

Black and Rajah Lorries

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C*halcopsitta atra* has long been one of my favorite birds and has been underrated as an avicultural subject. One of the reasons people choose to keep lorries is because they are exceptionally colorful birds. So why choose a black species?

For me they have two outstanding attributes: intelligence and, in females, the potential for great affection and gentleness towards their human friends. Add to this all the other wonderful characteristics of lorries in general, and the result is a very desirable bird, provided that you can overlook its one fault – a very harsh voice. Lorries have a special appeal for me and I find it hard to understand why more people do not keep them. The usual explanation is that their care is too demanding. This is not true in terms of how many minutes per day need be devoted to each pair but they usually need to be fed twice daily.

Black Lorries have been in my care continuously since the 1970s, so this is one of the species which I know very well. I kept and bred them in my own collection in the UK; then, during the time I was curator at Loro Parque, Tenerife, two pairs produced about three lots of young annually. During the past six years, I have also had the beautiful subspecies *insignis*, the Rajah Lorry, in my care in the breeding center at Palmitos Park, Gran Canaria. Both pairs currently have young; one pair bred for the first time in 1992 and the other pair in 1993.

We are unlikely to see any more wild-caught Black or Rajah Lorries. It is certainly easier to appreciate captive-bred birds, especially those which have been kept in close association with people, as they quickly become tame. In contrast, mature wild-caught birds can remain aloof for years. Some wild-caught birds, no doubt trapped younger, become quite fearless. However, from my comparatively limited experience of wild-caught Rajah Lorries, they are more timid. I know from their coloration that those at Palmitos Park were young when they entered the collection, yet

they have never become tame. Their offspring, hand-reared and parent-reared, are very confiding, however, and quite delightful in every way.

Among the lorries, few take longer to mature than wild-caught *Chalcopsitta* species. They do not breed before four years and their plumage takes longer to attain full brilliance. The Rajahs which came to Palmitos Park in 1988 had quite dull red on thighs and forehead until 1994. The brilliance of the plumage in these areas has increased greatly during the past year. As so often happens in parrots, captive-bred young color up more quickly and three year old birds are nearly as brightly colored as their parents.

The nominate Black Lorry *Chalcopsitta atra atra* has no brilliant colors to display. It is not entirely black, as the underside of the tail is muted red and yellow. Its length is about 12 in. and its weight about 230g to 240g. The males I have had in my care have been noticeably larger, with a bigger head and beak and a much more assertive personality. The Rajah Lorry is slightly more slender in build and I have not discerned any difference in male and female body size. Indeed, for a long time I believed the male of one of our breeding pairs had been wrongly sexed as a female because the female's first six clutches (over a period of 16 months) were infertile! I recently weighed four young ones: eight months, 200g; 10 months, 209g; 30 months, 209g and 11 months, 233g. Possibly these weights represent three females and one male.

The Rajah is, in my eyes, one of the most beautiful of all lorries. The glossy vinous purple-black of the body scarlet forehead, lores, thighs, under wing coverts and bend of the wing, and the yellow and red underside to the tail, give it an exceptional beauty. One absolutely must see it in sunlight to appreciate the unusual beauty of its body plumage. It is not black. Immature birds nearly resemble Black Lorries except perhaps for a few scattered red feathers mainly on the head and neck. At a few

months old the under wing coverts are dull brick red. At this stage they can easily be confused with Bernstein's Lorry *C.a. bernsteini* which has the under wing coverts just tinged with red or vinous and a small area of red on lores and at the bend of the wing. In the Black Lorry the rump is faintly tinged with blue but in adults of *bernsteini* and *insignis* it is deep blue.

In captivity, Black and Rajah Lorries are nectar- and fruit-eaters. Unlike the Yellow-streaked, the birds in my care show little enthusiasm for vegetables, even fresh corn. Pear, apple and cactus fruits are their favorite. I give branches laden with seed-bearing cones of *Casuarina exquisitifolia* as often as possible to all the lorries. It is a natural food of some species and nearly all captive lorries welcome its appearance, even if only to chew the bark and needles. The young ones destroy everything and become very excited when they see me bearing branches.

Black and Rajah Lorries can be very prolific, producing three nests of young per year. I advocate that the pair should be allowed to rear at least one youngster annually. Indeed, one of our pairs is so prolific that I leave the young one with them for several months after it has left the nest. I prefer this method of giving them a rest as I never like to remove a lorry's nest-box. It is too important for them as a roosting site. I leave young lorries of many species for months with their parents and have never had a case of aggression with the larger species - only with the smaller ones (and then mild because the young one was removed at the very first sign). I recommend leaving young with the parents for at least five weeks after they have left the nest because they learn important aspects of behavior from their parents. This will, I believe, help to ensure their own success as parents. Last year I left a single Black-capped Lorry *Lorius lory erythrothorax* with its parents while they reared the youngster of the next nest. If I wanted a bird for breeding, this would be the one I would choose.

Black and Rajah Lorries lay two eggs which hatch after 24 or 25 days. The chicks weigh 6g on hatching and have longish (but not thick) white or gray down. They are banded with 7.5mm internal dimension rings at 16 or 17 days. The rate of development is approximately the same whether parent-reared or hand-reared, although early weights are much higher in parent-reared young.



Family of Black Lories at Loro Parque, Tenerife. Note the conspicuous white eye rings which is typical of young birds (in the background).

For example, two chicks from different pairs were both banded on day 16 when one weighted 64g and the other 80g, yet a chick reared from an abandoned egg was banded at 17 days when it weighed only 35g. I should state here that I have closed banded parent-reared lorries of many species and have never experienced a problem. In my opinion, it is vitally important that all lorry breeders identify their young in this way. Young leave the nest at between 10 and 11 weeks. The age of hand-reared birds at independence varies enormously, from only 45 days, up to about 13 weeks, depending on the method of weaning and the individual bird. One reared alone, especially if it is a female, will be clinging and affectionate and not in a hurry to wean. I never try to rush their weaning. When they are moved from the hand-rearing room to a suspended cage outside, it is a mistake for the hand-feeder to suddenly cut off the attention they have been used to. They are very sensitive at this stage and really appreciate the warm hand-rear-

ing food which I take to them in the early morning for the next couple of weeks or so. I don't spoon feed them, but offer it in a small dish, alongside the nectar. They always take the rearing food first. Incidentally, this consists of a mixture of Milupa baby cereal, wheat hearts (wheat germ cereal), the commercial food Nekton-Lori and papaya blended with bottled water.

Until they are three years old most of our young ones are exhibited in a large aviary of various lorry species in the park. After this age problems of aggression would occur. This aviary is a tremendous attraction for its color and constant activity. I find it impossible to pass it by without being held spell bound by the lorries antics and wonderful colors. For most of the half million annual visitors to the park this aviary is their introduction to lorries. I wonder how many go away and decide that they would like to find out more about these colorful and playful parrots - and perhaps decide to keep a pair for themselves? 🐦



Photos by Rosemary Low

Young Black Lory, aged five weeks hatched at Loro Parque

Parent-reared Rajah Lory, 51 days, weighing 185g.



Two year old Rajah Lorries hatched in the breeding center at Palmitos Park, Gran Canaria. Note the red, blue and yellow in the plumage of these colorful birds.