

Breeding the Rueppell's Parrot

(*Poicephalus rueppelli*)

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The Rueppell's Parrot, *Poicephalus rueppelli*, is native to southwest Africa, specifically Damaraland north to coastal Angola. This is a very dry area with annual rainfall under ten inches a year. These birds are reported to travel in small groups consisting of one or two pairs of birds.

Although some may compare the Rueppell's Parrot to the Meyer's Parrot in size and appearance, there is a definite sexual dimorphism in this *Poicephalus* species with the female being the more brightly colored bird. The hen is more delicate in her features and bone structure also. Her beak size is slightly smaller than that of the male bird. She has dark pigmented feet, a dark colored beak and fiery red eyes. Her overall body is a greenish-charcoal, shoulders are yellow as is the underside of the wings. Her abdomen is a brilliant blue that encompasses both her upper thighs and rump. Her orange-yellow socks finish her wardrobe making her a most impressive bird.

Despite his lack of color, her male counterpart is not to be underestimated. His beak is the same dark color and slightly larger than that of the hen. Both birds have the same colored feet and those gorgeous red eyes. His body is the same greenish-charcoal color and his rump a bright blue but he lacks the blue abdomen. Shoulders are yellow and stockings are orange-yellow. The juvenile bird has the appearance of the hen, only washed out. The young we raised had yellowish scalloping on the feathers as is common with other *Poicephalus* babies. They lack yellow on the shoulders and the yellow-orange stockings of the mature birds. Although the eyes are black in babies, they turned red when the chicks were four months old. We noticed considerable development of brighter plumage at the first molt.

We have found some similarities between the Rueppell's Parrot's dispo-



The Rueppell's Parrot is a small *Poicephalus* parrot from Africa. They are uncommon in American aviculture. The parent birds in the center show the distinct yellow wing markings that are lacking in the youngsters.



These three young Rueppell's Parrots were hatched in May of 1992 and are nominated for a U.S. first breeding award.

Photos by Cyndee Garvin

sition and that of the other *Poicephalus* species we keep. As with most of our other pairs, our two pairs of Rueppell's Parrots are timid and aloof, hiding in the nest box during feeding and cleaning time. Our proven hen is the exception. She is always out of the box at feeding time, whistling and hopping on the cage bottom much like a Hyacinth Macaw. We have also noticed a great deal of displaying on the part of the hen. She raises her wings, showing off her yellow underside and her calls remind us more of a Budgie than of a *Poicephalus*. In general, with our mature hens and now our young hens, we can clearly see that the female is the more aggressive, treating her mate similar to the way in which the Eclectus hen treats her male.

Our two pairs of domestic Rueppell's Parrot's were a very generous wedding gift from a good friend who lives in South Africa. The birds were quarantined in San Diego by USDA. Upon release by USDA and FWS, we extended the quarantine here at home before putting them into a breeding situation with the existing flock. Although two of the birds were obviously mature, they were not marked as pairs, so we colonized them in hopes that they would repair. Apparently they did, with the mature pair being the dominant two, exhibiting a strong bond. Even in this colony situation the mature hen presented herself as the self-appointed monarch.

We breed many species of parrots, but our *Poicephalus* species are housed together in their own separate section. Once the Rueppell's Parrots had passed all of our medical tests, they were added to the established flock. They are housed, as are the others, in 2' x 2' x 3' cages made with 1" x 1" wire. Two natural manzanita perches were hung, one slightly higher than the other. The nest box is a deep Cockatiel box approximately 10" x 10" x 20". We feed a diet of fresh seeds, nuts and various fruits and vegetables. The Rueppell's Parrots are fond of any fruits and vegetables we offer, particularly green beans, oranges and corn.

Having read literature concerning their natural habits, we learned that

the Rueppell's Parrots were not largely gregarious. In view of this, dividers were placed on both sides of the cage and six cages, housing other *Poicephalus*, separate the two pairs. The mature pair began digging in the box only three days after being introduced to it and both pairs were sleeping in their box after two weeks. We had situated the mature pair in a location that we could observe from a distance. Although we were discreet and somewhat hidden, the male knew we were watching and was noticeably nervous. We decided to heed his warning signs and block off our field of view. Two weeks later we had four fertile eggs.

Normally we allow our *Poicephalus* pairs to incubate their eggs and feed the young for ten days to two weeks before they are removed from the nest for handfeeding. Our parent birds always do a wonderful job caring for their young and we are not particularly excited about feeding babies that weigh only five grams from day one. However, we decided to feed these chicks since they were so important to us.

Incubation began when the first egg was laid and since the female was doing such a terrific job of incubating (the male stayed in the nest but was never on the eggs) we chose to leave the eggs with her for as long as possible and pull them just before hatching. Well, you know what they say about the best laid plans...just twelve days into incubation we had a huge earthquake, and needless to say, she abandoned the eggs and they had to be pulled for artificial incubation. As it turned out, all four eggs were cracked. We lost the first baby but managed to hatch all the others. Incubation time was 28 days but draw down to external pip time is not known as all eggs had to be assisted. Hatch dates are May 7, 9 and 13 of 1991. Weight at hatch for all chicks was five grams.

The first two chicks hatched with white down, light colored feet and white beaks. The last baby also had white down but the toenails had dark pigment and the beak was black. We hoped this had to be some type of sexual dimorphism. This chick turned out to be what we deemed, the male. After only one week, feeding a com-

mercial handfeeding formula, the babies had more than doubled their weight with the exception of the male. Although his cultures were clean he was red in color and failed to thrive. At times he seemed to be almost in a frenzy. An article was brought to our attention in which the author, having experienced the same thing in her *Poicephalus* chicks, added creamed corn to her handfeeding formula with great results. We tried it with instant success.

The babies were weighed daily and photographed constantly. By four weeks of age they weighed 104 grams and at 11 weeks old they were weaned and independent. Visual sexing indicated we had one male and two females. The male had bigger bone structure and less blue on his abdomen. We had to separate the babies once they were completely weaned as outbreaks of fighting were becoming more and more frequent between the young hens. We kept one young hen in the house, and placed the other related pair in a holding cage, waiting for the onset of maturity and hopefully, unrelated bloodlines. The siblings gave us every indication that they could be compatible cage mates. When they were approximately nine months old, we were horrified to discover our young male had died at the hands of his sister. Our older pairs of Rueppell's Parrots have never been observed fighting in such a way, however, the males do seem to know their place.

Our proven pair is once again sitting on four fertile eggs which are hatching as we write. Our other pair shows no sign of producing anytime this season. Our plans are to let our proven hen incubate as well as feed her young. We are keeping our fingers crossed that the earth stays still long enough for her to hatch all of them this time.

Rueppell's Parrots are indeed rare in private aviculture. We encourage anyone having a pair to seriously attempt breeding, and if successful, to avoid placing the offspring into the pet trade. We hope that anyone with a single bird will contact us or try to find another breeder willing to cooperate in the propagation of this species and avoid hybridizing at all cost. ●