

# Poicephalus Parrots: Senegals and Their Relatives

by Isabel Taylor  
Saluda, North Carolina

This marvelous group of parrots consists of nine species. Six are available in the U.S. today, the best known being the Senegal Parrot. Three species (Rueppell's, Niam-Niam and Yellow-fronted) are quite rare and intensive cooperative breeding is urgently needed to keep them alive for future generations. One couple is now sharing their experience and knowledge of breeding Rueppell's Parrots. Their experience contains important clues about how to manage these birds successfully and is perhaps a clue about why these birds are still so rare after being in this country for many years. Only by sharing generously the information about common and rare species will we be able to preserve them in captivity and live up to our calling to be responsible stewards of the world's wildlife.

This is a quiet group of birds which makes it possible to raise them in apartments without disturbing your neighbors. I have found, however, that Capes can make a lot of cheerful noise, especially if you have more than one pair. Like Grays, *Poicephalus* parrots can all growl; but tend not to very often. *Poicephalus* vary from about 100 to 400 grams in body weight and are a very colorful group. They sport every color of the rainbow except purple. The name *Poicephalus* most probably comes from two Greek words, *kephalos* meaning head and *poios* meaning what kind of. This refers to the puzzling head colors seen in this group of birds. These head colors and frontal bands are influenced by sex, age, location or subspecies and individual differences. Three species are sexually dimorphic: Capes, Rueppell's and Red-bellieds.

One of the lesser known facts about this group is what wonderful pets handraised babies make. The wild-caught birds can be extremely shy and are best suited for breeding as a general rule. However, a handraised baby

can seem like a different species from its parents. They are affectionate, devoted, comical, not demanding, have strong personalities and are loving little birds. They all can talk, but some species are more adept than others. The talking ability and intelligence of the Red-bellied Parrot has been a delight to many owners and an unusual characteristic for a small bird.

This group has many advantages for the breeder. Low noise is a clear advantage for city dwellers and smaller species can live in small spaces. They will breed year-round, which can be an advantage or a disadvantage if you need a break from "baby birdie burnout". Wild-caught birds are seldom aggressive, but I am finding handraised parents can be quite aggressive when breeding. They are not very destructive to perches and nestboxes and many make excellent foster parents.

The young of sexually dimorphic species will resemble the most brightly colored parent. For Capes and Rueppell's the most brightly colored parent is the female. Red-bellied babies can be very confusing to breeders as they all resemble the brightly colored male. You will find that almost every book you pick up will tell you incorrectly that young resemble the adult female.

Subspecies can also be very confusing in this group of birds. Forshaw is the most widely used reference on subspecies, but it is virtually impossible to tell a "more or less washed with orange" from an "orange" tummy in a single Senegal. Most people do not try to tell the difference in a Meyer's with a "bluish-green rump" from one with a "rump green washed with blue". I cannot tell the difference in "broad margins" on a Jardine's feathers from the "broader margins" of another subspecies. I have found Jardine's the most confusing of all. Most of us have

a limited number of birds of a species to observe and we should be cautious in declaring a subspecies without extensive comparison of birds from many sources. Many of us have had the experience of matching breeding pairs colorwise, only to have them produce young that are colored like another subspecies. Some of the answers may be found in studying the skin collections of the world's museums. Other answers lie in field studies in Africa which have been practically non-existent.

These birds like privacy for breeding in captivity and as little interference from keepers as possible. Wild-caught pairs seem to settle down and breed best in smaller cages (2' x 2'). I would

