

Lovebirds

We welcome a new column to the "Watchbird" magazine. It is on a very popular parrot group — lovebirds. This new column will be written by Rick Smith, a very knowledgeable aviculturist who has specialized in the lovebird group. Rick has had lovebirds for 26 years. His very first lovebird was a Peach-faced Lovebird that lived with him for 16 years and accompanied Rick through his college years.

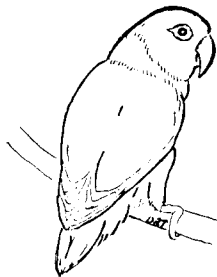
Rick has kept all eight of nine lovebird species kept in captivity. He has reproduced seven of these species and is looking forward to breeding the eighth (Red-faced Lovebird). Although he has always had an interest in all of the lovebird species, Rick has concentrated on the rarer species and has diligently encouraged all breeders of these rare species to exchange their knowledge and to make sure all singles are placed into a breeding situation. The need is great as the total captive numbers of many rare lovebird species are rapidly declining.

Rick is always trying to find better ways to reproduce the difficult species. For instance, he has created a specialized Red-faced Lovebird nest box in which the nest itself is lined with cork and filled with dried peat. The unique feature of this nest is the 2-1/2" D extended PVC entrance which is filled with rolled cork. This is done to encourage the courtship and breeding of this species by allowing the birds to chew through this soft material and create their own nest.

Rick Smith is the western director of the African Lovebird Society which has promoted the enjoyment and breeding of lovebirds for many years. Although Rick is known for his lovebird expertise, he enjoys many parrot species and is now concentrating his efforts on another beautiful parrot group, the Fig Parrots.

Rick's column has been titled "Lovebirds in Aviculture" and will be written on the many avicultural aspects of both the common and rare lovebird species. His first on the Madagascar Lovebird can be found in this issue.

Dale R. Thompson
Editor-in-Chief



The Rare Lovebirds... A Future Focus

by Rick Smith
Lakeview Terrace, California

There are nine species in the genus *Agapornis*, six of which are categorized as the "rares." They are Madagascar *A. cana*, Abyssinian *A. taranta*, Nyasa *A. lilinae*, Black-cheeked *A. nigrigenis*, Red-faced *A. pullaria* and Black-collared *A. swindermiana*.

The Black-collared is unknown in American aviculture. The remaining five species are infrequently kept and considered more difficult to breed and maintain than the Peach-faced, Masked or Fisher's Lovebirds. For this reason, it has become of paramount importance that experienced breeders specializing in these birds work together to maintain genetic diversity. The quantities of some of these birds in aviculture is alarmingly low and failure to outcross to new bloodlines can eventually lead to the bird's disappearance from our aviaries.

In this upcoming series of articles, I have attempted to gather information from experts on each of the respective species. I have been fortunate enough to breed all the rares except the Red-faced (although I'm still trying) and the Black-collared. In researching these articles, I was amazed how the methods used in attaining breeding success had some similarities, but also a great deal of variance. Understand, there is no right or wrong; *success is success!* I will try not to editorialize and allow you to draw your own conclusions.

The Madagascar Lovebird

Besides my own experience, I spoke at length with Barbara Broske of Florida, Ben Cooper of California and Mark Roberts of Georgia. All have been successful in breeding Madagascars. I thank them for their contribution.

The Madagascar is one of the smaller lovebirds and inhabits the island of Malagasy Republic and a few surrounding islands. They are a more primitive species, as are most of the fauna of Madagascar.

Madagascars have been imported frequently but have proven extremely difficult to establish on a long-term basis. The birds are prone to air-sac mites and a dealer told me that many were lost until the problem was identified and treated. Newly imported birds are also sensitive to temperature extremes.

Housing

I have maintained Madagascars in both cages and aviaries, and they have bred in both locations. However, in an aviary this bird is wild and nervous and virtually unapproachable.

