

Breeding and Maintenance of the Orange-breasted Fig Parrot

Opopsitta g. gulielmiterti

A Profile of the Species in Captivity

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The Orange-breasted Fig Parrot has a total of seven recognized subspecies, of which some five subspecies have been kept in collections. Notably that of the five specimens of two different subspecies exhibited at Loro Parque, Tenerife.

However, as from most accounts of the species, the typical specimens are described to be smaller and lighter in build than that of the closely related, Double-eyed Fig Parrot *O. diophthalma*. This is because all the specimens described are from the subspecies *amabilis*, *fuscifrons*, *nigrifrons* and *suavisima*; all of which are smaller and differ immensely in coloration to the nominate *gulielmiterti*. Indeed, I suspect the length which Forshaw used for his description of the nominate subspecies of the Orange-breasted Fig Parrot in his *Parrots of the World*, is not from *gulielmiterti*.

The accurate descriptions for the various subspecies can be found in various articles and publications, such as an earlier edition of the *Lori Journal International*, a Dutch publication, and in several parrot books written by celebrated aviculturist Rosemary Low. Unfortunately, incomplete or scarce information pertaining to the nominate *gulielmiterti* has usually been found. The description by Forshaw is as follows:

MALE: General plumage green, paler and more yellowish on underwing coverts and lower underparts; forehead, crown and behind eye dark blue; lores, throat and sides of head pale yellow (or cream-white); variable black line on ear coverts (completely absent in some specimens); breast and upper abdomen orange; concealed yellow edging on innermost wing coverts; bill grey black; legs greenish grey.

FEMALE: Cheeks yellow, bordered

behind by prominent black band and below by a greenish-blue band; orange ear coverts; breast greenish.

Immatures are similar to the female.

However, there is a distinct immature phase where chicks, on fledging, have gray cheeks, slowly acquiring the orange, as they molt into a plumage phase, not unlike that of an adult female, and young males takes about two to three years to attain full adult plumage.

Various authors have indicated that Orange-breasted Fig Parrots are common to numerous where they occur, replacing the habitat unoccupied by Double-eyed Fig Parrots, especially in the southern parts of its range in Papua New Guinea. The distribution and status of the nominate *gulielmiterti* is restricted to the western part of Vogelkop, Irian Jaya, near the Indonesian town of Sorong and to the Western Papuan Island of Salawati. It is the westernmost and most isolated occurring form of the species and no other subspecies of Orange-breasted Fig Parrot occurs within its range.

From my personal observations, it is decidedly local and rather scarce in its numbers, with only approximately 30 birds found in a single locality.

I had never seen or heard of the Orange-breasted Fig Parrot during my starting years in aviculture, until a pair of the subspecies *suavisima* was illustrated in the publication of the Singapore Avicultural Society. They immediately endeared me to their small size and exquisite coloration.

Previously, the genus *Opopsitta* was represented by only the nominate sub-

species of the Double-eyed Fig Parrot *O. d. diophthalma*; that was still occasionally available to local aviculturists. I then sought to find these birds from dealers, but found that they do not have them, mainly due to the rarity and high mortality rates of this particular species of Fig Parrot.

Indeed, from my experience, newly collected birds are decidedly delicate and the experience can almost be compared to the thought of trying to acclimatize Pygmy Parrots *Micropsitta* sp. in captivity.

Thus, coupled with stress and infections with bacteria, in less than sanitary conditions provided by the native dealers and trappers, very few birds can be expected to survive. I then planned two informal expeditions to Salawati and Sorong in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, and began the difficult task of trapping and keeping these birds alive. A total of nine birds was obtained from these two trips, and these have formed the basis of my breeding nucleus for this rare and exquisite Fig Parrot.

After appropriate isolation and quarantine at our facility in Singapore, the birds were initially housed in spacious flights that were planted. This produced nearly disastrous results, with two birds dying within the first week. Finally, they were accommodated in small lori-keet cages, measuring 150 x 80 x 100 cm high (60 x 32 x 40 in.) with natural guava and rambutan branches provided for gnawing.

This appeared to be the most suitable alternative, and the birds were broken up to form pairs and trios, consisting of an extra male. They cannot be kept on a colony system once established, as they are quite aggressive and very territorial; observations have shown that, like *Eclectus* Parrots *Eclectus roratus*, the female is dominant and can effectively prevent weaker birds from obtaining any food or drink, and will persecute them relentlessly.

These birds are most endearing and through careful husbandry of wild caught birds, I have managed to hold a minimum breeding population of 15 pairs of the nominate *gulielmiterti*.

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Some of the other subspecies are also kept, but the nominate form is still my favorite, because of their wonderful color scheme, larger size and stocky build. They are slightly longer and larger than all Double-eyed Fig Parrots and exhibit much interesting behavior.

