other *Agapornis*. While both wings are slightly spread, they may be stretched together over the back or one wing may be stretched (extended) backward and downward along with the colateral leg and half of the tail. A juvenile, 15 days old, was seen to

stretch both legs at the same time by extending them fully against the nest bottom. During a bout of comfort activities, it is common to see wing-whirring. This consists of the bird, while standing erect, beating the wings very rapidly; so rapidly, in fact, the bird has to grip the perch tightly

to keep from flying off. This trait appears to be an exercise that follows periods of prolonged inactivity. It is particularly frequent in females immediately after leaving their eggs. Hen birds also engage in intense stretching bouts.

All *Agapornis* species, including *Agapornis taranta*, spend much time resting. Rest time consists of sitting quietly on a perch with plumage somewhat fluffed, except in very warm weather. The bird's eye may be closed or partly closed. At times the head is turned back over the shoulder, as in sleeping.

Healthy birds almost always rest on one foot. The one foot is grasping the perch, the other tucked up into the feathers of the belly. These birds sometimes rest while hanging upside down. In such cases the head has never been seen turned over the shoulder.

The Abyssinian Lovebird has an aggressive walk. The walk is peculiar when a bird is attempting to supplant an opponent while on foot. This sort of activity consists of long, rapid strides toward the opponent. The bird's body is held at a shallow angle with the perch but the head is carried horizontally. If the opponent does

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not, at least, make intentional movement away, the attacker will, as it approaches, show signs of increasing fear. The fear is expressed by ruffling feathers. First ruffled are feathers of the crown, then the back and scapulars and finally the entire plumage including the wings and tail.

Gaping, clearly an intentional movement to bite, is often employed in such a situation, Gaping and feather ruffling are also employed as defensive threats when a bird is in a position from which it cannot escape, either due to physical restrictions of the environment or because of strong, conflicting motivations. The motivations are incompatible with the motor patterns of fleeing.

The aggressive display, and carpal flashing, is seemingly peculiar to the *taranta* males. The display consists of the carpal areas being quickly exposed by flicking them out from the body with little disturbance of the normal resting position of the wing tips. The display is oriented frontally at the opponent. When seen by the other bird, the display appears as two quick and simultaneous flashes of black against a green background. This serves to stop the advance of another bird and, at times, causes the "other" bird to retreat. When *Agapornis taranta* is confronted with a predator, such as a dog or man, it utters a series of "alarm" calls. The alarms are high pitched calls. The birds show relatively little evidence of being on the attack. Judging from the bird's overt behavior, the calls are a "threat" but the bird

merely utters the calls and remains where it is, or it flees.

Feeding

Abyssinian Lovebirds are known to feed on the seeds of juniper trees on the high plateau and mountain country. Mr. King observed that, in his garden in Addis Ababa, the birds were eating euphorbia seeds. Juniper berries have a high vitamin B content. W.C. Dilger, of Cornell University, found a number of his Abyssinian Lovebirds were suffering from vitamin B deficiency. He concluded these birds may have a particular dietary need for this vitamin.

Captivity-feeding

In captivity, these birds are quite the easiest of the lovebirds to persuade to eat a wide variety of seeds, greenfood and fruit. I offer, in my own aviaries, various seeds, dry and soaked fruits such as pears, apples, berries and other vegetables (carrots, etc.). The birds also like dandelion, particularly the flower. They are often provided with fresh birch branches, which they particularly like. They require fresh water daily. This is particularly important because the birds bathe frequently.

The species uses a varied diet in the wild. The birds eat figs (these can be offered in the aviary but they are quite expensive). Dried figs can be offered but they are nutritionally poorer so it is preferable to provide fresh berries and fruits from the garden.

Breeding Is Difficult

The Abyssinian species is generally considered to be one of the most difficult lovebirds to breed successfully in the aviary. Various explanations are offered as to why the situation exists, including nervousness and incompatibility. The real reason for breeding failure in the aviary is due to the nesting accommodation provided being far too large. An overly large nest box leaves the birds completely thwarted. These birds build a very small nest indeed. It generally consists of less than a tablespoonful of bits and pieces, including feathers.

This species carries the nesting material into the nest with the beak. Sometimes the nesting material is thrust amid the feathers of the entire body. This species also has a habit of using its own feathers as nesting material. Such feathers are obtained from the male bird (proved by feather

coloring) while the bird is in the nest.

Marie Louise Wenner, curator of birds, Naples Zoo, Italy, told me she offers *A. taranta* a double compartment nest box with small dimensions. My Abyssinians are also very pleased with this type of nest box.

A box with a nest built by Masked Lovebirds (*Agapornis p. personata*) is useful; the Abyssinians will rebuild the nest.

The birds come from an area where nights can be very cold so they require a warm, snug box, with internal dimensions of 6 to 7 cm, square. Correct nesting accommodation is very important for any bird but particularly for this species. Remember, birds in the wild will breed every year. If they don't breed every year in captivity it is because we keep them from doing it. When the Abyssinians are not breeding, the nest cavity provides a refuge by day and warm roost by night.

The hen selects the nesting site. The male has nothing to do with the choice except to encourage the hen with excited twitterings. Even when not breeding, a large amount of the hen's time is spent bickering with other *A. tarantas* when the species is maintained on the colony system. The birds are sociable only when feeding or foraging well away from their nest boxes.