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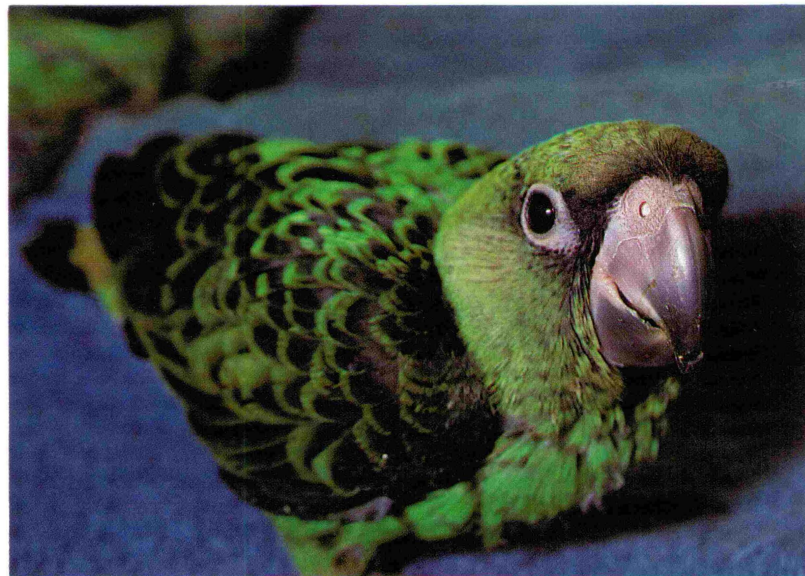
*The intensity of orange chest coloration can vary within the same clutch of baby Senegals.*



*Although less colorful than other members of the Poicephalus group, Brown-headed Parrots are gentle and quiet birds.*



*Jardine's have striking plumage of black and green with orange markings on the head, shoulders and thighs.*



*Baby Jardine's are captivating clowns, that often prefer not to be weaned.*

advise moving them to larger flight cages after a period of successful breeding for the long-range health of the birds. Many pairs like the dark and pairs in cages closest to the floor often breed first. They are easy to feed and do very well on pellets as they come from a dry environment in Africa.

Nestboxes measuring 8" x 8" x 8" deep work well for the smaller species and 12" x 12" x 24" for the larger species. They accept a lot of variation in nestboxes but usually do not like too large diameter boxes. If one type does not work, by all means, try another size or shape. Of course, knowing you have a genuine pair is critical, especially in species like Senegals where



*Cape Parrots are the largest species of the Poicephalus group.*



*Four week old Meyer's babies, note the large amount of yellow feathering on the shoulder.*

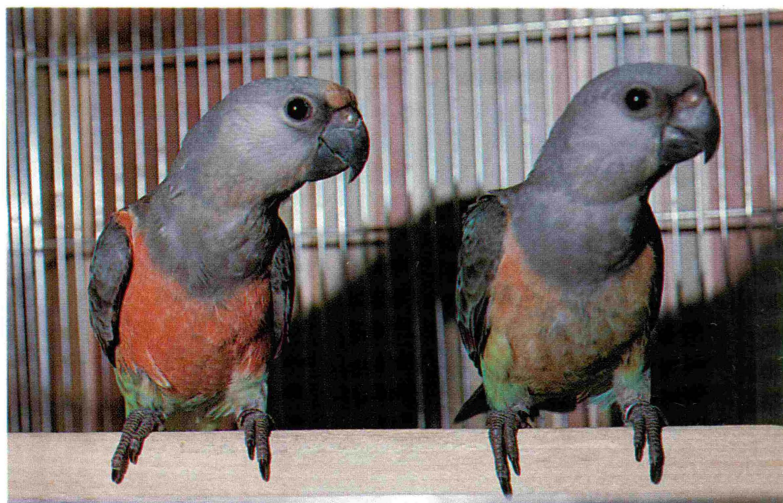


*This two month old Meyer's baby has paler plumage than adults, but more yellow on the shoulder and none on the head.*

Photos by Isabel Taylor



*The adult male Red-bellied Parrot displays the red coloration of the abdomen.*



*Both male and female Red-bellied youngsters can have a red coloration on the abdomen, although the females often have paler plumage.*



*The female Red-bellied Parrot lacks the coloration of the abdomen.*

the ratio of male to female is often 9:1 in imported birds.

There is so much we do not know about breeding these birds and so much we have to learn and observe. There may well be a bird density we should not exceed, so beware of putting too many birds of one species in one breeding area.

