



LOVE-BIRDS AND PIGMY PARROTS.

A STUDY.

By W. T. GREENE.

With Illustrations by A. F. LYDON.



EVER since parrots have been imported, the pretty little creatures whose ordinary designation has been chosen for the title of the present paper have been general favourites with bird-keepers on account of the remarkable attachment the pairs seem to entertain for each other; a circumstance to which they owe their scientific name of *Agapornis*, literally love-bird, as well as their French appellation of *Inséparable*, which has also been adopted by the Dutch, and their ordinary German name of *Unzertrennlliche*, which has a similar meaning.

A single bird, however, will live for years without any visible or apparent pining for companionship, and will actually become tamer and more attached to its owner when so kept than if a pair were the inmates of its solitary dwelling; and the reason it so frequently happens that when one of a couple of love-birds dies the other soon follows, is that the constitutions of both have been undermined by the hardships of the voyage from their native land, so that their death is due not to grief or a broken heart, but to decline or blood-poisoning, a rather prosaic termination to what at first seemed likely to become the nucleus of a very pretty little romance.

The Red-faced, also called the Abyssinian and Guinea parrakeet, or love-bird, is so well known as to scarcely need a description; nevertheless it may be briefly remarked, for the instruction of such readers as may be unacquainted with the species, that in size it about equals an English bullfinch, though its shorter legs and broader tail give it a very different appearance. The general colour of the plumage is grass-green; but the beak, itself of a yellowish red or orange colour, is surrounded by a circle of vermilion, which is broader and deeper in tint according to the age of the bird and not its sex, contrary to the usually received opinion. If the red-face affords no clue as to whether a given bird is a cock or a hen, the sex may be ascertained with certainty by examining the under part of the wings, where the small feathers, technically termed the under wing-coverts, are black in the adult male, but yellowish green in the female and the young cocks under a year old; when these last moult the feathers become black, and the sex is determined without a doubt. The tail in this species is rather short, rounded, and prettily barred with alternate bands of red, black, and green; but the long upper tail-coverts are green and cover it completely, so that its peculiar colouring is only seen when the bird flies or spreads out the tail in the act of preening its feathers, or in other words, is making its toilet, a performance in which it seems to take much delight, and the neglect of which is the first indication of ill-health.

The species under consideration is perhaps the most delicate of all the love-birds,

and requires to be studied a little as to its diet, which too often consists of dry seed alone, upon which it speedily falls into a decline. The food for newly-imported specimens should be boiled maize, no more of which should be cooked at a time than will be consumed the same day, for, when boiled, Indian corn soon turns sour, in which state it is injurious to the birds that partake of it. At the same time white millet (sorghum) and canary-seed should be accessible to the little prisoners, also French or spray millet, of which they are usually very fond. Good coarse clean grit (river sand) will supply small stones to assist digestion, and an abundance of clean water for washing and drinking, and a piece of soft wood on which to exercise their bills, will greatly help in the acclimation of these interesting little creatures, which do not appear, so far, to have nested in confinement, though as many of their congeners have done so, there seems to be no adequate reason why they should not follow their example.

There is however another thing that militates considerably against success in keeping the red-faced love-bird, namely, that when imported it has the quills of one or both wings closely cut, a fact that must be borne in mind if it is desired to turn them out into an aviary or even transfer them to a large cage, where they are apt to injure themselves by attempting to fly, which, of course, they are quite unable to do. As it would be decidedly cruel to pluck out the stumps, the birds had better be kept in a small cage until they moult; and the best abode for them during this probationary stage is what is usually called a box-cage, that is to say, one that is open only in front. This should be fitted with two perches, the back perch being fixed two or three inches higher than the front one, which last should be so placed that the inmates when sitting on it have easy access to the food and water tins.

