

5 The Cape Parrot

5.1 Range and Distribution

There are three races of the Cape parrot, *Poicephalus robustus*, described. In captive-bred birds, differentiation between the subspecies can be difficult if the origin of the founder stock is unknown. During the days of frequent importation into the U.S. and Europe, only small numbers of Capes were available from wild-bird import stations. This may have been due to its habit of traveling in small family groups in the wild and remaining in high tree tops to feed and roost resulting in trappers having difficulty procuring large numbers for sale to exporters.

The Cape parrot's range in the wild is throughout the central to southernmost extreme of the African continent. The nominate race, *robustus robustus*, is not well represented in aviculture because its natural range is the southernmost tip of southeastern Africa where exports have been prohibited for many decades. The majority of the specimens now found in U.S. aviculture are of the race *robustus fuscicollis*, originating from southern Senegal, into Ghana and Togo. Exporters in these countries were operating a thriving livestock business in the 1980s, during which time most representatives now in captivity were imported. Although a limited number of *robustus suahelicus* were imported from Tanzania into the U.S. during the very late 1980s and early 1990s a few can still be found in the hands of several dedicated aviculturists. However, in Europe, *sua-helicus* is the most common species in aviculture.

5.2 Subspecific Differentiation

The nominate race of the Cape parrot, *Poicephalus robustus robustus*, is easily distinguishable from its two subspecies. When mature, this subspecies sports an almost butter-scotch-colored head instead of the silvery grey of the other two forms. Upon close examination, the head color includes yellow-brown, with dabbles of dark brown and some black at the vein of each feather. Since the ranges of the nominate form and the other subspecies do not cross in the wild, there is little chance that interspecific crosses exist in the wild. When dealing with captive-bred birds, however, crosses can take place and the resulting offspring may be offered for sale. In this form, adult females have a distinctive reddish forehead that males of the same species often lack.

Ranging into Tanzania, and exported on a fairly regular basis, specimens of *Poicephalus robustus suahelicus* are uncommon, but occasionally available in captivity. This subspecies is distinguished from the nominate form of *robustus* by its silver to grey head. In addition, the head is marked with other colors as well, being speckled with pink, tinges of light brown and rose or tan. Adult males rarely have the red frontal band on the forehead but females usually develop the deep pink-red band just above the nares in their first adult plumage.

Probably the most commonly kept subspecies of the Cape parrot is *Poicephalus robustus fuscicollis*, and most representatives of this race were originally imported from Senegal or Ghana. This race is difficult to distinguish from *suahelicus* having only a slightly bluer tinge to the rump and on the back under the wings. The subspecies from Senegal (*fuscicollis*) is also slightly smaller in size than *suahelicus*. Of course, dietary influences in captivity may make determinations, based solely on size, very difficult if not impossible. Responsible breeders should try to trace the import origin of

their breeding stock to find out from which area their birds were imported. This could be the only definite way to keep the races pure in captive-breeding programs.

As a special note of interest, immature birds, both males and females, usually have the reddish pink frontal band above the nares. In most juveniles, this color disappears within the first year and then reappears on maturing females. Some males have been known to maintain a few red or pink feathers on the forecrown as well, but the male's band is very unorganized and splotchy at best. Females vary in color and will often develop a large area of pink on the front of the head, sometimes extending back beyond the eyes.

5.3 Breeding Setups in Aviculture

The Cape parrot has been bred in captivity in a number of ways. Some breeders in South Africa claim this species desires to fly and therefore must be housed in large flight cages in order to accommodate its breeding needs. This has been disproved by a breeder in Florida who has successfully bred them in suspended cages measuring only six feet long. So, the real key to success with the Cape parrot must be something other than cage size.

It should be stressed that cages should always be of an adequate size to give the birds freedom of natural movement and flight. To house any parrot in a cage that does not allow, at the very least, short flights from one perch to another, often results in unhealthy breeding stock. We must remember that captive diets are rich in fats and oils, and exercise is necessary to keep birds in breeding shape and good psychological order.

Breeding setups vary, as explained above. For the most part, cubical, suspended cages measuring at least five feet long and three feet wide are recommended. Larger flight cages are certainly welcomed where possible. Nesting

boxes can also be of several different designs. Some breeders prefer to use the L-shape or boot box for Cape parrots, claiming that they are shy and like to hide in the bottom of the boot where no light can get to them. The traditional grandfather-clock style box has also been used successfully. When using this style of nest box, the deeper the better. It is true that captive wild-caught Cape parrots are a bit on the shy side, and often a deeper box will help them overcome their fears. Make sure there is an internal ladder of some sort so birds do not become trapped in the bottom of a deep, dark chasm! Several perches should be mounted inside the cage to encourage flight from one to the other. Perches should be of several different diameters and should be made of wood, as Cape parrots love to chew. For the purposes of sanitation, do not place perches directly above food and water bowls.

In the wild, upon inspection of the nests of the Cape parrot, we find that they often lack substrate or chewed wood in the bottom of the nest, giving rise to the theory that these birds are not elaborate nest builders. Breeders usually add something to the box so the hen does not lay the eggs on the bare wooden bottom. Clean pine shavings or clean mulch will work just fine. If the female does not desire this addition to the box, she will surely remove it before breeding commences.

The diet consists of the normal captive parrot fare. Seeds, nuts, fruits, vegetables and extruded pellets should be offered. Birds often have favorite foods, but this varies from pair to pair. Some claim that walnuts are favored, while others have noticed that their pairs relish peanuts in the shell but will only accept them during their breeding times. When chicks are present in the nest, a change in dietary habits may occur; therefore, it is wise to offer a wide variety of foods and slowly begin to tailor the diet to the pair's specific desires. See section 7.7 for more nutritional information.