



The Rare Lovebirds... A Future Focus

The Black-cheeked Lovebird

by Rick Smith
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Photo by Dale R. Thompson and George D. Dodge

The Black-cheeked Lovebird has the most limited range of all African lovebirds. This small lovebird is somewhat scarce in aviculture but it has some hope.

The Black-cheeked Lovebird from southwestern Zambia, formerly Rhodesia, has the most limited range of any of the lovebirds. It inhabits lowland river valleys, with local seasonal movements. Its range approaches that of the Nyasa Lovebirds, the species it is most closely related to, however, does not overlap or form a cline.

The pure Black-cheeked is a small pretty bird. It is sometimes confused with the Masked Lovebird from East Africa, and at first glance, there are some similarities. The Black-cheeked is distinguishable by its smaller size, paler beak, "brownish"-black face and green rump. The iris is lighter colored, and the small throat patch is "pinkish-orange," replacing the broad

yellow collar and chest of the Masked. The Black-cheeked has been hybridized with all of the other eye-ring lovebirds and pure stock has often been difficult to locate. Even among imports I have received from Rhodesia there were specimens which were obviously crossed with Nyasas. They have also been frequently crossed with the Masked.

In early aviculture (the thirties), large shipments of Black-cheeked Lovebirds were imported from Rhodesia and commenced breeding rather quickly. Because of their more subdued coloring they never gained the popularity of some of the other species, and subsequently became scarce. Rhodesia cut off exportation of native birds some years ago, so

breeders interested in this lovebird were left scrambling with virtually no stock left in the country. In 1973 Lee Horton of Agapornis Acres in Vista, California brought in 26 Black-cheeked. The birds began breeding the next year and, initially, the offspring looked good. However, the major problem was that the young raised would die during the first major molt between eight to 10 months of age. I received some Black-cheeked and Nyasas the same year as Lee and had the identical problem. Even with the complications with the young birds, Lee persisted in working to establish them, devoting years to line breeding to build a healthy strain whose offspring would survive. I believe that from the late seventies and on through the eighties Lee was the only person in the country who still had a large enough quantity, as well as the patience and interest to work with them.

A few pairs did "trickle in" through quarantine from Europe. Finally in 1993 Mark Roberts of Georgia and I contacted Mr. Kloosterman in Denmark, probably Europe's foremost breeder of Black-cheeked. We arranged to import 30 birds. We came in just under the wire before the new laws took effect and we actually got the last quota issued for lovebirds. Lee Horton and Janice Pritchard both anxiously agreed to participate in forming a breeding consortium with us for Black-cheeked. There were no losses in quarantine and as Mr. Kloosterman had promised us, the birds commenced breeding very quickly. Also at this time, Lee began trading birds with the San Diego Zoo which had a completely different strain they received from Vogelpark Zoo in Germany. Mark "rounded up" some birds from the previous importations of one dealer which we also thought were unrelated. So now, in 1994 the Black-cheeked Lovebird, previously one of the rarest species, has an excellent prognosis for becoming established in the United States. In addition to our breeding consortium, I know of several other groups in the country. We would invite those aviculturists to work with us.

In Europe the Black-cheeked have produced a number of mutations, the most prevalent of which is the Blue. They claim the birds are not hybrids from the Blue-masked and are pure. We did receive some splits and are anxious to see

if the blues show any signs of impurity. All of the photos we have seen from Europe show birds in profile, so distinguishing features such as rump color or the size of color of the throat patch are not evident. At the time of this writing Mark has hatched out a blue, however it is not feathered yet. The other mutations, yellows, dark factors (olive, cobalt, slate) and possibly lutino/albino have all been introduced from the Masked. The problem lies in the fact that while one is establishing one of these mutations, it takes years to perfect them. The first crosses are useless hybrids which some breeders will sell to the pet trade, or worse to other breeders as true Black-cheeked Lovebirds. If they were mixed with the excellent stock of pure greens we now have, we would essentially be moving backwards and the purity of these birds would be destroyed.

In years past, breeders working to establish new mutations would destroy the early crosses when they got to the next generation, not selling a bird for years. This is not now necessarily the case. I have seen birds offered for sale from some of the other eye-ring species (i.e. blue Fischer's) which are only 50% pure. Unsuspecting or unknowing aviculturists buy them only to find out later that their rare new bird is not worth near the exorbitant prices often charged. Most lovebird breeders seriously working to establish new mutations always maintain a colony of normal or wild-colored birds, not split to anything. Thus through years of successive line breeding and outcrossing to the normal color, the mutations are enhanced and purity is assured.