After the moult the birds may be transferred to other quarters, where they by no means justify the verdict passed upon them by Doctor Karl Russ that in the aviary they are dull and uninteresting, in spite of their agreeable plumage; for when their wings are fully grown and they have room to fly about they are extremely lively and active, for ever on the move, and far more amusing and interesting than when dozing side by side in a small cage. As a rule these little parrots are harmless in a mixed aviary, but occasionally an ill-tempered specimen turns up, and, sad to say, generally proves to be a female, the only excuse for whose divergence from the amiability characteristic of the fair sex is that she has been thwarted in her laudable desire to set up housekeeping and is literally "an old maid." Bachelor love-birds however, as a rule, are very good-natured, and ready at a moment's notice to lavish their affection and tenderest caresses on any female with which they may happen to be in company, from a canary to a cockatiel, or, failing a feathered favourite, on the lady who attends to his wants and looks after the sanitary arrangements of his little dwelling.

That these love-birds or inseparables, however, are not always the angelic little darlings they appear to be will be seen by the following letter received by the writer from a great fancier of all kinds of foreign birds, of which he had a large and varied collection, which he thoroughly studied, and to the care and comfort of which he devoted all his spare time:—

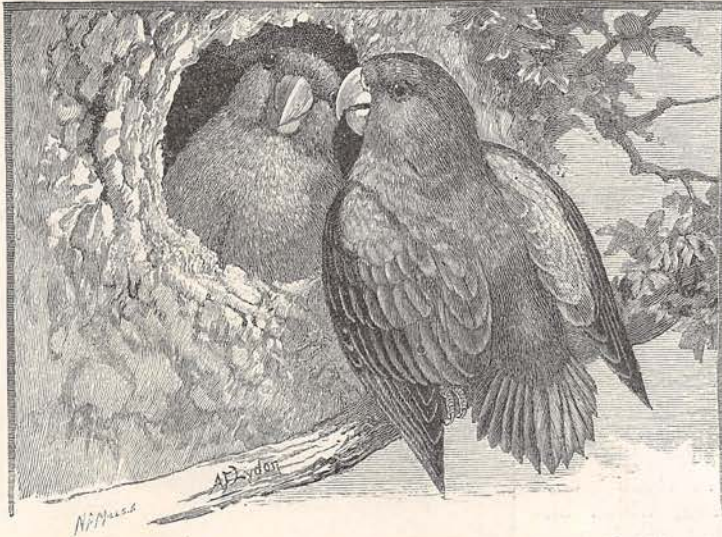
"I have a red-faced love-bird," he wrote, "to which it would puzzle you to apply the epithet 'amiable,' for a more surly, ill-tempered little glutton never existed. She quarrels with her husband, whom she drives about, compels to feed her with partly



GREY-HEADED OR MADAGASCAR LOVE-BIRDS.

digested food from his craw, and then thrashes if he does not sit closely enough to her, or if he dares to move before she is ready. In fact, a more hen-pecked wretch never lived, and yet he seems to like it, and to be specially proud of his beautiful but utterly unamiable wife."

Passing from the red-faced love-bird, I come to an allied species, the Madagascar parakeet, or love-bird, which, as its name indicates, is a native of the large island off the south-eastern coast of Africa, of which the fauna differs so materially from that of the adjacent continent as to lend colour to the belief that it is a fragment of a much larger tract of land that has disappeared beneath the ocean in some great cataclysm of nature, rather than part of the Dark Continent from which it is separated by a comparatively narrow strait. It derives its scientific name (*Agapornis cana*) from its personal appearance, its grass-green body being surmounted by a head and neck of a pearly grey colour, a distinction, however, that is peculiar to the male, the female



PASSERINE OR BLUE-WINGED PARRAKEETS (*Psittacus passerinus*).

being of a uniform green tint, except the middle third of the tail, which is marked by a ring of black spots, the colours following the same arrangement as in the red-faced *Agapornis*. It is about the same size as the red-face, but is hardier, and will even bear wintering out of doors in this country if provided with a snug sleeping-place secure from the attacks of those plagues to all bird-keepers, the mice, at whose door may be laid half the mishaps of the aviary.

