



Fischer's (*A. personata fischeri*) left, two Masked normal green (*A. personata*) at right.



Normal green Masked (*A. personata*) second from left, mutations far left – Masked Yellow (dilute green), second from right, Masked White (dilute blue), and Blue Masked far right.

Normal green Fischer's (*A. fischeri*) left, Yellow mutation on right.



Black Masks In Your Basement

by Clifton R. Witt
Washington, D.C.

There have been so many articles written about breeding the Black Masked Love Bird that I invariably shudder each time I see one. I dutifully read them, however, because you never know, they might contain one more answer to the many questions.

The one thing these writings all have in common seems to be how they give the reader the euphoric notion that these intriguing little birds are easy to breed. They casually toss around phrases like "free breeders", or "breed well in captivity", or "easily maintained", etc. If you haven't seen those things in print, perhaps you remember the one about Love Birds being "the next step up from Budgies". Maybe so, but not the eye ring series of love birds.

After my first disastrous attempts, I felt that everything I had been reading was a dirty lie. I've modified that opinion, however, and have decided that the problem is that most writings on the subject don't lie, they just don't tell you the whole story. The leave you with a "blind spot". That blind spot increases ten fold if you live in an area where you don't keep your birds outdoors for fear of losing the feed dishes in a snow drift.

This article, therefore, is intended to fill in that blind spot and is respectfully dedicated to my fellow breeders who, like myself, are faced with the nasty proposition of keeping their birds indoors.

I will not burden you with basic like diet, housing, genetics, sanitation, lighting, nestboxes, etc. I will assume that you have all that. I'll also assume you've joined the African Love Bird Society, and that you've even raised a few Masked or Fischers. I think it's important, however, at this point to define "success" with the eye ring love birds. Certainly there are many people in the North, Midwest, and on the East Coast who have raised them. But when I talk about being "successful" I am not talking about producing two or three birds per pair per

season. That is success with Amazons or Cockatoos, but not with Love Birds. I am talking about five or six chicks per pair per clutch for two or three clutches each season and over a number of seasons. That is the "success" I expect with my birds and there is no reason why it should not be so.

This definitely was not the case when I first started raising Masked and Fischers. I housed five pairs to an eight foot by four foot by six foot high flight. All seemed to be going well but somehow the number of chicks that fledged were very few. There were plenty of dead embryos, young dying in the first week, and even a number dying in the fifth week. After two clutches of Masked birds I had only 12 young ones to show for the effort. The Fischers were even worse. Three young Fischers on the perch! I checked myself on all the basics and nothing was wrong (according to the books). My other birds were all doing splendidly so there was definitely something I was missing out on with the love birds. Other people I talked with had no suggestions. They, too, were generally disappointed with the results from their eye ring birds.

It was clear that the one major difference between the love birds and other birds was the nesting behavior. The nest builders were the only ones with poor breeding results. The finger pointed directly at nest building as the weak point in my breeding program.

Any observer will notice that the nest building is a very elaborate operation. The pairs will spend many of their waking hours working on the nest in some form or another. The drive to construct an elaborate nest is so strong that no matter how many boxes I hang, there will be a nest in every one of them even though only half of them are finally used. We all notice, too, that the birds will carry every-

thing but the kitchen sink into the boxes, and, if they had access, they would probably carry in the sink as well.

Obviously there must be a reason for this. Nature is very clever and not so wasteful as to allow the birds to go through days and weeks of nest building just for the fun of it. I also noticed that, almost as if there was a big time clock running, all pairs in a flight will cease the heavy nest building activity about the same time and start laying within a few days of each other. Even though they are incubating and later raising a family, however, the hens continue to pay attention to that nest. Each day new material is added. As the chicks approach fledging age, the nest building picks up dramatically. If there is no new material available, they try to steal it from other nests or from the empty nests built originally. The Fischers even went so far as to soak all the material before putting it into the boxes. Ah ha! Humidity is the answer to all this one would think. But why do chicks of all ages need wet nesting material tucked in around them?

Back to the books to check out nesting material. The nesting material itself, I decided, was crucial to the success of breeding the eye rings. Excitedly I read about nesting material. Palm Fronds! I looked out my window over the snow and not one palm frond did I see. The nearest palm tree was 1600 miles away somewhere in Southern Georgia! Whoopie. There had to be a substitute. So began the long search to find a perfect nesting material that didn't grow on palm trees.

