

How to Identify Three Similar Species

by Fred Perry, Norco, CA

In these days of ever dwindling bird populations, captive and wild, we who attempt to maintain a viable breeding program can no longer afford to identify species incorrectly and mismatch our breeding pairs. In the genus *Psittacula* there exist three species which the untrained eye can easily confuse with one another. The three are paired erroneously with little or no breeding success being the result. We will attempt to remove the veil of mystery to the proper identification of the three.

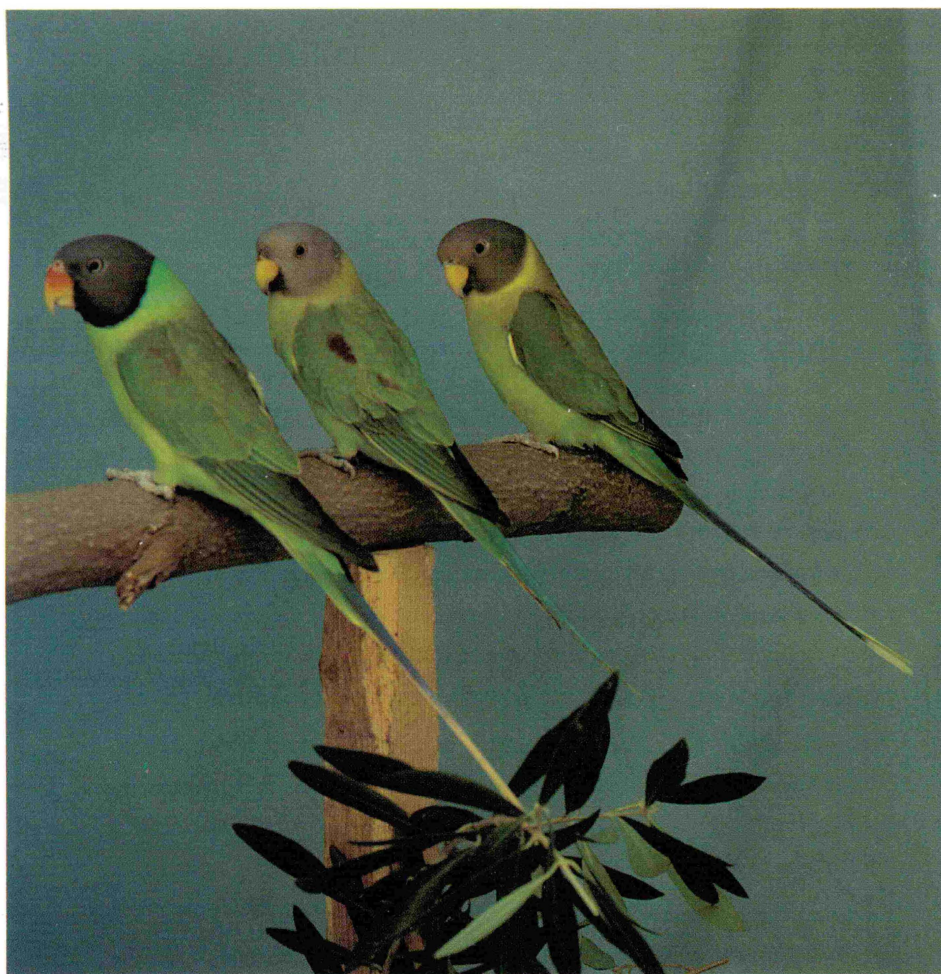
The Blossom-headed, Plum-headed and the Slaty-headed Parakeets are probably the most often confused and mismatched trio in aviaries today. The most common of birds in years past, the three have become increasingly less available. We should make every effort to insure that we do not waste our more limited supply of breeding stock.

The Plum-headed and Blossom-headed hens are the most commonly confused with one another from what we see when visiting other's aviaries. They are very similar in appearance, but they much prefer to be with their particular species and they know the difference.

While both have gray heads and green bodies, the trim is different and these differences are easy to spot once you know what to look for. The Blossom-headed hens have maroon "blood patches" on their wings and their tails are yellow tipped. In contrast, the Plum-headed hens have no wing patch and their tails are tipped in white. The Plum-headed hen also sports a yellow neck ring just below its gray head and the Blossom-headed does not.

The male Plum-headed has a reddish purple head and a tail with a white tip. In contrast, the male Blossom-headed has a light pink head and a yellow tipped tail.

The most easily recognized differ-



A comparison of three similar *Psittacula* hens: L. to R.: Slaty-headed *P.b.himalayana*, Blossom-headed *P. roseata*, Plum-headed *P. cyanocephala*.

