SINGING PARROTS
Bred in South Africa

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There are three species of *Geoffroyus* Parrots, found in Indonesia, New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands. They vary from 21-25cm (8-10 inches) in length with a solid build and a short, almost square tail.

The Red-cheeked Parrot is found in Australia, in the eastern part of the Cape York Peninsula, however not much is known about its habits there.

From the limited experiences of a very few people, it seemed that *Geoffroyus* have difficulty in adapting to captivity; it was thought that this was because they are easily stressed. There were no records of the other two members of the genus in aviculture. Then, in 1994 a hen Singing Parrot *G. heteroclitus*, from the Solomon Islands, was imported into South Africa. The owner, Brian Mardon, was very impressed and longed to see a cock. He decided to import a few pairs, however sadly, he died while the birds were in quarantine. The death rate among these Singing Parrots was high. Clearly, they needed expert care - and quickly.

Fortunately for the surviving birds,



Right: At the age of eight weeks the beak begins to lighten. By four months both mandibles are pale.
Below: The cock of the breeding pair of Singing Parrots.



Mike and Terry Thom, of Marina Beach, South Africa were contacted and asked if they would take them all. They said yes. After all, in their own words, it was Brian Mardon who instilled in them a love for parrots. A couple more *Geoffroyus* died soon after arrival, in October 1995 - but the other seven are still alive today. I would describe this as an avicultural feat. Not only are they thriving, but they are breeding! The Thoms suggested that I was too lavish in my praise of them and insisted that credit was also given to several scientists, avian veterinarians and other experts who gave them advice and encouragement. However, several other Singing Parrots were imported into South Africa and did not survive long. I remain convinced that it was the Thoms' dedication and commonsense which led to their success.

In February 1996, I received a fax from them. When they told me that they kept Singing Parrots, I was intrigued, as I had never seen this species and never expected to. I had no plans to go to South Africa. Yet only four months later I was getting off a plane in Johannesburg! My travels took me to Natal and I did not have to make a large detour to reach the area where the Thoms live.

They started to keep parrots as recently as 1991. This surprised me as they appeared to be extremely

experienced aviculturists. It was quickly obvious that nothing was too much trouble where their birds were concerned. No wonder the Singing Parrots have thrived with them! They are meticulous in every aspect of bird care.





Above: In the hen the head is a soft blue-tinged brown. Below: Singing Parrot chicks aged 28 and 30 days. Note the light-coloured beak.

Description

Eagerly anticipating my first sight of the Singing Parrots, I was impressed by their superb feather condition and by their soft colours. The only adult cock had a blue-mauve collar of subtle shade and a yellow head. He had only recently moulted into adult plumage; three months previously there were green feathers on his head. Apparently the beak colour changes first, then the head plumage. The whitish, yellow iris, as in other parrots from that area of the world, such as the Blue-rumped and *Tanygnathus* species, results in a rather hard, staring appearance.

The feather has a very fine quality, something like a Plumheaded Parrakeet. Hens differ in the head colouration, which is a soft blue-tinged brown. A young cock had a softer shade of yellow on the head and the cheeks were tinged with grey. Only in flight are the beautiful blue underwing coverts seen. The Singing Parrot measures about 25cm long. The weight of the two cocks has varied between 116-135 grams. The hens weight ranges between 146-172 grams.

I stood for an hour admiring them. Their behaviour was as fascinating as their lovely plumage. They move in a slow and stealthy manner. If a bird of prey flies over they may freeze, motionless, with one foot poised above the perch. It would take dedicated and sensitive aviculturists to provide the conditions under which they would thrive. They need to feel secure. The medium-sized aviaries, filled with leafy branches, in a secluded location between guava trees, seemed to be exactly right.

Singing Parrots are extremely observant and watchful. They can swivel their eye like a cockatoo does. One feels a need to tip-toe about and talk very quietly in their presence, as though any loud noise would have a profoundly disturbing effect upon them. Mike and Terry told me, 'We would be horrified at the prospect of anyone attempting to import them in any number. They definitely need sensitive and special handling.'

This includes diet. Indeed, it appears to be the key to the successful maintenance of this species. They told me, 'It was Dr Roger Horner who ultimately discovered a vital fact. Singing Parrots chew bananas, skin and all. They then reject nearly all the solids but retain the juice. This is the moisture which they require to digest seed (their source of protein). Other sources of juice are carrots, oranges, sweet potato, carrot tails (a favourite) and mulberries.' One Singing Parrot can pulverise two whole green bananas and skin per day - probably more than its own weight!'

Dehydration

After careful examination of much data, Dr Horner found the common denominator of the Singing Parrots he had autopsied. Most had died of a kidney-related problem. These were actually secondary: the primary cause was dehydration. On arrival they existed mainly on green bananas, including the skin. Ripe and semi-ripe bananas are not favoured, except during the winter when they apparently need food with a higher sugar content. Some seed is taken but a good variety of fresh fruits and vegetables form the larger part of the diet. The fruits are spiked onto stainless steel skewers. On arrival the green bananas were ignored. It was not until they were hung up in a vertical position that they were eagerly consumed. The secret of their diet is including fruit or vegetables with a high moisture content on a daily basis.

The Thoms told me that these birds would probably not have survived the quarantine period, had it not been for the dedication of Aubrie Naude who was caring for them. When they became ill he crop fed them twice daily with food and antibiotics. It is believed to have been the water content in the food which kept them alive. The Singing Parrots have been seen to drink water from a dish on extremely rare occasions, and not from wire or foliage. When it rains, they make straight for the shelter! It is interesting that prior to export these birds would readily drink the milk of green coconut, yet in South Africa they ignore the milk of ripe coconut.