Unlike the last species it has bred freely in confinement, and is a pretty and lively little bird, that is to say, when enjoying comparative freedom in a good-sized garden aviary, for in a cage it passes most of its time dozing, unless when satisfying its appetite, which it is sometimes apt to exceed, probably from lack of anything else to do. Canary seed and millet are the best food for the little Madagascar parrots, but should be supplemented with a few oats when there are a number of young to be fed, for the latter have enormous appetites and are continually shrieking for food, while the female is extremely exacting in this respect when engaged in the engrossing task of incubation, during which she rarely leaves her charge, and is fed by the male with seed disgorged from the crop.

The peach-faced love-bird (*Agapornis roseicollis*) is a very charming species that bears a general likeness to the red-faced, but is rather larger; the mask is pink rather than vermilion, and the beak is white with a greenish tinge, but in every other respect it closely resembles its congener, with which it is a denizen of the south-eastern and western parts of Africa. It does not, however, appear to be quite as common, and until lately commanded a very high price in the market. At present the cost of a pair has fallen from £7 or £8 to £3, at which last figure it is cheap, for no more delightful parrot can be found. Tame and familiar, it will go to nest at once, in cage or aviary, without the slightest trouble, rearing two broods a year, which will also nest the following season, so that some amateurs have been able to obtain peach-faced love-birds in captivity to the fourth and fifth generation. The greatest difficulty is to secure a veritable pair, as the sexes are exactly alike in outward appearance, and two males or two females caged together will comport themselves exactly like a genuine pair, so that the only way to tell whether the couple are really husband and wife is to

watch whether after a due term of nesting any eggs make their appearance, and if they do whether they are fertile. These peach-faced parakeets are somewhat noisy little birds, but their chatter is not disagreeable, and the male has a decided song which is far pleasanter to listen to than that of a caged skylark, for instance, or a canary that indulges in the production of "high" notes, as so many of those yellow-coated friends of one's youth are in the habit of doing. The way they have of bobbing their tails up and down every time they give utterance to a note is very curious, and looks for all the world as if they were beating time to their own music.

Canary and millet-seed is the most suitable food for the peach-faces, which may also be allowed some oats when they are engaged in feeding their young, and some of them are partial to boiled maize; but great care must be taken that this is not allowed to get sour, in which state it quickly disagrees. There is, perhaps, not so much romance attached to the history of the peach-faces as there is to that of some other members of the family, for they are very matter-of-fact in all their ways, and go about the chief object of their existence with an amount of *sang-froid* that marks them at once as thoroughly practical little people.

The blue-winged love-bird (*Agapornis passerina*) is an exceedingly charming little bird, very abundant in its native country, South America, and very frequently imported: it has bred in the writer's aviary, and in those of other amateurs, some of whom give it a bad character, but the writer has always found it most amiable and inoffensive with other birds. With him it was always kept in a large bird-room, not overcrowded, and what its deportment might be in other and less favourable circumstances he cannot say. It is about the same size as the Madagascar, and is strongly gregarious in its habits, as much so as the budgerigar, to which we shall come presently, and quite a number of them may be kept together, not only without disagreement but greatly to the benefit of these beautiful little birds. They are very easy to keep, living almost entirely on millet, to which oats should be added when there are any young to be fed.

