

## Unique and Beautiful Vasa Parrots

**Get a rare look at vasa parrots, Madagascar's unique black beauty**

*By Leigh Ann Harsfield*

Photo Courtesy Kim Waldie, New York  
Vasa parrots are relatively rare in American aviculture.

Two of the most fascinating parrot species are in the genus *Coracopsis*: *C. vasa*, the greater vasa parrot, and *C. nigra*, the lesser vasa or black parrot. Native to Madagascar and surrounding islands, vasa parrots are the largest parrots in their natural range. An adult greater vasa parrot's body size (500 grams) is comparable to a large Congo African grey parrot.

However, vasa parrots have extremely long necks, legs and tails, giving them the appearance of a much larger bird. The plumage is a subtle grayish-black and often reflects bluish hues in sunlight. The ceres and eye rings are naked. At first glance, these birds look as if they might be a strange cross of crow, pigeon and pheasant until you see the signature hookbill of a parrot. Characterized as extremely curious and active, these birds are a joy to watch. When asked what sparked her interest in vasa parrots Connecticut resident Timothee Graze, current owner of three pairs of greater and thought to have produced the first generation from a domestic pair of greater vasa parrots states, "They're different." And different they are!

### Seasonal Changes

During the October through December breeding season, both male and female vasa parrots exhibit dramatic visible changes. For starters, the hen's feathers actually change color from dark gray to light brown without undergoing a molt. She also sheds the feathers on top of her head to the point of baldness. The exposed head and facial skin of both genders turns from a pale white to a mustard yellow color. Beaks change from dark gray to horn-colored, and the hen's beak becomes noticeably swollen. Both experience enlarged cloacas, and the male's inverts or prolapses to 2 inches in length. Imagine the observer's surprise if not familiar with these peculiarities!

Females are dominant and demanding, even to the point of aggression. In fact, since a single male has such a difficult time supplying the mating and feeding needs of the hen, some breeders have been known to "pair" a hen with two males. It is reported that hens in the wild have been observed copulating and accepting food from several males, too. For this island-dwelling genus, it is all about survival.

### Growing Up Fast

The incubation period for greater vasa parrots is only 17 to 18 days, the shortest of any large parrot. By comparison, the similar-sized African grey parrot's eggs hatch in about 29 days. Upon hatching, chicks grow incredibly fast. A small pouch of skin develops under the hen's lower mandible and is filled with a clear, greasy, almost soupy substance that is fed to the neonates.

According to Graze, vasa parrots can produce chicks weighing more than 500 grams at only 6 weeks of age. Fledging usually occurs at about 7 weeks while, again in comparison, African grey parrots tend to first leave the nest at 10 to 11 weeks. Why the need to spend such a short time in the nest? No one seems to know for sure, but it is of course suspected to be the result of a high likelihood of predation.

### The Vasa Parrot Pet

The fact that vasa parrots don't form particularly tight pair bonds means some of the challenges we're accustomed to dealing with among other parrots are lessened. They are not as likely to be fond of only one person or to become overprotective of that person.

According to Rusty Rusin, lead aviculturist of the Tracy Aviary in Utah, vasa parrots are very active and need a great deal of behavioral enrichment. Rusin states that vasa parrots are fairly cold-hardy and do fine during Utah's winters. By all accounts, these birds are extremely intelligent, but they also know the value of some good old foolish play and clowning around.

They love baths – dust baths, water baths, sunbathing – it doesn't seem to matter. Some are good talkers, and most enjoy cuddling and being held. Their natural calls are almost donkey-like snorts and whines, and they're generally considered to be "quieter" parrots. The volume and noise level does, however, increase dramatically during the breeding season. They do best when kept in an aviary or a very large cage due to their active nature and long tails. Toys are, of course, a must.

Both chewable and mechanical toys are useful for keeping the vasa mind, body and beak stimulated.

Vasa parrots are relatively rare in American aviculture. It's estimated that only a dozen or so breeders in the U.S. work with these beauties. Although not widely kept as pets in the past, in recent years there have been enough successful breedings for a slow emergence of companion vasa parrots. If one is lucky enough to find vasa parrots available, they are moderately priced considering their rarity in aviculture.

#### Look Toward The Future

Deforestation, due to both human destruction and hurricanes, poses a severe threat to the natural habitat of the vasa parrot. Only a sliver of deep forest remains along one side of Madagascar. Sadly, in addition, vasa parrots are sometimes viewed as pests in their own homeland because of their habit of foraging maize crops. One species of lesser vasa parrots, *C. nigra barklyi*, from Seychelles, a tiny offshore island of Madagascar, is critically endangered. However, thanks to the efforts of individual breeders as well as organized breeding programs in the U.S., Europe and the Philippines, there's hope for the future of these unique living treasures.

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