Black and Rajah Lories

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Chalcopsitta 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 lories 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 lories in general, and the result is a very desirable bird, provided that you can overlook its one fault - a very harsh voice. Lories 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 Lories 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 Lory, 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 Lories. 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 Lories, 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 lories, 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 Lory 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 in my care have been noticeably larger, with a bigger head and beak and a much more assertive personality. The Rajah Lory 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, 235g. Possibly these weights represent three females and one male.

The Rajah is, in my eyes, one of the most beautiful of all lories. 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 Lories 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 Lory 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 Lory the rump is faintly tinged with blue but in adults of bernsteini and insignis it is deep blue.

In captivity, Black and Rajah Lories 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 branchless laden with seed-bearing cones of Casuarina exquisitfolia as often as possible to all the lories. It is a natural food of some species and nearly all captive lories 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 Lories 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 lory's nest-box. It is too important for them as a roosting site. I leave young lories 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 Lory Lorius lory erythrobrotanx 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 Lories 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.
Young Black Lory,
aged five weeks
hatched at Loro Parque.

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 aban-
doned egg was banded at 17 days
when it weighed only 35g. I should state
here that I have closed banded parent-
reared lories of many species and have
never experienced a problem. In my
opinion, it is vitally important that all lory
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 sus-
pended 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 lory 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
lories antics and wonderful colors. For
most of the half million annual visitors
to the park this aviary is their introduc-
tion to lories. 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?

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

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

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