Barbara Broske breeds in cages two feet square. She said she has offered larger three foot square cages but does not feel they work as well. Broske said, "It takes at least a year before they trust you."

Ben Cooper started with cages two feet square; however, changed to 14 inches square and the birds seemed steadier.

I bred them twice in planted flights 4' wide x 12' long x 7' high, as well as in 24 inch cages. I do not find these birds to be steady in an aviary. They are shy and elusive, although from a distance their courtship is fascinating to watch. The females are dominant and solicit the males for breeding. Males have been killed by aggressive females. I lost several many years ago in this way. My first hen acquired from the San Diego Zoo proved very selective in her choice of mates. There is a weird irony here. In captivity, there seems to be more females lost than males and in the nest there are usually more males born. Probably in the wild these extra males are necessary because the females are so vicious and some males may be killed by



The sexually dimorphic Madagascar Lovebird is one of the smaller species. As an adult, the male acquires a grayish-white head and breast.

hens. As mentioned, in captivity it is almost always the female that dies first and there is usually a surplus of males.

Breeding

Mark Roberts of Covington, Georgia wrote me with his experience in colony breeding:

"It was not until I allowed the birds to select their own mates that they started to breed freely for me. This can only be done with young birds that have never mated or formed pair bonds. They should be marked so that they can be easily separated and caged. This should be done rather quickly, because there is always the possibility of fighting. I usually put six birds (three males, three hens) in a cage the size described with four nestboxes, and separate them when they have chosen nestboxes. Many breeders would say this is risky, but it has worked well for me; in fact, two years ago three pairs quickly selected boxes, mated, and raised a total of 13 babies in a cage that was only 60 centimeters square."

Birds were raised in colonies at the San Diego Zoo years ago, however, I remember seeing a disproportionate number of hens.

The Madagascar has been bred, not infrequently, even by novices; however, seldom have they been sustained into successive generations.

They need to be the focus of breeders dedicated to a long-term cooperative program.

A variety of nestboxes have been offered and used in breeding. Broske uses regular lovebird boxes with pieces of wood in the bottom and cut palm fronds inserted in predrilled holes in the box. Cooper is currently using an L-shaped box. I prefer the diagonally hung hexagon-shaped box (used by Dr. Baer), however I have used English Budgie boxes with success. I offer a mix of shavings and sphagnum moss in the box (some of which the birds throw out) and fronds from the Fan Palm. Cooper states not to use Eucalyptus.

My birds resent inspection and the hens make a "growling" noise inside the box when approached. Many years ago, my first pair abandoned their young because of my inspection, however they were kept in a large aviary and were quite wild. Broske inspects regularly and removes babies for banding. Cooper has about 100 Madagascars, the only lovebird in his collection. He notes that he bred successfully for years, then the birds just quit. He removed them, gave them new L-shaped boxes and they started again with one hen raising her first

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clutch at six months old. Broske says her captive-raised birds start breeding at about seven months of age. Incubation is around 21 days and young fledge at seven to eight weeks, becoming independent two to three weeks later.

Diet

Ben Cooper feeds keet and finch mixture supplemented with one tablespoon of soaked (not sprouted) millet. He also feeds CD mix (insectile).

Barbara Broske feeds keet and cockatiel mix as well as Vita-Finch and Vita-Canary. She supplements "a lot of green," however, states many of the *dark* greens are "strong" and the birds won't eat them. She also feeds sweet potato and high grade wheat bread put through a food processor. She says imported birds are finicky and are hard to feed supplements, however, the second generation are better feeders. She prefers Romaine, broccoli and carrot.

I concur with Broske on the difficulty of establishing supplemental food as a part of their diet. Mine prefer small seeds, including niger and I feed extra straight canary seed, and also spray millet. Fruit is seldom accepted, however some greens and vegetables are.

In Aviculture

The Madagascar Lovebird was one of the first lovebirds imported and, in the past, reached Europe in the thousands. Yet they still remain rare and are very difficult to establish. The late David West told me they will even die of fright in the net, and they should be moved in their nestboxes whenever possible.

