



The Rare Lovebirds... A Future Focus

The Red-faced Lovebird

by Rick Smith
Lakeview Terrace, California

The Red-faced Lovebird is a very pretty little bird that inhabits much of equatorial Africa. In fact, the Red-faced and the Black-collared Lovebirds have the largest range of any of the species.

There are two subspecies, and I believe I have had both, however the difference is slight, being a variation of the rump feathers. The nominate subspecies, *Agapornis pullaria pullaria*, is from West and Central Africa. The subspecies *ugandae* is from Uganda and allegedly northeast Tanzania. It is not known if the two overlap.

The Red-faced Lovebird is sexually dimorphic with the male being brighter in color in the face. The facial color of the females varies, and even changes during the breeding season. One of the most attractive features is that the body color is very bright "apple" green, not the olive or dark greens of the Peach-faced or eye-ring species. As mentioned, the rump is a bright blue. The bill is red.

The Red-faced has been imported into the United States somewhat infrequently. It was certainly one of the first species to arrive here, dating back to the thirties, however for reasons I will discuss later, never became established. At least two dealers have imported them since the start of quarantine, however, the last birds to my knowledge arrived about two years ago in Chicago and there have been none brought in since. Because they are poor breeders, and there are not established domestic strains, this could mean the end of their presence in American aviculture. As with the other sexually dimorphic species (the Madagascar and Abyssinian Lovebirds), the females are the most aggressive of the sexes. Sigie Meyer of SE BIRD AND SUPPLY told me he kept them apart in quarantine because of this.

Their dietary requirements are not particularly unusual, however I would not call them great eaters. Small seeds form the basis of the diet I feed (I use a

Kaytee Mix). They do not eat sunflower or safflower here. They do like apple and will eat some greens. However, all my lovebirds relish a Kaytee soak and cook mixture I prepare daily and mix with vegetables, but the Red-faced will not touch it. In a mixed aviary with finches (although they are sometimes aggressive with each other, they are not aggressive with other birds and can be maintained in a community flight - do not try this with any other lovebird!), they ate meal worms.

I compared the diet of my birds with that of several other aviculturists working with the species. One breeder told me her birds ate cranberries. Her birds also ate legumes and rice, which, as mentioned, mine will not touch after a year of trying. At the San Diego Zoo where there is a number of these birds, I think most of the "soft" foods are eaten by other aviary inhabitants and the Red-faced Lovebirds still feed mostly on Kaytee small hookbill mix.

Still, the major problem with the Red-faced Lovebirds is not that they won't eat. The problem is that it is very difficult to get them interested in breeding. Success has occurred occasionally, however it is hard to look at these cases as other than isolated events.

In order to understand this lovebird's uniqueness, let us look at the natural history of the bird. In the wild the birds nest in arboreal termite mounds. They tunnel the nests straight in, then down and to the right to form a completely darkened nest chamber about the size of an orange. The nest itself is warmed by the heat generated by the insects inside, and must certainly provide a warm comfortable brooder for the hatchling birds when the parents go off to feed.

So as breeders began to work with this species, we had to become creative in what we offered the birds to entice them to nest. One breeder in South Africa offered an actual termite mound he collected himself and raised the birds

Photo by Rick Smith



Our typical daily soft food mix consists of a wide variety of raw fruits, vegetables, flowers and soaked grains offered in large feeding dishes to make it readily available to the bird without throwing out the top layer.

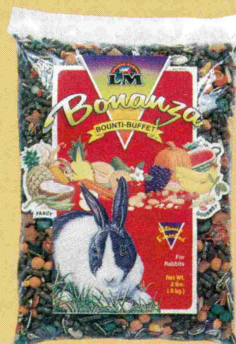
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successfully. In the United States this is not a practical alternative. Various types of boxes have been designed, some packed with cork, some with compressed peat, and here in the United States one breeder packed a box with dried grass. There has been success in a plain Budgie box, which somewhat proves my theory that if a bird wants to nest bad enough, it will even under less than perfect conditions. I hope not to offend anyone by saying that I think some successes came through the "luck" of owning an exceptional pair.

My new nest boxes this year (my latest design) are rectangular in shape with PVC spout lined with rolled cork. The birds must tunnel through the cork to get to the box, which is also lined with cork and filled with compressed peat. The new and improved model will have a false bottom which could hold a small reptile heater that could be turned on after chicks hatch to maintain a high brood temperature. Well this year I got further than I have ever before with the Red-faced. Two pairs from two completely different sources went to nest in the late fall of 1993. They tunneled through the 2 1/2 in. PVC cork-filled spout and started to tunnel downward into the peat. I might note here that I would much prefer a solid block of cork to the peat, but have never been able to find it. European breeders have had success with the cork. For the first time ever, I observed pairs not only feeding but copulating as well, so I felt I was on the right track. Then on January 17th, at 4:30 in the morning I, as well as my birds, were awakened by a major earthquake epicentered about five miles from my ranch. That was the end of the breeding season for the rare birds. I might add that one pair was kept in a 12 ft. aviary, while the other was kept in a 4 ft. breeding cage, and the results were the same.

In speaking with two breeders in the African Love Bird Society who have been successful in the last two years, I offer these accounts.

Jackie Eckman of Baltimore, Maryland provided a custom nest box, a small Budgie box lined with half inch sheets of cork. The box was not filled, only lined. The birds were kept in Safe-guard stackable cages 18 in. square. The pair of Red-faced was on top with a Boston fern for privacy. The nest box went up in November and was investigated by the parents. At this time the female was noticeably paler in the face and feathers on the nape were smutty or

brownish, just before nesting commenced (I have noticed this on my birds, as well as on the birds at the San Diego Zoo). Jackie observed the male feeding the hen but did not inspect the nest for two weeks or so. At that time there were two eggs and a week later four. She candled the eggs and all were fertile. After about 20 days she heard peeping from the nest and inspected, whereby the normally steady parents panicked and ultimately two babies were killed. One baby was pulled at four weeks and handfed, with the other left with the parents. Both offspring (males) were raised successfully, Jackie told me that black pinfeathers on the wings of the males are discernible very early. Thus sexing is possible in the nest.

Marilena Salmones of Plano, Texas raised three Red-faced. She also raised the birds in relatively small cages and emphasized that the birds are place high up to give them a sense of privacy and security. She also reported the change in the color of the nape of the female. Her nest box was packed with sun-dried grass. She also cautions against interference of any kind. Marilena raised females.

If second generation birds were exchanged by breeders like Jackie and Marilena, we would, hopefully, in subsequent nests see some of the shyness and specialization bred out of these birds. The Hooded Parakeet of Australia, also a termite-nester and once considered very difficult, is now established. We do not have very many Red-faced Lovebirds left and they will probably die out. This species was virtually absent from aviculture for many years prior to quarantine. The only known specimens were two males I owned (which were lent to the San Diego Zoo and the source of many of the photographs published of the species) and a few imported by Lee Horton which did not thrive. In fact in the seventies, I finally gave Horton my only remaining male to mate with his only remaining hen. They did nest in a palm log, tunneling and even laying fertile eggs, but none were successfully raised. Thus, I don't really see much hope of establishing the Red-faced at this time. If we ever receive any more importations of wild caught birds (they are in no way endangered in the wild), we need to be more prudent in trying to establish a self-sustaining domestic strain. ➔