Species Identification Key

- A. Red upper mandible, yellowish tip with yellowish lower mandible.....
 1. Tail green and blue, tipped with yellow, black neck ring.....**Slaty-headed**
P. Himalayana
 a. Red wing bars..... **male**
 b. No wing bars..... **female**
 2. Tail violet-blue, tipped with white, black neck ring.....
P. finschii
 a. Red wing bars..... **male**
 b. No wing bars..... **female**
- B. Pale yellow or orange-yellow upper mandible.
 1. Tail blue, tipped with white.....**Plum-headed**
 a. Head reddish purple, red wing bars, black collar, turquoise nuchal collar..... **male**
 b. Head gray, yellow collar, no black neckring, no wing bars.. **female**
 2. Tail blue, tipped with yellow.....**Blossom-headed**
 a. Head light pink, red wing bars, black neckring with no turquoise nuchal collar **male**
 b. Head gray, no yellow collar, no black neckring, small red wing bars **female**

Laminated copies of this chart may be obtained by contacting managing editor S. L. Dingle who will refer your requests to me.

ence between the Slaty-headed and the Blossom-headed/Plum-headed group is the Slaty-headed's reddish upper mandible with a yellow tip. It is a radical departure from the yellow or yellow/orange upper mandible of the Blossom-headed/Plum-headed group. In addition, both sexes of the Slaty-headed possess a pure gray head with both sexes having a black neck ring and "moustache".

The male and female Slaty-headed can easily be distinguished from one another by the male's maroon wing patches and the female's lack of them. This is the only visible difference I have so far detected, but it always works. Occasionally I have seen females with a maroon feather or two showing as a wing patch but it is obviously smaller than the male's patch and barely visible. You will probably never encounter this but it does show up now and then.

The two species of Slaty-headed can easily be identified and distinguished from one another. The *P. himalayana* is the larger of the two types. It possesses a blue tail tipped with yellow. The *P. finschii* subspecies sports a violet/blue tail tipped with white.

I realize this is considerable information to digest so I have devised a dichotomous key to serve as a quick, handy reference to make it easier. The word dichotomous may sound forbidding but it only means divided into two parts. In this key you are given two choices for distinguishing characteristics such as beak color, tail color, etc. You first choose the characteristic under capital "A" or "B", which is beak color. The next step is to choose "1" or "2" under The "A" or "B" heading you have previously chosen. This will give you the species. Then choose the small "a" or "b" under the "1" or "2" you have chosen to determine the sex.

To promote greater breeding success with what we still have available, it would be advantageous if we each specialized in a particular genus or species instead of haphazardly choosing whatever comes along. In this manner we could more readily learn about the various behaviors of a small group and become more proficient in their management and then share what we learn. Duplication of errors could be avoided and greater successes could be achieved by many instead of by a privileged few. ➤

Rufous-bellied Niltava

by Maarten de Ruiter
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Niltavas belong to the large family of Old World flycatchers Muscicapidae and are certainly one of the most beautiful species in this group. The species most frequently observed in aviculture is the Rufous-bellied Niltava *Niltava sundara*. There are three subspecies, *N.s. donotata*, *sundara* and *whistleri* which originate from a large part of the Himalayas, south and south-western China and the Malay peninsula. Within its native habitats it lives in the forest undergrowth.

Even though it is regularly available to European aviculturists, the name flycatcher keeps many breeders from obtaining these wonderful birds. Many aviculturists feel that these birds can be kept alive only if large amounts of live insect food is made available. This is not true. I have personally cared for several of these birds and they were fed a diet of mainly commercial insectile food (non-living) and live food was given only on a limited basis.

I have observed breeders who kept single males in meter square (39 in.) cages, but it is certainly advisable to keep these lively birds in an aviary. A well planted aviary, whether indoors or out, is best. A combined indoor/outdoor enclosure is ideal. In cold climate areas the aviaries, preferably indoors, should be kept above the freezing point.

Only a few successful breeding attempts have been accomplished with the Rufous-bellied Niltava and this is really a shame. The reasons for so little breeding are that most Niltavas are kept as single birds or they are housed in mixed collection aviaries with a number of different species. To improve the chances for breeding Niltavas they should be housed in medium sized planted aviaries as single pairs.

To bring the pair into breeding condition it is, indeed, necessary to



Male Rufous-bellied Niltava.

supply them with large amounts of live food. This food can be in the form of mealworms and crickets. There is, however, a much cheaper solution. Several pieces of rotting fruit and one piece of liver can be placed in a basket or bowl that is covered with a wire mesh to keep the birds out. The fruit and liver attracts an enormous number of fruit flies, house flies and other insects. These live insects are an excellent food source and a cheap way to feed Niltavas. There is a good possibility of breeding these delicate birds if the aviary is well planted and has many sheltered places that give the birds a place to hide. ➤

Photo by Maarten de Ruiter