The two excellent breeders acknowledged in this article are to be commended for their ongoing dedication to this species. There are few of the Madagascars left in the country, and members of the African Love Bird Society need to give immediate attention to ensure their survival and continued breeding to successive generations. ●

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Breeding the Tui Parakeet

(*Brotogeris sanctithomae sanctithomae*)

by Robbie Harris
La Habra, California

The Tui Parakeet (*Brotogeris sanctithomae sanctithomae*) is part of the *Brotogeris* family. The Tui is a "cousin" to the ever popular Grey-cheeked Parakeet, as both are in the *Brotogeris* genus. The Tui is a small bird of seven inches in length, and built on the more slender side compared to its cousin. A nice different feature from the Grey-cheek is that the Tui Parakeets do not have a harsh loud voice. They have a voice like most *Brotogeris*, but just do not seem to use it as often. I would consider them quiet compared to the Grey-cheek.

The Tui is mainly shades of a bright green, with the breast, abdomen, under the wings and tail, lower back and tail coverts more of a yellowish green. The wing flights are bluish green, with the blue a bit brighter on the primary coverts. The most noticeable differences of the Tui Parakeets compared to other *Brotogeris* parakeets are the chestnut-colored beak and glowing golden colored iris. The head is the most striking feature of this little bird. Those golden eyes are really set off with the bright yellow forehead. To many people, the Tui Parakeet appears to be in color a mini version of the Yellow-crowned Amazon (*Amazona ochrocephala*). The Tui Parakeet inhabits areas over eastern Amazonas, Brazil, westward through southeastern Colombia and northeastern Peru to eastern Ecuador and northern Bolivia.

Over 10 years ago, I was fortunate enough to purchase a few of these beautiful birds. Once the birds were surgically sexed, I ended up with two pairs to work with, in high hopes of producing more of these beautiful birds. It took years to finally get a pair to settle in and produce successfully.

The two pairs were set up outdoors in wire cages, no added heat or cooling, for the weather here rarely drops below 40°F. Each pair was set up in an individual breeding cage. The cages measured 48" wide, 17" tall and 15"

deep. For perches I prefer to use natural tree branches. The branches used are from my own orchard of over 50 various fruiting trees grown on my property. I do not use insecticide so I can assume they are safe. The wooden nest boxes used measured 11" x 10" x 7" wide, having a round 2" diameter hole; these were offered to each pair. The nest boxes were lined in a dark cork, which was adhered to the inside with a non-toxic glue. To the bottom of the nest box three inches of pine shavings were added to use as a base. Photos and more details on nest box lining is described in my book "Grey-cheeked Parakeets and Other *Brotogeris*," T.F.H.

All my birds that are set up in breeding cages are in a large wire enclosure. This wire building houses many pairs of birds which do not seem to be bothered by their close neighbors of different species. A few pairs of birds set up right next to the Tui Parakeets are Painted Conures, Pearly Conures, Peach-fronted Conures, Dusky Conures, Blue-crowned Conures, Senegal Parrots and Tovi Parakeets. The diet I provided for the Tui Parakeets is very similar to the diet I offer to most of my other parrots. This diet in detail can be found in either of my books, "Breeding Conures," T.F.H. or "Grey-cheeked Parakeets and Other *Brotogeris*," T.F.H. The Tui Parakeets have available to them at all times a variety of dry seeds including medium size gray sunflower seed, safflower seed and a parakeet mix containing 42% canary seed. Along with the dry seeds the birds are given a daily bowl of fresh cut up fruits, vegetables, sprouted seeds and greens. Corn on the cob and apple are their favorite foods which are always the first to be eaten.

At the end of May 1992, I found an egg buried in one of the nest boxes of Tui Parakeets. This egg was removed, the shell was slightly porous, but even though it appeared no good I still placed it in my incubator. This egg