These Fig Parrots, together with Double-eyed Fig Parrots, have been observed feeding on seeds of fruiting fig trees, and some other blossoms and fruit in their native habitat and, indeed, immediately after trapping them, they would accept only ripe figs as their source of food. After they were brought to the city and then onward to Singapore, they were slowly and somewhat painfully converted to a diet of bananas, guavas and apples. This formed the initial diet, but was not satisfactory or adequate to my standards; thus, attempts were made to "persuade" them to accept various mixtures and diets, but it was found that they refused a totally liquid mixture and only partially accepted a lumpy mixture consisting of diced fruit, pound cake and lory mixture, given in general to all the larger Fig Parrots of the genus *Psittaculirostris* while in quarantine.

Then a unique mixture was formulated to suit their tastes and dietary preferences. It consisted of very young, sprouted wheat and various millet seeds, mixed in fresh corn kernels and very lightly topped with a thickened mixture of NEKTON LORI (Nekton Produkte - Germany). And fresh fruits in season were provided ad lib, and these usually consisted of ripe guavas, small figs (available from local trees and imported specially for them - it is not so palatable to the human taste, as it is thick, sticky, starchy, not so sweet and full of tiny seeds), bananas, apples and pears. Surprisingly, these birds refused to sample any citrus or papayas.

During the breeding season, fresh ant larvae and mealworms were provided, but only the former was relished. Other forms of live food, such as grubs and maggots, are often looked upon with disdain.

Vitamin supplements and calcium/mineral supplements are added more frequently than for other fig parrots. It has been published in several papers for fig parrots in the USA that vitamin K and zinc may not be adequate in normal diets and supplements are recommended for their continued well being and breeding successes.

Standard vitamin supplements are

used once weekly in water, in the form of NEKTON S (Nekton Produkte - Germany) and extra supplements of vitamin K are used in the morning feeds, in the form of NEKTON Q (Nekton Produkte - Germany).

There have been instances where I have observed Double-eyed Fig Parrots dropping dead from their perches, due to excessive internal worm infestations. Thus, as a precaution, I worm the Orange-breasted Fig Parrots, after they have become established, using YOMESAN tablets for children. The dose repeated after two weeks guarantees that eggs and larvae, not destroyed previously, are completely eradicated. Their condition tends to improve and since they are housed in suspended lorikeet cages, there is little risk of re-infestation.

Nest sites observed in the wild on the West Papuan Island of Salawati, where some of the birds were obtained personally by myself, were on slightly decaying trees in deep forest, on the site of a broken branch or joint of the tree, often obscured by moss and epiphytes. The nest is not very deep but usually at about 40 cm (16 in.) down from the nest entrance.

Thus, standard horizontal boxes were designed for use in these fig parrots, and some of the smaller lories. The dimensions are 14 in. x 5-1/2 in. x 3 in high and all the captive Orange-breasted Fig Parrots, whether paired or not, prefer to roost in these boxes at night. The interior is filled with soft peat and small grade, red wood bark, which the birds enjoy excavating.

Orange-breasted Fig Parrots do not show any seasonal preference for breeding in our facility, but it seems that they are stimulated at around the monsoon season, which occurs both in Singapore and in their native habitat at about the same time.

After some initial nest preparation, the pair get more territorial and certain threat displays are exhibited when somebody is in view. The male usually jumps from perch to perch in wide deliberated movements, and stretches out his neck in typical lory like fashion. He may also preen the feathers at the sides of his chest and neck. He also makes a sharp call, while both sexes will put up a constant chattering. At most other times, these birds are relatively quiet. It is recommended that pairs be kept out of sight of other members or pairs of its kind that are unfamiliar to them. As they will appear visibly stressed

Photo by Lawrence Kuah



The Female Orange-breasted Fig Parrot has orange ear coverts and a greenish breast which easily distinguishes her from the male, whose entire breast is orange. In this species the female is dominant.

The Orange-breasted Fig Parrot is uncommon in captivity. Although the photo is not sharp, you can see the beautiful colors of the species.

and it is the female here that shows all the threat displays and is very anxiously throwing herself furiously at the adjoining bars in an attempt to drive away the intruding arrivals. Mating occurs frequently, and is performed with one foot on the perch; the male rocking himself with peculiar movements not unlike those of mating lorikeets. They would mate at any time of the day, even late at night - in artificial lighting. And these birds, once acclimatized to conditions in captivity, are so tame that they would mate in full view of strangers. Thus, Rosemary Low managed to obtain some photographs and make observations, when she visited us in 1993.

The usual clutch consists of two round-oval, white eggs, with incubation commencing on the production of the second egg. Incubation is carried out exclusively by the female and lasts approximately 20 days. But for the smaller subspecies, such as *nigrifrons*, it could be as short as 18 - 19 days.

Young Orange-breasted Fig Parrots hatch with grayish-white down. Both parents are more aggressive and active during this period of time, with a greater interest in live food for some pairs and an acceptance of a slightly wetter mixture, previously ignored.

Of all our available pairs, at least 11 have laid, but the majority of chicks hatched could not be raised successfully beyond the first week. On pairs that refuse to accept live food or a more enriched, soft food mixture, the chicks are doomed to an early demise. Only the few pairs that choose to accept the foods containing the essential nutrition sufficient to cover the needs of the young can raise young successfully.