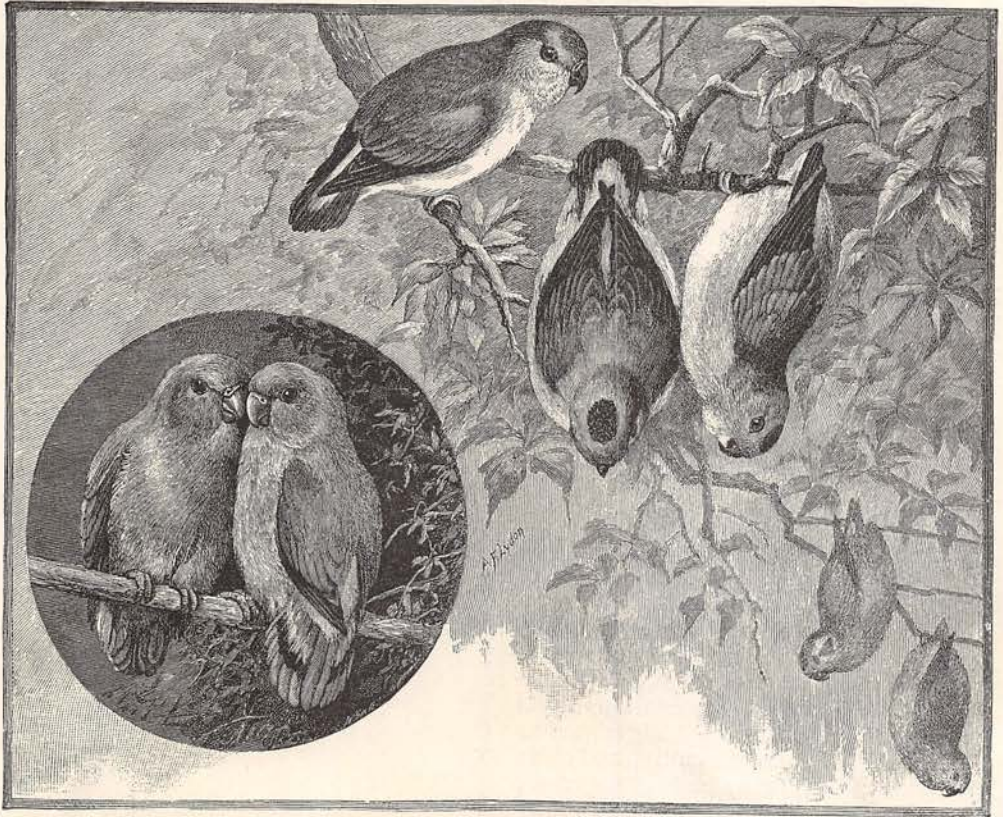
The eggs are round and white, and from five to eight in number; incubation lasts, as well as could be ascertained, from seventeen to eighteen days, and two broods, sometimes three, are produced in the season, which begins in November and terminates in February or March when the birds begin to moult. Individual blue-wings, however, vary considerably in their habits, some accommodating themselves to the changed climatic conditions among which they are placed, while others, more conservative, doggedly adhere to old times and customs in spite of the inconveniences inseparable from their inflexibility of disposition.

Every one knows the little parakeet, often called the Australian love-bird, but which rejoices in such a multiplicity of names, among which may be mentioned that by which it is most usually known in England, namely, budgerigar (*Melospittacus undulatus*), undulated grass parakeet, zebra and shell parrot, warbling-grass-parakeet, &c. It is of a different shape to those already mentioned, being of



BUDGERIGARS OR AUSTRALIAN LOVE-BIRDS.

slimmer build, and having a longer tail, which, contrary to most illustrations that purpose to represent it, is not forked. It is a somewhat difficult bird to describe, but may in a general way be said to be of a bright green colour, with a primrose head, blue tail, and neck, back, and wings copiously marked with undulating alternate bands of greyish black and yellow. The sexes are alike in appearance, but the male can be easily distinguished by his blue cere, as the naked membrane surrounding the nostrils is technically called; the same part in the female being cream or brown, the latter when she is about to nest. The young want the primrose front, the undulations extending all over the head. These birds are not to be trusted among smaller and more defenceless species, whose legs they are very apt to break, and that, too, where no offence has been given, but from apparent wanton mischief.



WEST AFRICAN LOVE-BIRDS.

HANGING PARROTS.

Comparatively few budgerigars are now imported from Australia, but many thousands are bred on the Continent of Europe, and when sent over here are described as "imported" by the dealers. As a rule, such birds are worthless or pretty nearly so, owing to in-breeding and allowing the birds to go to nest too young, by which the stamina of the race rapidly deteriorates, and the offspring are unable, when they moult to reproduce their feathers, and indeed sometimes never develop the quills of the wings and tail at all, but leave the nest utterly incapable of flight. Birds so afflicted are said to have "French moult," as the disease first manifested itself in some continental "perrucheries," where thousands of these little birds were raised every year. Such budgerigars are often advertised at as low a figure as three shillings a pair, but good birds still command a remunerative price, and are readily saleable at from ten to fifteen shillings a pair, if offered in the bird papers a few at a time. It is a curious and suggestive fact, that although budgerigars have only been regularly kept for breeding for a comparatively short period, a pale yellow variety or sport has been obtained, and another which is stated to be of an entirely blue colour has been announced, but not as yet exhibited at shows; there is, however, not much

