

# African Lovebirds

## Genus *Agapornis*

by Kristine Kuchinski, DVM

**A**frican lovebirds are a group of delightful small parrots which belong to the genus *Agapornis*. There are nine species comprising this genus which are divided into primitive and more advanced species. The primitive species are those which taxonomists believe broke off the evolutionary branch earlier and are characterized by lack of a white eyering and sexual dimorphism. These primitive species are *A. cana* (Madagascar), *A. taranta* (Abyssinian) and *A. pullaria* (Red-faced).

### Madagascar Lovebird *Agapornis cana*

The Madagascar Lovebird is the only lovebird found on the island of Madagascar and is considered the most primitive of the *Agapornis* genus. It is sexually

dimorphic (the sexes can be easily distinguished from one another). The male has a gray head and the female is all green. This is the smallest lovebird, averaging around 30 grams body weight. In the wild they are found in small flocks of five to 30 birds at elevations up to 1500m. (5000 ft.). They feed on grass seeds. In captivity they will eat small seeds such as those found in finch, canary or budgie mixes. They also should be offered a mix of chopped vegetables and fruits along with a mineral block. The soft foods are especially important when babies are in the nest.

They are solitary nesters and it may be best to allow them their own cage or flight for breeding. In the wild they are reported to breed in November and December but seem to breed year round in captivity, even when kept outdoors.

They will breed in cages as small as 1 ft. x 1 ft. x 18 in. or in large flights. As with other species, it is probably best to offer them as much room as you can. I use 2 ft. x 2 ft. x 3 ft. cages for all my lovebirds. Madagascars may breed in regular budgie type nestboxes or nest logs, but I have had best success with a tunnel nestbox. They seem to favor willow as nesting material, but may use palm frond or other materials as well. The female will chew these into small C-shape pieces which she will tuck into ruffled feathers and carry back to the nest. They are pad nesters and do not build elaborate nests. The clutch size ranges from four to six small elliptical white eggs. The female incubates and is usually joined by the male in the nest at night. Incubation usually lasts about 23 days. Several sources state the young emerge from the nest in plumage resembling the female. In captivity, the sex of the young has been evident with the first feathers on the head. Males are gray and females green, just as in the adult.

Young fledge at approximately 43 days. This may differ for handfed babies which may wean quickly. The parents frequently feather pick the young if they are not pulled for handrearing.

The Madagascar is a quiet and attractive lovebird. It is best to separate the young into pairs or small groups as they frequently become aggressive at four to six months of age and may kill cage mates when in crowded situations. This may occur as they are trying to pair off. Even when handfed, Maddies have limited pet potential as most must be handled very frequently to retain their tameness.

### Abyssinian Lovebird *Agapornis taranta*

The Abyssinian Lovebird is found at higher elevations than the others (5,000-10,000 ft.). It is frequently seen in the tops of junipers and is reported to feed on the berries. It is a large lovebird, averaging 50 grams. It is also called the Black-winged lovebird as the males have black feathers on the underside of their wings. This is also true of male Madagascars and Red-faced lovebirds, though. Sexes are easily identified as male Abyssinians have a red forehead and the females are all green.

Diets most frequently fed are small hookbill mixes together with a vegetable and fruit mix. A mineral block should be offered. Many feel it is important to



Photo by Dale R. Thompson and George D. Dodge

The Masked Lovebird *Agapornis personata* is almost as common in aviculture as the popular Peach-faced Lovebird. It builds elaborate nests and has several color mutations.



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breeding success to offer free choice sunflower seeds as well.

In the wild they are solitary nesters and should be given their own breeding set up. They may breed in regular budgie nestboxes, but many breeders have had best success with the tunnel type nestbox. A small portion of sphagnum moss is soaked in water and after the excess water is squeezed out placed into the bottom of the nestbox. The female carries little to no nesting material into the box and will probably throw out anything you place in it as well. They are pad nesters and most will build a small nest with only a few feathers. The female tends to vocalize loudly during copulation and may alert you to any mating activity. Clutches average two to four eggs. Incubation lasts about 25 days and the young fledge at about 50 days. The young are colored as the female until the molt. Some males may have a few red periorbital feathers at this stage, though.

Abyssinians tend to be quiet and are attractive. They make wonderful pets when handfed and may be capable of mimicking some whistles.

### Red-faced Lovebird *Agapornis pullaria*

The Red-faced is the last of the primitive species and is probably the least commonly bred lovebird in aviculture. They have the most extensive range of any of the lovebirds. The male has a brighter red head than the female and has black on the underside of his wings. They have a peculiar habit of hanging upside down as hanging parrots do. It is thought that lovebirds are related more closely to hanging parrots than other psittacines. This habit may have developed as a security device, allowing the birds to sleep hanging at the ends of branches hiding in the leaves. It is a smaller lovebird, averaging 37 grams.

