

Breeding the Slaty-headed Parrot

Psittacula himalayana

by Greg Solorzano, Indio Hills, CA

P*himalayana finschii*, also known as the Burmese Slaty-headed Parrot, for those unfamiliar with this bird, is, of course, a member of the *Psittacula* genus of Asiatic parrots.

The two subspecies share a velvety black head over an aquamarine collar and a nearly lime green breast, with darker green back and bluish suffusion under the wings. Sexing can be done while very young, as the males evidence a dark maroon wing patch and the hens do not. They have a golden iris and a beautiful Chinese red upper mandible, tipped in yellow.

The larger subspecies, *P. h. himalayana*, also called the Himalayan Slaty-head, has a tail with a green base, changing to blue and ending in a yellow tip, and the smaller, *P. h. finschii* has a tail that is violet-blue at the base, changing to a soft parchment yellow-white at the tip.

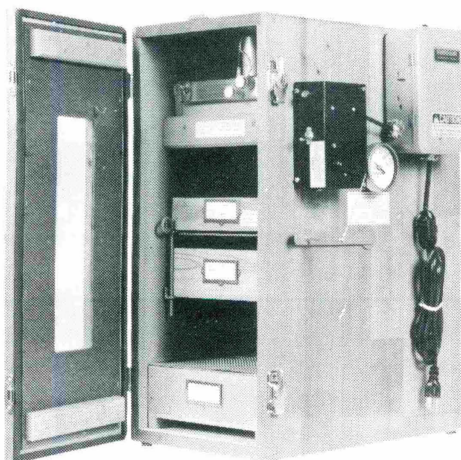
This is a quietly exquisite little bird that can talk if raised alone and is otherwise very quiet. The Slaty-head definitely deserves a greater popularity in aviculture.

Introduction

I have been raising Slaty-headed Parrots since the early 90s. After reading many articles in the *AFA WATCH-BIRD* over the years, which talked about breeding and conserving the

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The Slaty-headed Parrot (or Parakeet) is an exquisite little bird that deserves more attention from the breeders of Asiatics.

birds remaining in aviculture, I decided to keep a single Slaty-headed Parrot belonging to the smaller subspecies, *Psittacula himalayana finschii*. This was the beginning of my adventure with Slatys, and it also launched me into specialization with breeding a variety of Afro-Asian species.

Description

Until I acquired my first Slaty-headed Parrot I had never even seen a live specimen and I found it to be a beautiful bird, especially when the long beautiful tail remains intact. My first Slaty-head, according to ornithological description, was a male, because I

noticed that he had a faint crimson wing patch. Since that time I've noticed that some males have darker, more pronounced wing patches than others. When I got him home, I saw that this bird was missing all the toes but one on the back of his right foot. I judged him to be a poor candidate for breeding, reasoning that he would not be able to get a good grip on the hen's back or wings while copulating. But there's no telling what challenged birds are capable of when mother nature calls! Nevertheless, I bought this male (whom I named "Stubby") a hen, at the Pomona Bird Mart, the following summer.

My Breeding Pool

Following this, I acquired three parent-raised clutch mates from a well-known *Psittacula* breeder. This seller owned a single pair of breeding Slaty-headed which he later sold; reasoning that there was no purpose to breeding a species that was not popular and did not sell. When I sexed the three clutch mates I found that I had two females and one male. I subsequently traded one of the hens for an older hen, with another well-known *Psittacula* breeder. "Stubby" was then paired with the young hen, and I paired the young cock with the older hen. Both siblings bred with their respective mates at two

years of age.

Climate

My home and aviary are located in the low desert area of Southern California, in the mountain foothills at about 1,200 ft. elevation, where summer temperatures can range from 100 degrees F., in April, to about 115 degrees F., in August.

Although I have successfully raised both Ring-neckeds and Mustached Parrots in the desert, I was at first hesitant to try the Slaty-headed species because in the wild they are found farther north than any other parrot species. At one time, I supposed that their native climate must therefore be cooler for that reason, but have since learned this is not necessarily so.