Hay and straw obviously were not right. I had tried that and suspected that allergens in the pollen created itchy hens and dead chicks. Some people were using shredded paper. I couldn't believe this was suitable for eye rings, especially after they soaked it, so I never tried it. Green material seemed to be key, so I tried long grasses. The birds ate some, others they used for the nest, but it didn't seem to make much difference. Then there was the matter of whether the weeds I was gathering were poisonous or not. I didn't know a degree in Botany was a prerequisite for raising love birds. I dreamed about Forshaw's "Dome-shaped nests." Mine looked like railroad platforms. The

platforms got higher and higher until the hen was looking out the hole watching the world go by as she sat on the eggs. Hardly a "dome-shaped" structure.

Clearly, the materials I was using did not have the required rigidity to form a structure of any kind. They would start out in some cup-shaped fashion, but in a week or so they would start to sag and dry out and settle with the activity in the nest. I started using willow branches to give the needed rigidity. This was a step in the right direction, but the leaves on the branches were scarce and volume became a problem as the birds tried to fill the boxes with pulverized willow branches. I could not provide enough from my few sources of willow trees without destroying the trees, themselves.

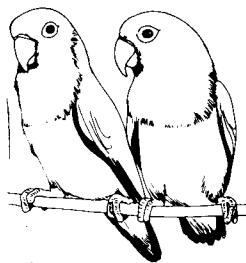
Then one day, while pulling weeds of a tough, fibrous nature, I noticed something I had overlooked. It was the sweet, warm spring time smell that attracted me at first. Honeysuckle. I was surrounded by Honeysuckle hanging from the trees and covering the bushes and ground. It was everywhere. I thought about the possibilities of Lories munching on the honeysuckle flowers. Then I thought about the possibilities of the love birds munching on the flowers. You know the rest. In a computer-like flash I thought about the strong thick vines, the thin vines, the heavy foliage, the clean smell, the flowers. I ripped out as much as I could carry and raced home with it.

How I could have been so stupid as to overlook honeysuckle vines up to that point will never cease to amaze me. It is the perfect medium. The vines provide the needed rigidity while the slow-drying leaves provide the humidity. The texture is not too woody nor too flimsy. And it doesn't grow on palm trees. It is available everywhere in our climates. It grows in the city, around housing developments in the suburbs, in the parks, in any open area, practically. Once you start looking for it you will be astounded at the stands of honeysuckle growing along the roadside and especially in the backyards of bird club members. And people hate it. It is the curse of the suburban home owner. They tear it out every year and every year it grows back. It's marvelous. Nobody minds when they see you clearing the landscape of honeysuckle. And, believe it or not, it stays green all year. Yes, even in January you can find green honeysuckle.

The use of honeysuckle vines confirmed all my suspicions about the nest building behavior being tied very tightly to the successful rearing of large clutches of chicks.

I first noticed that the nest building

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behavior became even more elaborate. There was much less soaking of the nesting material than before. The birds fabricated a truly woven structure using some of the vines to form the framework, some for filling in the "walls", some for pulverizing into sawdust, almost, for lining the bottom of the nesting chamber, and the leaves were woven into everything as well as being laid down in layers from the bottom of the box up to the floor of the nesting chamber. It was truly a marvel of nature that I watched. There were, for the first time, distinct chambers and connecting tunnels. The entrance chamber where the male can sit and stand "guard" connected by a real spiral tunnel to the nesting chamber at the bottom corner of the box.

It disproved theories for poor nests that I had heard. One common one is that the domestically raised birds have "forgotten" how to build good nests. Not so. My domestically raised birds, as well as my wild caught birds, have abandoned the platform approach to nest building since I started using honeysuckle.

Sanitation in the nest is excellent with honeysuckle. If a baby dies, the parents immediately move it into a corner of the box and seal it off tightly with honeysuckle chewed to the proper texture to provide a tight seal. And even you cannot get to it to remove it.

I have the suspicion that heat retention is greater as well, but have no way to prove it. I only know that the increase in number of young fledged was dramatic. The five pairs of masked birds that produced 12 young before, last season produced 61! (The third clutches were taken at two weeks and hand fed.) The Fischers (now down to four pairs) produced 37. The only variable was the use of honeysuckle vines for nesting material.

Here are some pointers on the use of honeysuckle. Start with absolutely empty boxes of the type that opens from the top. Boxes that open from the side are problematic in that when you slide that door up, you are confronted with a wall of vines and leaves that you cannot see through or pry apart. This same problem sometimes presents itself even with top-opening boxes, but generally there will be a hole in the top of the "dome shaped" nest that permits inspection.

Use a pencil flashlight to inspect the nest. It can easily be inserted down through the hole in the top to see what is going on inside. You can even candle the eggs right in the nest in this manner.