Handfeeding these birds is usually not a difficult task. Many breeders remove them from the nest between two to three weeks of age. Babies can be growly and will often respond to your state of mind. Senegals and Red-bellies especially need a lot of extra handling as babies to make them good pets. They do best if kept in clear containers and in the middle of human activity. Regurgitating during

handfeeding is common occurrence in this group of birds. It is seen in all species and is most commonly encountered when using commercial formulas. Be sure you weigh your birds daily so you will know if you have a disease/medical problem or this common feeding problem. I do not know a solution to this problem but it often helps to give their amount of food in smaller portions with a period of rest between portions. Because *Poicephalus* babies need extra handling, they often do best in small nurseries.

A common problem I am asked about is parents maiming or killing babies in the nest. Some pairs will tolerate you checking the nestbox every day, but other pairs cannot tolerate this at all. If you have a pair that have maimed or killed babies, my advice is to not look in the nestbox after you see their first egg until time to take the babies out for handfeeding. This could be a period of 50 to 60 days during which you must not look — even if the parents are outside the nestbox.

### Senegals

#### *Poicephalus senegalus*

These little birds have been imported into the U.S. in the tens of thousands and are the best known member of the *Poicephalus*. They are very resilient little birds, but wild-caught birds can be extremely wild and are often impossible to tame. On the contrary, handraised babies are a delight and one of the best parrot pets in my opinion. Juvenile plumage is paler than the adult and not “duller” as you will read in reference books. A well fed baby should have an iridescence to the feathers and no stress lines. Handraised birds keep their tameness, are forgiving even if you forget them and become quite attached to you. I have found myself getting very attached to several handraised Senegals whose devotion is hard to resist.

Senegals are good breeders, but can be very sensitive to interference during the nesting cycle. If they do not want to come off the nest for you to check, do not make them. They will average four eggs per clutch and have good fertility. They have laid for me almost every month of the year in an inside breeding facility. Most birds

seem to be compatible with the mate you give them, but you occasionally run across a Senegal who has definite ideas about who he/she likes and can be difficult to pair. Some pairs can be excellent foster parents, usually those who do not mind interference. I have had them raise all other species of *Poicephalus* babies. In addition, one pair hatched and raised a clutch of three Grays for ten days. Senegals have been very healthy birds for me. I do highly recommend medicating all wild-caught birds for tapeworms. Also, beware of feeding high protein pellets (20 percent) to new imports. Their systems are not able to handle such rich foods just out of quarantine and they should be slowly acclimated to better foods.

### Brown-headed Parrots

#### *Poicephalus cryptoxanthus*

These gentle and quiet birds are the least colorful of the *Poicephalus* group, but the sweet dispositions of handraised babies make up for that lack. They are very similar to Senegals, but lack the yellow/orange tummy and have a pale lower mandible and yellow-green eyes. I have found them to be good breeders, laying four eggs several times a year. They do not incubate until the third egg is laid, which has led some breeders to think they are not going to incubate at all. Many times their eggs have the airsack on the side but the babies hatched with no difficulties. Babies I have raised have had a nutrition problem that we do not understand at this time. They did not do well on commercial formulas, but started to gain weight again and thrived when I added strained corn to the commercial diet. They may need lower protein or perhaps corn has an ingredient they need.

### Meyer's Parrots

#### *Poicephalus meyeri*

These are beautiful birds and it is unusual to find a Meyer's who is not in excellent feather, even when sick. They inhabit a range in south-central Africa, larger than that of any other *Poicephalus* species. Young birds have no yellow on the head or thighs, but have very large shoulder patches, larger than those of an adult. Juvenile

plumage is lighter than an adult and upperwing coverts are lightly scalloped in blue-green. They are very active birds and adults often show no fear of larger birds or animals.

It is not unusual to have a pair of Meyer's three to four years before they breed. It seems to take the nervous wild-caught birds a long time to settle in and breed. Do not give up on them. They have clutches of three to five eggs and will breed one or more times a year. Like other *Poicephalus*, how many times they breed per year is different for each pair. There are now several reports of young breeding at four years old. Youngsters are active and curious and will jump onto anyone who opens the cage door. They say a few words, but as a general rule, they do not talk much.