Housing

All my flight cages are built outside under the tree canopy in my back yard, and the birds do just fine. Birds in such a climate given a large water bowl can thrive nicely and without ill effects, if acclimated. I do not use a misting system, but I do spray them down several times a week with the garden hose set on a fine spray.

My aviary is 6 feet long by 3 feet wide and 3 feet high. All the aviaries are raised four feet off the ground. Mourning Doves and Gambel Quail are always present, picking up any food spilled or dropped by the parrots.

Feeding

I'll admit right off that I don't feed enough fruits or vegetables, due to time restrictions for preparation, but I have found that Slatys will eat just about anything a Ring-neck will eat.

Breeding

Except for the Derbyan, all the *Psittacula* are early season nesters, and this fact contributed to my decision to specialize in this genus. They will begin breeding in my climactic conditions in January, when it is usually quite cool, and will breed throughout our very windy season, from February through April, until the heat kicks in, in May. By mid-May most of the Asiatic babies are fledged and being weaned by their parents

unless they have been previously pulled for hand-rearing.

Challenges

My mature hen has since laid five eggs each year, and never fails to have trouble with either her eggs or her babies. For instance, in 1997 she laid her usual five eggs but hatched only four, most of which I fostered with a lutino Ring-neck whose own infertile eggs were discarded after about 40 days of brooding. The lutino hen accepted the first two babies, then accepted the third about two days later. She kept them well fed until they were pulled for hand feeding at about two weeks of age. The fourth baby, which had been left with the natural mother, died from either having been crushed or smothered.

I don't know if my interference with the Slaty-headed hen's nesting activities, or other factors has so far caused this hen to be both an unstable and unreliable mother, but she is just not yet calm enough to raise her babies without encountering problems.

Stubby and his young hen, on the other hand, are the better parents, although they too have had their problems. This past spring, they had five fertile eggs and five babies. I was able to leave the babies with the parents for two weeks without incident. At five weeks, I removed the older nestlings for handfeeding so that there would be less crowding and competition for the parents' attentions. Sadly, one morning when I made the nest inspection, I discovered two chicks with broken legs! It is unknown whether the cause was over-crowding, rough care by the parents, my daily inspections, or what? I was very disheartened.

I couldn't decide what to do: leave the babies and let nature take its course, pull the babies and take them to a vet, or see what I could do myself. I was already late for work that day, and my real job pays the bills, so I had to leave the fate of the babies to nature for the time being.

Two days later I summoned up the courage to pull the tiny chicks and examine them closely. Miraculously, and to my amazement, I saw that only one baby had a broken leg, and even

that one wasn't too bad! That leg seemed to have fused in a slightly angled position so that its right foot pointed a little to the right. This did not represent a serious incapacity.

Banding

I had not yet banded any of the babies, so I worried about banding those fragile little legs. However, I successfully banded the four other babies, and left the fifth baby with the crooked leg unbanded. In talking with a fellow *Psittacula* specialist, I learned that she has also experienced finding different babies in the nest box with broken legs. So although I don't understand it, I know I'm not alone.

Update

Currently, my three Slaty-headed breeding pairs are kept in individual aviaries. As of this writing all three Slaty pairs have been in the nest box for seven days. I checked the nest of my No. 1 pair (Stubby and his hen) when the hen was out of her nest, and I discovered two eggs. I estimate that these babies will be starting to hatch by March 20 if all goes well. I didn't check the No. 2 pair today, but the hen has been in her nest box continually, so I believe she has eggs. Pair No. 3 consists of a 3-year-old, hand-raised male and a 2-year-old, hand-raised hen. I had to relocate their aviary in the yard, recently, so disturbing them may have caused them to lose this breeding year. However, you never know.

Conclusion

Despite somewhat rocky beginnings, I honestly believe that the *P. himalayana* is one of the easiest Asiatics to breed. Thus, I sincerely hope that readers of this article will take up the challenge to breed these very nice birds in their different locations and environments, both in the US and abroad, and share their experience with others.

I do hope that the Slaty-headed Parrot will gain favor with *Psittacula* breeders, sooner rather than later, because it would be a great shame to lose this beautiful little *Psittacula* from aviculture. 