

## BREEDING THE WHISKERED LORIKEET

by Irene and Don Bardgett

We purchased a pair of recently imported Whiskered Lorikeets *Oreopsittacus arfaki* from a Lancashire bird dealer in October 1997. When we first saw them we were immediately impressed with their small size for as well as measuring only some 6in (15cm) in length, they are also very slightly built. Rosemary Low describes them as '...undoubtedly among the most difficult small parrots in aviculture', a description with which we would not disagree except to suggest that, in the wild, they must be more robust than they look for their alternative name is Arfak Alpine Lorikeet and they have been recorded at altitudes of up to 12,000ft (3,600m) in the mountains of New Guinea.

Despite searching diligently through as much avicultural literature as we could lay our hands on, we could find little in print about the species in the weeks immediately following their arrival. However, in January 1998, Rosemary Low, perhaps prompted by the previous year's importation, contributed some very useful notes in an article which appeared in the UK weekly publication *Cage & Aviary Birds*.

We housed the lorikeets in an all wire-cage measuring some 36in x 12in x 12in (91.5cm x 30.5cm x 30.5cm) in which we have previously bred various other small lorikeets, together with Vernal *Loriculus vernalis* and Blue-crowned Hanging Parrots *L. galgulus*. At first both birds were inclined to panic and take flight at the slightest provocation. However, they eventually settled down and were subsequently much less nervous. They were fed on the same Wysoy-based nectar mixture which we use for all our brush-tongued parrots. The mixture also includes brewer's yeast, bee pollen, white sugar and Farex. They also enjoyed sponge cake soaked in nectar but showed no interest in fruit. We had been told they like greenfood but the birds did no more than nibble at any of a variety of items they were offered.

Nearly eight months passed before we were provided with irrefutable evidence the pair might be in or approaching breeding condition. Because of their extreme nervousness, they had been provided with a nest-box from the time we brought them home. It was used for roosting and was obviously a welcome refuge for whenever they felt threatened they would both dive - literally - headlong through the entrance hole and remain hidden until they deemed it safe to emerge. Because we had not seen evidence of display or other courtship interactions between the pair it came as something of a surprise when we found a single white egg in the nest-box on May 15th, 1998. We felt it would be unwise to further disturb the birds and left them to their own devices.



On June 10th we heard what we believed to be a chick calling in the box. We discovered that two eggs had been laid and the second hatched on June 12th. Unfortunately both nestlings died, the second of them on July 4th. We had formed the opinion that the first of them may have been weak on hatching but the loss of its sibling, when three weeks old, was disappointing. On examination we found the dead youngster had food in its crop but the tiny carcase looked peculiarly flattened. Two further eggs were laid (on July 31st and August 2nd) but both were clear. We decided to seek advice from lory and lorikeet expert, Trevor Buckell to see if he could offer any explanation for the problem. Although he had no direct experience with Whiskered Lorikeets he suggested we changed the diet to NektarPlus which he pointed out, is of a thinner consistency to our mixture. We made the change gradually and experienced no further problems.

On October 2nd 1998 another egg was laid and a second followed within 24 hours. Both adults incubated and during this period we saw the male displaying for the first time. Most of this activity consisted of rapid head-bobbing which we likened to the kind of display performed by iguanas. After each display the male retired into the nest-box.

So far as we are aware, both eggs hatched on October 24th - an incubation period of 23 days. For several days after incubation the adults were extremely nervous and frequently behaved in a very agitated manner - to such an extent that we considered moving items of equipment away from the vicinity of their cage in case the problem was associated with the environment immediately outside their accommodation. However, they eventually regained their composure and no further problems ensued during the nestling period.

The first chick emerged from the nest-box after 45 days, the second young bird fledged the following day. At this time the adults again became nervous, but their offspring conducted themselves with remarkable confidence and began feeding almost at once. Within three weeks they were obviously independent and we separated them from their parents. The decision had nothing to do with parental aggression. Indeed although the female was again showing interest in the nest-box all four birds frequently engaged in mutual preening.

In marked contrast to the adult birds, the chicks, initially, had shown every sign of confidence. Soon after fledging they hopped onto a proffered hand in their cage without the slightest sign of fear, even when gently stroked. When housed alone following independence they spent a good deal of time playing together when they would roll about like kittens engaged in mock fights. However, after being transferred to more spacious quarters their willingness to engage in close contact with their owners rapidly diminished!





Rosemary Low

**Whiskered Lorikeets in the aviaries of Fred Barnicoat in South Africa**

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Colin Smale

**The two Whiskered Lorikeets bred by Irene and Don Bardgett. The birds are still in juvenile plumage.**

*Irene and Don Bardgett live in Shipley, West Yorkshire. Lifelong foreign bird enthusiasts, they keep a variety of species ranging from small seedeaters and softbills to lorikeets.*



*When I wrote to Rosemary Low, an acknowledged expert on the lories and lorikeets and the author of the Encyclopedia of the Lories, to ask if she had a photo of the Whiskered Lorikeet that could be used to illustrate the previous breeding account, I suggested she might like to summarize what is known about keeping this species. This is what Rosemary wrote:-*

## **WHISKERED LORIKEETS NEED SPECIAL CARE**

by Rosemary Low

Three years ago at least two importers in the UK were offering Whiskered Lorikeets *Oreopsittacus arfaki* for sale. This is the smallest and, in some ways, the most delicate of the lorikeets which have been imported. It is an exquisite little creature but suitable only for highly experienced lorikeet keepers who can devote much time to its care and who have exactly the right accommodation. For more than a decade attempts have been made to import this lorikeet into Europe; losses in transit and in quarantine have, unfortunately, been very high although the numbers of birds involved have been small. It was therefore with very mixed feelings that I discovered that further attempts have been made.

I sincerely hope it does not lead to a demand for what is undoubtedly one of the most difficult small parrots in aviculture. I especially hope that exhibitors are not tempted to buy the species. It is not a bird which takes kindly to the stress of being caught up and moved around for shows. In addition, unless the diet and conditions are exactly right, the plumage lacks lustre and may have unsightly dark marks.

The two main problems with newly imported birds are the diet and the reluctance to bathe, or possibly lack of suitable bathing facilities. This may lead to the plumage becoming sticky. The Whiskered Lorikeet is a tiny little creature, more finch-like than parrot-like, and weighs about 21g.

If its plumage is in poor condition, it will quickly lose body heat and will become inactive and unhappy. In good health the Whiskered is active and vivacious in the extreme - a joy to behold. A friend in South Africa has told me about the losses of newly imported birds there. They were kept in conditions under which the plumage became sticky and the birds lost their ability to fly.

Knowledge of the specialised dietary requirements of this species is vital. One importer told me that they refused nectar. This was probably because the nectar offered was too thick. It must be thin, more like that offered to a sunbird. He had been feeding them on tinned fruit cocktail. On this diet they would be unable to moult or to breed, because it contains no protein. A properly formulated lorikeet food is essential for long-term survival.



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