It is important to remember that all of the *personata* group of lovebirds, or the eye-rings (Masked, Fischer's, Nyasa and Black-cheeked) as they are commonly called, are thought to be subspecies of a single species. These mutations can be established to a purity of 99% if care is taken to breed back to normal green to eliminate faults. In my opinion, we aviculturists in the United States have to first establish the normal greens before spreading out too far in the mutation colors. As I mentioned previously, the Black-cheeked have the smallest range of any of the lovebirds. While there are no endangered lovebirds as the current time, the Black-cheeked may be the most likely if there is any loss of habitat. For this

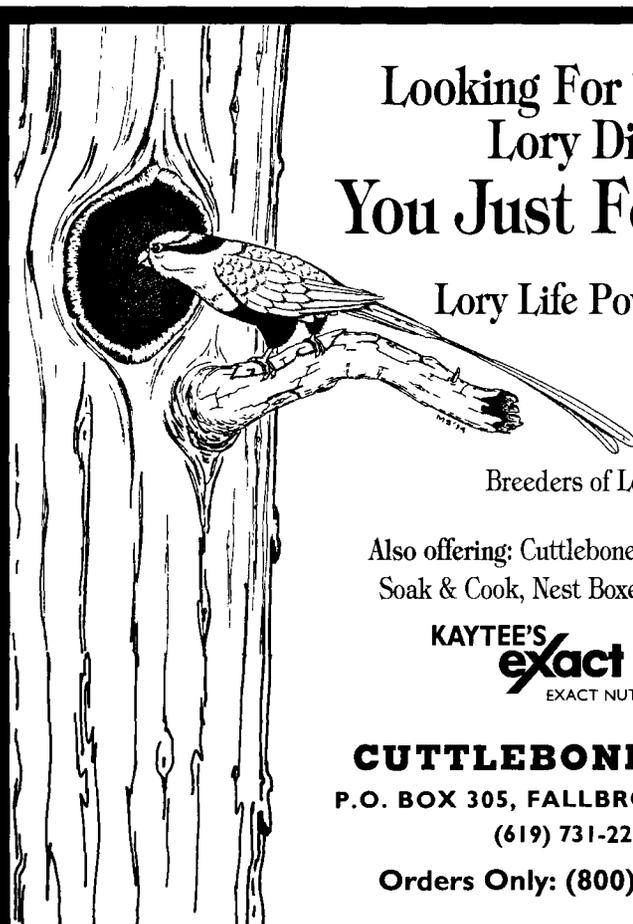
reason the wild colorations should be preserved first and foremost.

Breeding the Black-cheeked Lovebird is not particularly different than any of the other eyerings. They require a small box, budgie size or a little bigger, in which they build a domed nest. The best nesting material is green palm fronds which dry slowly and maintain humidity in the nest. Willow or honeysuckle can also be used. Nesting material is carried in the bill, not the rump feathers as in the Peach-faced. It is important to put up at least 1½ times as many boxes as pairs of birds, or fighting over nest sites will take place. An average clutch is four eggs incubated by the female exclusively for about 21 days. Babies fledge at around seven weeks and are weaned about two weeks later. However, there is one unique feature that separates the Black-cheeked as breeders and is part of the reason they have been hard to establish. Often they will raise one nest then just stop completely. It can be months before they are inclined to start again. The only means that Lee and I have found to help this is to move the birds to a completely new aviary. Sometimes this will stimu-

late them to start again. Fortunately the new birds from Europe appear to be more stable and we can hopefully eliminate this problem in the future.

They have no unique feeding requirements and will do well on standard lovebird fare.

As I mentioned previously, we can be cautiously optimistic with the Black-cheeked Lovebird. We have sufficient quantities of a diverse genetic background in the hands of experienced breeders necessary to establish them. All the breeders I have mentioned in my writings so far are members of the African Lovebird Society (ALBS), the only U.S. organization specifically dedicated to the propagation of the genus *Agapornis*. Anyone is welcome to join. An excellent bi-monthly magazine is sent to members with articles for both novices and experienced breeders as well as show information and listings. Membership is \$20/U.S. single; \$25/dual. You can write to the ALBS for membership at P.O. Box 142, San Marcos, California 92079-0142. It provides an excellent means to communicate with other lovebird fanciers around the world. ●



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