Our successful pair managed to hatch both chicks, one of which was neglected and died on the second day. The first chick was raised by its parents until about 12 days, when it was suddenly abandoned. It was then removed for handrearing and placed in a commercial parrot brooder at 92° and fed with the same lory rearing mixture, consisting of NEKTON LORI (Nekton Produkte - Germany), with additional rearing mix consisting of ground seeds and pulverized sweet corn.

It developed rapidly. The chick was fully fledged at about forty days and it resembled the adult female in coloration, with a grayish-horn colored beak.

This young bird was initially thought to be a female, but after approximately two years, some spots of orange appeared on its breast and the answer was obvious! In fact, prior to its transformation, I had observed "her" copulating with another adult female, but I thought that females may exhibit male copulatory behavior as well. But, I was wrong and that thought now seems to be remote.

The secret to raising and breeding fig parrots successfully is relatively straightforward (I refrain to mention easy, because it is far from it), and is greatly influenced by the diet, especially the quality of the food provided. Also, adult birds would have to be conditioned to consume suitable diets, containing adequate nutrition. Avoid diets that are too oily and fattening in order to prevent obesity. Suitable protein rich foods must be introduced at the onset of rearing chicks, to ensure success. Never provide a monotonous diet consisting of one kind of food item, always provide variety; also, do not forget the sensitive nature and requirements of these fig parrots, which are very prone to stress. Keep in mind, too, that this species and other members of its genus and of the genus *Psittaculirostris* require higher levels of vitamin K and possibly dietary zinc for successful maintenance and reproduction in captivity. ➤

Successful breeding of the Orange-breasted Fig Parrot at Loro Parque

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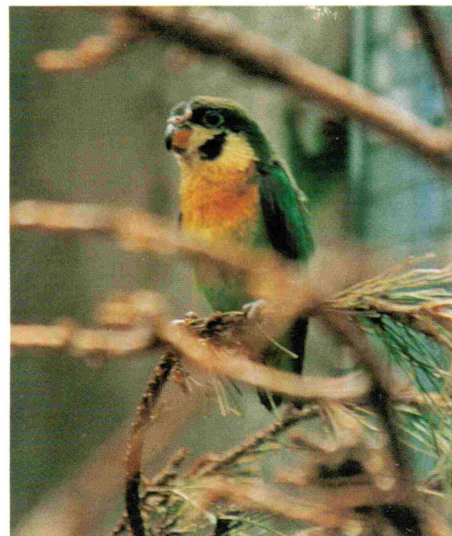
The Orange-breasted Fig Parrot *Opopsitta gulielmiterti* occurs naturally on New Guinea, including Salawati in the Papuan islands, and also the Aru islands, Indonesia. Seven different subspecies have been described, although this figure may be in need of a slight revision. Perhaps the most distinctive subspecies is *Opopsitta gulielmiterti amabilis*, which occurs from the Northeastern region of New Guinea. This subspecies differs very noticeably from other subspecies by the fact that the adult male bird lacks the distinctive orange coloration of the breast and upper abdomen, which is instead a pale yellow. The male bird also lacks the black marking on the ear coverts that is usually present in other subspecies. The female bird by comparison has the black ear coverts and also the rich orange breast and upper abdomen coloration, making sex identification for this subspecies the reverse of the nominate description and most of the other subspecies.

The Orange-breasted Fig Parrot has been represented in the Loro Parque collection by the subspecies *O.g.amabilis* for several years, although in recent years these birds have not been on public display but are accommodated in one of our off-exhibition breeding areas. One pair of *O.g.amabilis* managed to successfully hatch and rear a chick during the early part of the 1994 breeding season. Some of the notes recorded are given as follows;

The breeding cage is situated in an off exhibit area which is not accessible to members of the visiting public. The breeding cage measures 2.93 m. (10 ft.) in length, 1.00 m. (3 ft.) in width and 2.36 m. (8 ft.) in height. One end of the cage is covered and has solid walls, while the middle and far end of the cage is of a more open wire framework design. The birds do have visibility into the adjoining cages, but the pair of

O.g.amabilis in question are not housed within visibility distance of other *Opopsitta* pairs.

The same dietary mixture is fed to the adult pair twice a day throughout the year, once early in the morning and again during the middle of the afternoon. A main dish provides a mixture of various chopped fruits and vegetables, alfalfa, palm fruits and fresh figs. A second dish contains a commercial dietary pellet, a mixture of small dry millet, niger and canary seeds, a canine pellet, a special supplement cake which is made at Loro Parque and live food in the form of mealworms. Throughout the year the diet is supplemented with a general vitamin/mineral powder, plus a small amount of additional Vitamin K in powder form. When the time is approaching for chicks to hatch then the diet is supplemented daily with *Lactobacillus* in powder form sprinkled over the food, which is continued until the chicks have fledged. I have now used similar dietary guide lines to these to successfully rear both species of *Opopsitta* and all three species of *Psittaculiro-*



A newly fledged chick of the Orange-breasted Fig Parrot *Opopsitta gulielmiterti* at Loro Parque, Tenerife, Canary Islands.

Photo by Roger Sweeney