One problem is that sometimes you cannot reach into the nest to get the chicks out for banding. The hole in the top is often large enough to put your

hand (or at least a few fingers) into, but sometimes it is not. In those cases I resort to open banding rather than destroy the nest to get to the babies. The nests are so elaborate that you may also be surprised when six young birds emerge instead of the four you thought were there.

How much honeysuckle do you use? For the size flights described above, I usually put in a quantity somewhat larger than the size of a bushel basket. For cage breeding a volume equal to 1/3 the size of the cage is used. Once nest building begins in earnest, you will be shocked at how fast that amount disappears. It must be replaced constantly with an equivalent amount until egg laying begins. At this point consumption of the honeysuckle diminishes.

If you remember nothing else from this article, please remember this: The honeysuckle must be provided throughout the entire nesting period. The birds constantly replace and repair the nests. Do not make the mistake of thinking that after the eggs hatch you no longer need the humidity provided by the green honeysuckle and consequently slack off in honeysuckle harvesting. This is a fatal error. For whatever reasons, they need fresh honeysuckle from the day you hang the boxes until the day the last baby of the last clutch is fledged.

I do not understand fully what part the nesting material plays in the growth and development of the chicks. Certainly sanitation is important. Also I know the chicks climb around the sides of the rigid chamber and attempt to chew the honeysuckle (presumably for beak exercise). Near fledgling age the parents increase the amount of new material added to the nest. I assume this is in preparation for the next clutch and at the same time it often serves to move the existing nesting chamber closer to the top (so the youngsters are literally forced to peak out at the world?). In any case, the nest undergoes heavy remodeling at this time. More material begins to poke out of the entrance hole so that the effective size of the hole is reduced. The entrance chamber is enlarged. This, I feel, is another piece of Nature's cleverness. The chicks now have a place to "hang out" until they are weaned while the hen starts her second clutch in the lower chamber where she is somewhat protected from harassment by the fledglings.

Neither rain, nor snow, nor sleet, nor dark of night should stop you from gathering that honeysuckle. (I can attest that sleet is the worst.) The Spring and Summer honeysuckle is the best, so it is advantageous to time your breeding to the availability of the large leaf stuff with

flowers and green vines as well as brown ones. If, however, you blow it and suddenly it's Winter and you need honeysuckle, don't be alarmed. It's still out there and with a little fortitude you can gather it. Even under the snow it's still green. (When it is under a lot of snow I'd recommend paying a kid to get it for you.) Winter honeysuckle has one major drawback. It dries out quickly and has to be replaced more often.

If you live in a Midwest area where the snow is measured by the Ton instead of by the inch, I have discovered a second-choice material you can use in a pinch. Corn husks. Green corn husks normally discarded when feeding corn on the cob (as I do each day) will work pretty well although it is a desperate second-choice and serves as a temporary measure to be used on top of a honeysuckle base. (As an aide, I might mention that corn husks are preferred by my Peach Face and used exclusively by them when given a choice.)

I feel it is important to increase the production of the eye ring series of love birds in this country very soon. I fear that the attitude promoted by the literature that these birds are easy to breed has produced the resignation on the part of many people that their failures are related to their particular birds and they, therefore, do not strive to increase and better results. This is dangerous because we are faced with the very real proposition of imports being curtailed or cut off by political situations in the various African countries where the birds come from. We have already seen this with the Black-Cheeked. The new dilute mutations of these birds are also in a very precarious state. Establishing these mutations depends first on a solid and continuing success with the normal stock.

The financial rewards for producing a large number of Masked or Fischers are small. It requires a much greater effort on the part of the breeder to produce these \$40.00 birds than to produce, say, a Blue Peach Face for \$85.00 or a lutino cockatiel for \$75.00. We therefore cannot count on the commercial breeder to guarantee the availability of these fascinating birds. It will be up to you, the aviculturist, to propagate and firmly establish these birds and their mutations in the U.S.

I hope that my suggestions on the use of Honeysuckle will contribute to that end and fill your basements and bird rooms with Black Masks, Blue Masked, Yellow Masked, White Masked, Fischers, Black-Cheeked, and Nyassalands. After that you will be permitted to build flights in the living room.

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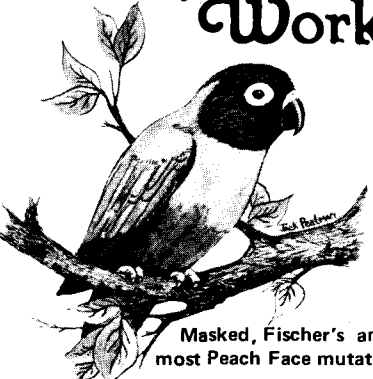


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