Breeding Two Species of Brotogeris Parakeets at Loro Parque

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The small neotropical parakeets of the genus Brotogeris are not well represented in collections. At Loro Parque six of the seven species are kept. The two pairs of tirica are off exhibit at the time of writing (one pair is to be placed on exhibit) and the orange-chinned parakeet (B. jugularis) is not present in the collection.

Members of the genus are notorious for failing to breed in captivity. However, a private aviculturist in California, Robbie Harris, has bred six species (she does not have tirica) and is perhaps the only person to have achieved real success.

Her cages are small, as are those at Loro Parque. The latter measure approximately 58 in (1.5 m) long, 32 in (82 cm) wide and 40 in (102 cm) high, and are suspended about 3 ft (91 cm) off the ground. No Brotogeris had been reared here until this year, I believe. I am thus pleased to report success with two species.

The cobalt-winged parakeet (Brotogeris cyanoptera) has very seldom been bred in captivity. It originates from the western part of the Amazon basin. There is one pair of the nominate race on exhibit and three specimens, also of the nominate race, off exhibit. The latter are so much more brightly colored that I believed that those on exhibit must have been either gustavi or bentiensis until the German aviculturist Thomas Arndt assured me they were not. None answer precisely to the descriptions given by Forshaw (1971), for example.

In August 1987 Carlos Keller, an extremely knowledgeable Brazilian aviculturist, visited Loro Parque and told me that the more brightly colored birds originate from Acre in Brazil. They are much brighter yellow on the forehead, the yellow being more extensive in the believed males which have the crown tinged with blue.

It is regrettable that because of the difficulty of inspecting the nests in the range of cages for the Brotogeris parakeets, I can provide no information on the development of the chick of the pair on exhibit. The nest-box for this pair is very small, measuring about 4 in (10 cm) x 5 in (12 cm) x 10 in (25 cm) high, of a sloping design. The first of three eggs was laid about April 20 and hatched on about May 14. The young bird left the nest on July 2, i.e., after about 49 days. It was very confident and a joy to watch with its very attentive parents.

On fledging it differed from them in its much smaller beak, also in the beak coloration, the upper mandible being dark brown, except the fleshy pads at each side. The feet were grey, not pink tinged with grey as in the adults. The orange spot on the chin was as bright and as extensive as in the adults. The lores, also a very small area of the forehead, were tinged with yellow. There was a faint blue tinge on the head and a little yellow on the carpal edge of the wing. The cere was white.

Incidentally, the male parent has a larger head and beak but plumage does not differ in male and female.

The bond between the three birds is very close; they are never more than a
few inches apart, usually with the young one in the middle. It will frequently playfully take hold of the upper mandible of one of its parents but apparently not in a serious attempt to solicit food. Mutual preening between parents and young, including vent-preening, is frequently observed.

According to Forshaw, the call of this species is undescribed. It emits a Budgerigar-like chirruping, also squawking similar to that species but not as loud.

The three other cyanoptera at Loro Parque were caged two and one without a nest-box until late May when a cage in the second breeding centre (just constructed) was available for them. The three birds were then housed together, sexes unknown. Believed to be two males and one female, they were immediately compatible. During the third week in July the female commenced to lay. There were four eggs by July 31 but these proved to be infertile.

In the next cage to the cyanoptera on exhibit are a pair of orange-flanked or grey-cheeked parakeets (*B. pyrrhopterus*) which had laid clutches of six eggs in 1985 and five in 1986. Two eggs of each clutch were fertile and chicks hatched but these apparently died after being removed for hand-rearing in 1985 and when left with the parents in 1986.

In 1987 the female had laid four eggs by April 7. Two chicks hatched, the first on April 22. They were removed for hand-rearing on May 1 when they weighed 29.2g and 31.8g. On that day they were ringed with 6mm rings (the cyanoptera was ringed when about 14 days old but the ring came off). Weights...
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The hand-rearing food consisted of the following blended with mineral water: wheat germ cereal, baby cereal such as Nestle's Seven Cereals, Three Fruits or Multifruits, oatmeal, a little carrot, apple and alfalfa, a small amount of soaked mung beans, soya flour and a few drops of Dayaminerals (Abbott Laboratories SA, Madrid), occasionally peanut butter and a little calcium.

As already noted, the chicks from the first clutch were removed for hand-rearing on May 1. A second clutch, consisting of five eggs, was laid at the beginning of June. By July 3 four chicks had hatched; the fifth hatched two days later.

The elder two chicks were removed for hand-rearing on July 10. The nest-box was of the same dimensions as that described for the cobalt-winged parakeets; it was simply too small to hold five chicks. On that day they were ringed with 6mm rings. The third and fourth chicks were ringed on July 14 and the fifth two days later.

The parents made an excellent job of rearing the three young. The first two left the nest on August 12 but for two or three days spent most of the time back in the nest. The third chick left on August 15. The behavior of the family was identical to that of the cyanoptera; from very soon after fledging the young would preen their parents as enthusiastically as their parents preened them. They quickly learned to feed on their own.

Meanwhile, one of the two chicks from the second nest which was being hand-reared developed unusual markings. Each feather of the flanks and the sides of the upper breast had a bar of orange near the tip of the feather, producing a very attractive barred effect.

These two chicks weighed 31.9g and 33.9g when removed from the nest on July 10. Subsequent weights were as follows: July 16, 39.7g and 37.1g; July 23, 41.2g and 37.1g; July 30, 52.0g and 49.7g; August 6, 64.8g and 62.1g. August 10 was the first day on which they lost weight: 64.8g and 65.1g. On August 13 they weighed 64.9g and 61.0g and on August 20, 64.9g and 61.6. They were removed from the hand-rearing room, weaned, on August 26 weighing 58.3g and 58.7g. Again, the favorite food was corn on the cob and spray millet.

I am especially pleased that the pair at Loro Parque produced seven young in 1987. The orange-flanked parakeet has a limited range in north-western Peru and south-western Ecuador. Certainly in Ecuador its numbers have declined considerably in recent years due to the combined pressures of habitat destruction and excessive trapping.

In the 1970s this species was exported in quite large numbers. Some young birds could be obtained for extremely low prices. Then Ecuador and Peru prohibited the commercial export of their fauna and this species became virtually unobtainable. Breeding successes were almost non-existent. In 1979 or thereabouts Peru again allowed the export of birds and enormous numbers of pyrrhopterus were imported into the USA. Between October 1979 and June 1980, for example, over 7,500 were imported into the States; very much smaller numbers reached Europe.

This delightful little parakeet is now fairly rare and seldom bred in Europe. As a threatened species, it deserves more attention from aviculturists. It is in danger of dying out in captivity and of becoming rare in the wild.

My aim is to have several breeding pairs at Loro Parque. I would like to hear from other breeders who would be willing to exchange young to form unrelated pairs. And may I urge anyone who has a single bird to make an effort to ensure that it has the opportunity to breed. Success will bring so much more pleasure than a single pet bird...