doubt that in time there will be as many established varieties of this favourite species as there are of canaries, providing, of course, that the provoking disease already alluded to as French moult can be kept in abeyance, or at least cured when it has manifested itself. The first pair of budgerigars ever imported into England were disposed of for the sum of £25, according to Dr. Russ, and for a long time they remained at a very high figure, thirty or forty shillings a pair. Any small hollow log, cocoa-nut husk, or even box will do for these birds to breed in. They make no nest, but lay their eggs on the bare wood, and, if allowed, will keep on breeding throughout the year; but it is this over-production, to which the stimulating nature of their food—chiefly canary-seed—impels them, that French moult is mainly due.

Passing from the love-birds proper and their allies the budgerigars, we find another peculiar little group, of which the hanging parrakeets of India and Ceylon are typical examples. These little creatures have, as a rule, neither the elegant shape nor the agreeable colours of the love-birds, and are moreover nectivorous in their habits in their wild state, that is to say, they subsist for the most part on the nectar of the flowers that abound in their native woods, and are less readily reconciled to life behind the confining bars of a cage than many of their congeners. Nevertheless they can be kept, and are even occasionally seen at shows, the best diet for them in captivity appearing to be rice boiled in milk and well sweetened with Demerara sugar, to which is added a certain portion of ripe fruit, sponge cake, and ants' eggs.

The blue-crowned hanging parrakeet (*Loriculus galgulus*) from Malacca and the Ceylonese hanging parrakeet (*L. asiaticus*) are the species most frequently met with in confinement; but the golden-backed hanging parrakeet from the Philippines (*L. chrysnotus*) also sometimes appears

in the bird market, and one or two species more. Not much is known of these birds even in their wild state, as for the most part they inhabit the fastnesses of dense tropical forests, where they pass the greater portion of their lives clinging to the rich blossoms at the summits of the trees, where but for their shrill cries they would readily escape notice. Regular acrobats, it is a matter of indifference to them whether they sit on a perch in the ordinary attitude, or whether they hang head-downwards from it, which last is their ordinary posture when asleep; and if several of them are kept together in a cage they will hang side by side for hours together from the roof, and in this extraordinary position will caress and feed each other as assiduously as other love-birds will in the usual attitude.

There is another and apparently numerous group of dwarf parrots of which even less is known than of the hanging parrakeets, namely, the pigmy parrots of New Guinea, which comprise the very least members of the order, some species described



Nasiterna Pygmæa.

N. Bruijnii. *N. Misorensis.*

PIGMY PARROTS. New Guinea. $\frac{2}{3}$ natural size.

by the late John Gould in his monumental work on the birds of New Guinea and the adjacent islands actually measuring under two inches in length, or less than a European wren. These veritable pigmies are most magnificently clothed, and vie with the birds of paradise of their native land in the gorgeous colouring of their small persons; they are true parrots in shape, and by no means parrakeets, for they have the comparatively large broad head and short rounded tails of the Psittaci, but unlike them appear for the most part to be honey-feeders. Very little is known, however, of their habits in the wild state and whether they can or not be preserved alive in captivity; but no doubt as their native land gets more opened up to commerce and the outside world, some enterprising person will be found to attempt their importation.

It is curious that the largest as well as the smallest parrots should hail from the same part of the world, but the goliath aratoo, or gigantic black cockatoo, which is larger than a raven, and the tiny red-capped green parrot, which is less than a wren, are both natives of New Guinea, while the unmistakable likeness in form that exists between them lends colour to the notion that they have been evolved during a long course of ages from one original stock. On the whole the dwarf parrots, whether love-birds proper or not, are far more desirable inmates of the aviary than their larger relations, whose loud cries and destructive habits make the keeping of them anything but an unmixed joy; while the pretty ways, harmonious colouring, and moderate, or in some cases actually pleasing notes of the smaller species render them favourites with all fanciers of foreign birds, to whose most favourable notice they are here accordingly recommended.

