

ALEXANDRINE PARROT

Psittacula eupatria

The Alexandrine Parrot is one of the largest of the Asiatic Parrots bred in Australian aviaries and because of its size, is not always suitable for every aviculturist. If you have a small backyard in suburban areas, they can be rather noisy, at times causing problems with neighbours who do not appreciate loud piercing bird calls.

However, a large percentage of aviculturists who live in open areas, where noise is not a problem, find Alexandrines to be an excellent bird. In fact, it has only been in fairly recent years that people have taken notice of them, prior to that we feel they were very underrated. Like all Asiatic Parrots, rarely do you see one in poor feather condition, apart from when they are moulting. Alexandrine Parrots are an excellent example of a good feathered bird. Often at bird shows the common remark from budgerigar breeders is 'how do you get a bird that size in perfect feather?' Our answer to that is, if they are housed properly, it just seems to be in their makeup. People new to aviculture probably don't realise how lucky we are to have this species of bird available. Thirty years ago there were few Alexandrine Parrots available, however, with careful breeding from dedicated aviculturists, Alexandrines have slowly progressed and are freely available today. There is rather a marked difference in the size of various Alexandrine Parrots you may see. Some believe that there is a large race and a small race of the species. However, in our experience we would simply describe the difference in size as being between the weak and the strong.

Sexing

A good sized cock Alexandrine Parrot should measure around 1550-580mm (22-23 inches) in length, be rather bold in the head and stand firmly on the perch with an alert appearance. The hen is slightly shorter in the tail and has a rounder, more feminine head than the cock. In selecting birds, particular attention should be made to size and the amount of chestnut red on the wing patch of both sexes. Some Alexandrine Parrots are very poorly coloured in this area.

Housing

The aviaries we use are of the open flight type as these birds benefit from access to rain. Regardless of the time of year, as soon as it is raining, Asiatic Parrots delight in hanging on the wire or sitting on the perch to get a good soaking. This is very beneficial, not only for maintaining good feather condition, but also it is a great help in egg hatchability, by supplying moisture to the eggs from the brooding hen's breast feathers. Alexandrines like to chew, therefore, an aviary built of galvanised pipe or box steel tube with heavy 16 gauge (1.6mm) weldmesh, is required. The aviary length should be at least 4.8 metres (16 feet) long x 1.2 metres (4 feet) wide x 2.1 metres (7 feet) high, one third of this shelter.

One pair per flight is suggested, however, in some cases colony breeding has been successful.

Being such large birds and heavy fliers, it is advisable to place a leafy branch or similar at either end of the flight that youngsters can crash land into, saving skinned heads or broken wings. Within a few days they soon settle down and are a sensible bird in a long flight.

Feeding

Feeding is as discussed in the general *Feeding* section.

During breeding, a basic diet of grey-striped sunflower seed, hulled oats and budgerigar mix is always available. A daily supply of green food such as milk thistle, oats in head and corn on the cob or boiled corn, whichever you are able to obtain, makes for an excellent supplement at this time. In our experience, if a daily supply of corn is not supplied, the parents are not able to keep up the food required from just a dry seed mix. Their diet does not include a lot of fruit, however, apples will readily be eaten.

Breeding

Alexandrine Parrots are generally excellent parents, usually rearing all their young without problems, provided the parents have adequate food available to feed the youngsters. If food supply is inadequate, rarely do they allow the young to die, as many other species would. They

continue to rear the best they can, however on leaving the nest, the young are much smaller than they should be.

We never expect breeding success until both the cock and hen are at least three years old. From this age on we have found them to be very reliable breeders usually going to nest, in southern Victoria, around the end of July.

Natural hollow logs, 900mm (3 feet) long with an inside diameter of 250-300mm (10-12 inches), hung vertically, are used for nesting. A 120mm (4.5 inches) diameter entrance hole is cut approximately 150mm (6 inches) from the top of the hollow. Logs of this size are rather heavy, therefore an inspection opening is made 230mm (9 inches) from the bottom. This allows the breeder to inspect without having to lift the log down. Natural rotted hardwood sawdust is used for the nesting chamber.

If logs are not available, a nestbox constructed of sawn timber or plyboard covered with flat iron, to restrict the birds from chewing, with a ladder of weldmesh or similar attached inside, would be suitable. It should measure approximately 250mm (10 inches) square x 900mm (3 feet) high.

Three to four eggs is a normal clutch and although the cock will enter the log, only the hen incubates.

Incubation lasts approximately 24 days and on hatching, young soon need a constant supply of food, which can be easily regurgitated by the parents.

Chicks stay in the nest for approximately seven to eight weeks. Young are independent a month after leaving the nest and we have never had to remove young from the parents' flight through bullying. It is a rare occasion for Alexandrines to double brood.

Most young Alexandrine cocks will show colour at 12 months of age, yet others do not show colour until 18 months. Usually they display a full neck ring of pink and black by the time they are two years old. Hens do not develop a neck ring, but will show the chestnut red wing patch.

Mutation

In an effort to produce Lutino Alexandrines, some breeders have hybridised pure or Normal Alexandrines with Lutino Indian Ringnecked Parrots. However, it is a long programme and care must be taken to keep thorough records of matings and hybrids. The end result is an outstanding mutation, well worth the effort if properly managed. Green hybrids, especially in the first cross, tend to show a more rust coloured shoulder patch than the pure Alexandrine.

We began some 15 years ago by mating a Normal green Alexandrine cock to a Lutino Indian Ringnecked hen. The offspring from this mating produces all visual Green youngsters, the cocks being split for Lutino. The hens are disregarded as they do not carry the Lutino gene. These split cocks are then paired to Normal Alexandrine hens which produce Lutino hens and possibly split cocks.

Each generation must be mated to Normal Alexandrines so that size and conformation is improved. After four generations we have been able to produce Lutino Alexandrines that are as good as the Normal greens.

One must have patience, time and plenty of aviary space if contemplating a challenge such as this, however, it is well worth the effort.

A quicker way of producing Lutinos is to mate a cock Lutino Indian Ringnecked Parrot to Normal Alexandrine hen. The progeny are Green cocks split for Lutino and Lutino hens, however birds bred from this mating often lack size and usually run into fertility problems.