Why are they called Singing Parrots? Because they really do sing! Apparently they may do so for half an hour at a time. I heard a brief snatch of song, which was slightly reminiscent of that of a Lesser Vasa Parrot.

The First Egg

In July 1996, the most mature hen started to spend long periods in the nestbox after the entrance hole was enlarged to measure 70mm wide and 90mm high. She stripped thin lengths of eucalyptus (blue gum) bark from the perches and took these into the box. However, neither she nor the other hens have done this since. When the hen was inside, the cock would sing with the group in the next-door aviary. On July 30, the hen was obviously carrying an egg but her wings were drooping and she was breathing heavily. Veterinary advice was to give her an injection of calcium gluconate that evening, repeating in the morning. Because of the stress which removal from the aviary causes to the Singing Parrots, this posed something of a dilemma. Mike and Terry reported, 'After much agonised discussion we drilled a hole in the nestbox so that we could insert a thermometer.'

The hen was then restricted to the nestbox for the night, after being given the injection, and an extra infra-red lamp. During the first winter all the Singing Parrots had infra-red lamps because the night temperatures can drop very low. Next morning there was no egg but the hen looked better. For fear of disturbing her, the nestbox was not checked until August 3 when an egg was seen. The hen incubated for

the full period but the embryo had died. She nested again in October. The clutch consisted of two eggs, laid on October 3 and 6. They hatched on October 29 and November 1, to give an incubation period of 26 days for each egg.

Rearing Foods

During the incubation period the cock was never seen to enter the nest. This changed the day after the chicks hatched. His favoured rearing foods were mulberries, green beans, carrot tops and sprouted sunflower seed. Also eaten were apple, carrot, sweet potato and ripe banana; peanuts were rationed. Mulberries and green beans were ignored except when there were chicks in the nest. Green mealies are greatly enjoyed. Dry seed forms approximately 10-20% of the diet. This includes canary seed and sorghum. Generally, green fruit is preferred to ripe fruit but they readily eat ripe guavas. This preference for green fruit must mean that they do not compete with other parrot species who share their habitat. The others probably take the riper fruits.

Handrearing

The chicks were fed on a varied diet and were thriving. However, it was decided to remove them for handrearing. They were fully feathered and ten weeks old when disaster struck. The handrearing food normally contained 25% guava puree. One day it was decided to give pureed butternut pumpkin to vary the diet. Both chicks vomited and became very ill. Despite all efforts, both died. It was suspected that the pumpkin puree, a jar of babyfood, was contaminated in some way. Some of the puree was fed to a cockatiel chick. It developed the same symptoms and died, despite having its crop washed out several times. The puree tasted normal. Another aviculturist had fed the same food to his chicks for years without a problem. The Thoms were very unlucky indeed. Each young Singing Parrot was post-mortemed by a different pathologist. Neither could find the cause of death.

Success!

The hen laid another clutch, one egg only, on January 19, but it was infertile. The next two eggs were laid on March 30 and April 2. Both hatched, on April 23 and April 26 1997. One chick died in the nest at the age of two days. It was decided to handrear the surviving chick when he was 11 days old. He was successfully reared. On September 29 he weighed 160 grams with the crop empty and 190 grams with a full crop. It was noted that he first sang on October 23, after making 'the strangest noises' the Thoms had ever heard from a Singing Parrot.





Above: Terry Thom (in jeans) with a visitor to her aviaries. Below: At the stage of development when the first contour feathers are appearing, a Singing Parrot bears a resemblance to an Eclectus chick.

Eclectus-like, the pair had not finished their breeding activities for the year. The hen laid two more eggs, on August 1 and 3, which hatched on August 25 and August 28. This time the incubation period was 25 days. When the young were nearly seven weeks old, they had to be removed for hand-rearing; the hen deserted the nest after a stormy night. The young Singing Parrots were very cold but recovered in an intensive care unit. The eldest took his first flight at the age of 58 days.

Behaviour of a Hen

After the removal of the young the cock parent was placed in an aviary with two hens, one of whom had been calling to him while the chicks were being reared. After only one hour the hen approached the cock and serenaded him. She even tried to sidle beneath him! The Thoms feel sure that a cock will consort with more than one hen. In the Solomon Islands, one cock has been seen attending two nests at the same time, according to information given by a local person.

Vocalisations

There is still a lot to learn about the behaviour and reproduction of the Singing Parrot. The Thoms have observed that Singing Parrots always sing before they mate - a beautiful song. When the eyes of the chicks open the hen will leave the nest to be fed briefly by the cock. While he is feeding her they will whistle. Despite careful observation it is not certain which bird sings, or whether they both do so. At no other time have they been heard to whistle. The Thoms told me, 'These fascinating parrots have distinct songs and these songs have meanings.'

Development of the Young

On hatching, the beak is yellowish with a yellow tip. By the age of seven weeks the beak is dark grey. At eight weeks it begins to lighten. By four months both mandibles are pale. At six months the tip darkens and then becomes pale grey, as does the base of the upper mandible. Eventually, the cock's upper mandible becomes pale. One cock was sexually mature six months after his beak began to lighten.

The eyes open at about 11 days. One of the young ones was perching at 42 days. Its appetite was at its greatest at about 43 days and began to decline at about 55 days, when its weight had dropped from 141 grams at 43 days to 126 grams. The first flight occurred at 58 days.

The Future

A second pair had two infertile eggs, followed, three months later, by two more. The cock appears to be inexperienced. A third hen has laid but she does not have a mate. Hopefully in due course she will have the chance to breed, either with the reproducing cock or with one of his sons. Let us hope that this small group will be the means by which the Singing Parrot is established in aviculture in South Africa. The Thoms' success is deserved and must surely be the first captive breeding of the Singing Parrot. As they told me, 'It has been wonderful to contribute new knowledge to science and aviculture.'