A male rarely, if ever, attacks females. Hens usually only war with other females. The pair-bond is very strong. The hens are so much larger and so much the stronger sex that it would be invariably unrewarding if a male fought a hen.

Breeding — More About It

Copulation, as with all lovebirds and most, if not all, parrots is a long process, lasting about three minutes. It is usually preceded by the hen pleading to be fed by bobbing her head slightly while she holds it low. Body feathers are slightly sleeked and the hen is squealing at the same time.

The male mounts, moves his head in fidgety fashion, and the copulation side is changed several times. The hen emits a continual squealing note during copulation which may be done to placate the male.


The incubation period is about 24 days. On hatching, chicks seem to be all head and neck with a very small body. The ear is a pin-hole opening. The chicks grow very, very slowly and at a week old are still embryonic-looking.




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The eyes do not open until the chick is at least 15 days old. It is more usual for the chick to be several days older than 15 before the eyes open. In fact, some youngsters still have an eye shut when three weeks old. Fledging time is 49 days or more.

Experience shows Abyssinian Lovebirds are single brooded. The birds will re-lay if the first clutch is removed for fostering or because the prospective chicks do not hatch.

If youngsters are taken into the house, once independent of their parents they tame down and remain perfectly tame. Indeed, it is this tameness that makes the Abyssinian my favorite lovebird.

I have a hand reared male. Its parents have, on four occasions, killed the young just before they would have left the nest. I don't know the reason for such action but, perhaps, other breeders can help discover the "why" of this.

There is a stupid theory that damp and/or water is necessary for parrot and parakeet eggs to hatch. That theory must have added more clutches than all other factors of aviary mismanagement. If the birds do find the nest cavity to be too dry, they will bathe more often than would be the normal case. Several times parrots and parakeets have been watched carrying on more intensive bathing just a day or two before eggs hatch.

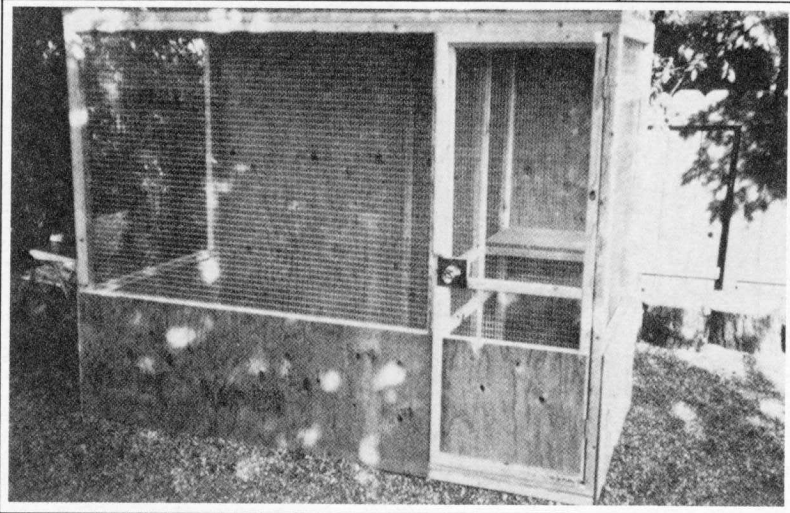
The Abyssinian Lovebird is related more to the Asian parrots than to the African species. I believe *A. taranta* is especially closely related to the Hanging Parrots (*Loriculus*). It is the only species of lovebird known to use the foot as a hand, as does *Loriculus*.

They also differ from the rest of the *Agapornis* in their strange voices. Because of their voices, they cannot communicate with other lovebirds. So asserts the Danish breeder of Hanging Parrots and Abyssinian Lovebirds, Jan Eriksen. For this reason, Peachfaced (*A. roseicollis*) cannot be used to foster newly hatched *taranta* chicks. Peachfaced Lovebirds differ from other *Agapornis*, which look like a downy ball, in that they are naked when hatched as are *Loriculus* chicks. Abyssinian chicks grow as slowly as do *Loriculus*. Movement of the adult birds is very similar to the *Loriculus* — quiet and steady.

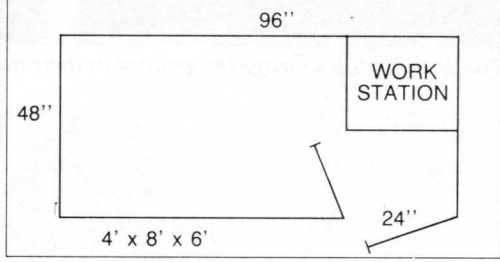
During copulation, the male stands on the back of the female and holds the female's wing-bend with its beak. This trait is just like *Loriculus*. A *taranta* also has close affinities with

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
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Loriculus in nest-building and in the methods used for carrying nesting material. As far as I know, there are no documented records of hybrids between *A. taranta* and other species. Birds from the same genus can hybridize and birds from different genera usually cannot.

What Bird Is That?

Is the *Agapornis taranta* an *Agapornis*? It is a contention we shall leave undiscussed here. If the birds themselves cannot identify their own species as being a separate one, is it not impertinent that we do?

Because of the low fecundity of this species, stocks can increase only slowly. Once a color mutation has shown up, the price and general interest will rise among aviculturists to a stupendous degree. I, therefore, make a plea that a concerted effort be made to consolidate our stocks of this admirable little bird before it is too late.

It is important that we breed these wild birds in our aviaries. Breeding color mutations may be more popular, but let us hope breeders will carry out a mission: *prevent* this species from disappearing from aviculture. ●