The birds readily accept a diet of smaller seed similar to the Madagascar's diet and relish the vegetable and fruit mix offered. A mineral block should be offered.

Red-faced are solitary nesters in the wild, but there are reports of breeding activity in a colony situation in captivity. They nest in termite mounds in the wild and some think the activity in the termite mound may lend extra heat to the nest. Aviculturists have struggled to meet the nesting requirements for the Red-faced without consistent success. However, San Diego Wild Animal Park reported

breeding last year in a nest log in a heavily planted flight. Others have tried filling nestboxes with cork for the birds to tunnel into. It seems that tunneling may be an important aspect to stimulating successful breeding. Others have used heating sources to maintain a constant warm temperature in the nest. More work is needed to master this species.

### Black-collared Lovebird *Agapornis swinderniana*

Also known as Swinderen's Lovebird, this is the most elusive lovebird and no known specimens are in captivity. It lives in a more heavily wooded and lush area than other lovebirds and may be difficult to trap as it may remain in the treetops, rarely coming lower. There are a few in museum collections. The few times it has been captured it has proven difficult to keep alive in captivity. It seems to have unusual dietary needs and has only accepted figs.

### Peach-faced Lovebird *Agapornis roseicollis*

This is probably the best known species in the genus and comes in an endless variety of color mutations. It inhabits grassy scrub land in Africa and is monomorphic (sexes are not easily distinguished). Sexing is commonly done by examining pelvic bone width, but many factors may affect this and so it is not 100% accurate. They have no eyering.

The diet consists of seeds, leaves, berries and buds in the wild. They readily accept a diet of small hookbill mix, vegetable and fruit, and mineral block.

They are colony nesters in the wild and have been found taking over the nests of weavers. They are willing to accept budgie boxes and if bred in a colony there should be more boxes than pairs in the flight to avoid fighting over nesting space. The female will build a nest using nesting material such as palm fronds. The material is chewed into long narrow strips and then tucked into ruffled rump feathers and carried back into the nest. Males may chew up the nesting material, but do not carry it back into the nest. Clutch size ranges from three to seven. If one repeatedly gets large (>8 eggs) clutches of infertile eggs, the pair may be two hens. Incubation lasts 23 days and the young fledge at about 43 days. Some color mutations may be identified by the color of the chick's first down.

Peach-faced Lovebirds can be quite noisy, but make excellent pets when

handfed or pulled from the nest shortly after weaning. They may be kept singly, as pairs, or in groups. They also are excellent beginner birds for those interested in breeding birds.

### **Masked Lovebird** *Agapornis personata*

The masked lovebirds have white eyerings and are monomorphic. There are four birds which are considered to be subspecies, depending on which taxonomist you are referring to. The four are the Masked *A. p. personata*, Fischer *A. p. fischeri*, Nyassaland *A. p. lilianae* and the Black-cheeked *A. p. nigrigenis*. The subspecies idea is supported by the finding of Masked and Fischer's hybridizing in the wild. There are also color mutations established among these species in aviculture.

The Masked and Fischer have blue rump feathers while the Black-cheeked and Nyasa have no blue rump feathers at all. The presence of blue in the rumps of the latter two indicate hybridization. They all are found in grasslands and are colony breeders. They have similar dietary requirements as the Peach-faced.


Reproductively they are similar to the Peach-faced as well and can be set up in the same manner. They tend to build more elaborate nests which may even become dome-shaped with a tunnel leading to a nest chamber. Clutch size ranges from three to six eggs, and incubation lasts about 22 days.

### **Medical problems**

Some of the common medical problems seen in lovebirds include trauma from other lovebirds, egg binding, eye problems, feather picking, and viral diseases. Lovebirds frequently cannibalize dead birds in the areas of the head so examine dead found to determine if it was really trauma inflicted by another bird or other causes that led to its demise. Madagascar Lovebirds are particularly prone to air sac mites which may be treated with ivermectin. Should you have or suspect any problems in your lovebirds, seek the advice of an avian veterinarian.

Two excellent references on lovebirds for the experienced or novice aviculturist are:

Dilger, W.C., 1960. *The comparative ethology of the african parrot genus Agapornis*, Zeitschrift für Tierpsychologie, 17, p. 649-685.

Dorrestein, G.M. and M.H. van der Hage, 1987. *Aviculture and veterinary problems in lovebirds*, Proc. of Assoc. of Avian Vet., p. 243-261. 

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