### Red-bellied Parrots

#### *Poicephalus rufiventris*

These beautiful and charming little birds have not been well known in aviculture until recently. They are one of the sexually dimorphic species. The adult males have a carrot orange tummy and are orange under the wings; the adult females have a brown-green tummy and are brown under the wings. Juvenile plumage resembles the male. Sometimes young females have paler plumage than young males, but often they are identical. Some babies will have an orange frontal band, but this is not an indication of sex. To be sure of the sex of youngsters, you may need to have them blood sexed or wait for the first molt at about six to eight months of age.

Pairs can be excellent breeders when they start. Newly imported birds have been known to be in fragile health and extra precautions should be taken with these birds. They will breed year-round inside and often have three to four clutches a year. Three or four eggs are a normal clutch. Because these birds come from the areas of Ethiopia and Somalia, they are used to dry foods and breed very successfully on pellets. They do not drink much water. Domestic young are breeding at four to five years, but this is based on only a few birds so far.

Red-bellied babies need extra atten-

tion during the handraising process to be good pets. You cannot just feed a baby and put him back in the container. During weaning they may exhibit strange behavior, but they do settle down and grow out of this. They have strong personalities and owners become very attached to these little characters. They are very intelligent, talk well and keep learning for years.

### Rueppell's Parrots

*Poicephalus rueppellii*

These birds are rare in the U.S. and breeding reports are equally rare. A couple of breeding reports do tell of three to four month old domestic juveniles killing each other or killing their parents. Weaned youngsters should be housed separately, it appears, for their own safety and for that of their siblings and parents. We know so very little about these birds and hope breeders will join the African Parrot Society and share this information. It does appear from several reports that Rueppell's are not good pets and, because of their rarity, every effort should be made to breed each individual.

### Jardine's Parrots

*Poicephalus gulielmi*

These birds have unusual plumage with markings of black and green. The orange markings on head, shoulder and thighs vary widely from bird to bird. In Jardine's, as well as other *Poicephalus* species, we see quite a difference in individual size. This is not necessarily an indication of a subspecies, but is most likely a common evolutionary change. Wild-caught Jardine's, unlike the other *Poicephalus*, can become very friendly with their keepers. Babies are very relaxed and captivating clowns that prefer for you not to wean them.

Jardine's have been good breeders in captivity from most reports. Three eggs is an average clutch and they will breed two to three times a year. Domestic young are breeding at two years of age from several reports.

### Cape Parrots

*Poicephalus robustus*

Capes are the largest species of the *Poicephalus* group. They are uncommon in captivity and have been the

most difficult to breed for me and other breeders as well. Wild-caught birds can be extremely shy, especially the males, and they are prone to become ill when stressed. A more accurate statement might be that stress brings out whatever illnesses they may be hiding. They are sexually dimorphic with the female being the more brightly colored sex with orange on her forehead. Subspecies seem more easily identified, but most of the birds in the U.S. belong to the *suabelicus* subspecies. Youngsters all resemble females and the young of both sexes lose the forehead orange at six months of age. At about nine months, a molt returns the orange to the foreheads of females.

Wild-caught birds need a lot of privacy for breeding. They form loose pair bonds and I have switched mates without any trouble. Mine have done best when I put several pairs together in a room and hung their cages up high. Many pairs foul their nestboxes during breeding, which is a nuisance. They will lay three to four eggs per clutch and twice a year is probably average. One egg under the parents took four days to hatch from pipping. Fuzzy white babies are adorable and very funny with their large beaks. They often have a smile on their faces. Pairs breed well for a while, then often stop. Changing mates and moving them may help. Give them privacy for the nestbox area, but put them in close proximity to other pairs. They do a lot of loud chirping when breeding is going on and can raise quite a racket. Domestic birds show little fear and handraised males can be very domineering.

Few breeders have enough individuals of these species to keep a species from extinction alone. It, therefore, behooves us to work together and pool our knowledge and experience with these birds. Learning from more common species can provide important expertise before working with endangered species. Each individual bird becomes more important as our access to wild-caught stock dwindles. We know very little about the status of these species in the wild, but we would probably be correct in assuming that they are vulnerable, unpredictable and threatened. ●

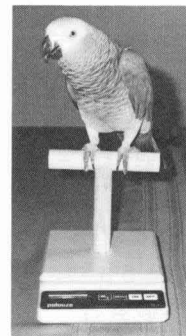


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