



The Rare Lovebirds... A Future Focus

The Abyssinian Lovebird

Agapornis taranta

by Rick Smith
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My favorite of the rare lovebirds is the Abyssinian Lovebird, native to Ethiopia. Abyssinians, also known as the Black-winged Lovebird are the largest species in the genus. They are sexually dimorphic, the female lacking the red on the forehead. Juveniles resemble hens, with males beginning to color up at the first molt. The bioclimatic area in which they live is much colder than any of the other lovebird species, and in aviculture they are able to withstand colder temperatures. One of the most unique traits of the Abyssinian is the calmness of the bird. Mine will often just sit on their perches observing me, more like a parrot, when I enter their flights.

Another attribute of the Abyssinian Lovebird is that it will eat a large variety of food. Mine are fed a basic mixture of seed and crumbles (turkey growth), 50% each. The seed mixture is 60% Canary, 5% Safflower and the remainder Proso Millet and Hulled Oats. They also receive a "handful" daily of Kaytee Parrot Mixture which contains some sunflower and many other seeds. I feed the sunflower because Abyssinians come from a much colder area in Africa than the other species and store more body fat. The next portion of their diet is a mixture called Tune Up Soak, Cook and Feed Mix. It contains peas, paddy rice, wheat and soybeans. At first I was skeptical as to whether lovebirds would eat this, but the Abyssinians took to it immediately and today it is their favorite food. I cook it in a crock pot low and slow, six to eight hours and then refrigerate and store it for the next day's feeding. I

sometimes add frozen mixed vegetables or grated carrot or corn for variation. I will admit, the other lovebird species were slower to start on it but once you get a "leader" bird to try it the other birds will usually follow suit. The Abyssinians, who are on each side of my Nyasas, taught them to eat the mixture, for which I was very thankful as the Nyasas were eating nothing but seed.

Abyssinians love fruit and vegetables and almost any variety can be offered. Some pairs will even eat orange, the only lovebird species I have which like this fruit. They will eat any of the darker greens like chard or endive. I give them oyster shell and mineral block. Powdered vitamins are occasionally sprinkled on the supplemental foods.

Unfortunately, Abyssinians are not always reliable breeders and for this reason have never become well established. I have them breeding out to the fourth and fifth generation, and they are getting steadier, but there's a long way to go. Newly imported pairs were often just uninterested in breeding, so it was a slow start with the wild-caughts. We have not seen any wild-caught birds for years. I have two lines in my collection. The first is from the line of birds established domestically by Dr. Baer, who probably bred more Abyssinians than anyone in this country. The second is from a European line from Walsrode Zoo, that came to me via the breeding group at the San Diego Zoo. Both lines have produced, and records are being maintained to assure genetic diversity.

The first challenge to raising Abyssinians is in the pairings. The female is the dominant sex, and will attack and sometimes kill a male she does not fancy, so two birds of opposite sex do not make a breeding pair. In the nest there are always more males than females, probably necessary in the wild because of poorer survival rate. I feel this is relative to the aggressiveness of the hens. It is extremely important that the female be allowed to select her mate. For this reason I always keep a "bachelor herd" of extra males. In an introduction, I place three males (one marked with lipstick on the left wing, one on the right, one unmarked for identification) in a long (12 ft.) aviary. In the back is a "ladder" perch rack hung on an angle. Next I turn out the female who usually flies to the ladder perch and takes the dominant position at the top. Eventually a male will fly to the ladder and begin approaching her from the bottom rung. There will be a lot of posturing (wing fluttering, head bobbing, etc.), however, if the female accepts the male on the top rung after intimidating him, and he pursues her in spite of the intimidation, they usually will pair. The markings on the wings are necessary because you must immediately go into the flight and catch the remaining males or they will be attacked and possibly killed.

If pairs are compatible, the male may begin regurgitating food to the female almost immediately. Nesting normally takes place in the winter with the presence of rain. This year I did have two nests in June with babies produced, the first ever at this time of year. I feel this was because during the middle of Abyssinian breeding season on January 18th we had a horrible earthquake, my house being five miles from the epicenter. I did not lose any adult birds, but I threw out 29 "scrambled" Abyssinian eggs. Because of the aftershocks, which went on for months, none of the breeding pairs went back. In June things were calmed down again and I think this is why these two pairs bred at that time.

Abyssinians nest well in small Budgie boxes. A bigger box is inappropriate, as their nests in the wild are very small. Because of the colder climate, a small nest helps conserve heat. The Dr. Baer line of birds sometimes use a long nest box he designed which hangs diagonally. I put pine shavings and sphagnum moss in the bottom, most of which is thrown out. Usually the only nest material the female uses are feathers from her own breast, or

occasionally from the head of an unfortunate male. Incubation with this species is about 23 days. An average clutch is three to four eggs, however once in a while a female will recycle in a week to 10 days and lay more eggs. They all may be fertile, but if hatched the older chicks will win out for the food and have to be removed for handrearing. Chicks spend about eight weeks in the nest and wean within two weeks of fledging.

I am currently aware of two mutations in the Abyssinian Lovebird, however, I do not believe there are any of either in this country at this time. We have seen pictures from Europe of an olive and a cinnamon. Abyssinians appear to be better established in Europe and many entries are found in their bird shows. They are only rarely seen in shows here as it should be until they are better established.

Abyssinians can be housed in a breeding cage or aviary and I have raised offspring in both. To me some of the breeding cages used by Eastern Aviculturists are too small (18 in. square). Mine are 3 ft. X 3 ft. X 4 ft. Aviaries are at least 6 ft. long. They will come into condition and probably do better in the long run if they have an opportunity to fly. Also, most importantly, this species is not a colony nester. One pair only to a cage or aviary. The adult hens may even become aggressive towards their own offspring, particularly daughters, so they too should be removed as soon as possible.

We are making some progress with the Abyssinian Lovebird, slow but sure. If ever available again, I think it could become popular. They are very quiet compared to the endless chatter of the Peach-faced and eye-rings, and the males are quite colorful and could make pets. Even female babies are nasty and will bite when being handled. Anyway, females being in such short supply should be used for breeding. I am not aware of very many people working with Abyssinians, just a pair here and a pair there. I am fortunate to have a good number of them now, and look forward to helping other breeders start to establish them. However, it is impractical to start to work with a rare bird with only one pair. It is better to have more birds of fewer species than to assemble a postage stamp collection and contribute nothing toward captive breeding or conservation. As I have mentioned before, I hope to see the rare lovebirds preserved in American aviculture for future generations to enjoy. ➤

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