



A Cape by any Other Name..... (*Poicephalus robustus*)

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History

As some of you may know the Cape parrot, *Poicephalus robustus*, the largest of the *Poicephalus* group, has been reclassified. The South African Cape parrot will now be the only “true” Cape parrot, being a species by itself. What we knew as the other two Cape parrots, *P. r. fuscicollis* and *P. r. suahelicus*, will now be known as the brown-necked parrot, *P. fuscicollis fuscicollis*, and the grey-headed parrot, *P. fuscicollis suahelicus*, respectively. To say the least, this will be most confusing since there is already a species called the brown-headed parrot, *P. cryptoxanthus*, in this genus. It is unfortunate for aviculture world wide that no *P. robustus* were imported into the United States (that we know of), since their plight in the wild is ever increasing. Aviculturists worldwide are holding their breath and watching the demise and possible extinction of yet another glorious parrot.

Going back to basic biology one needs to understand a type of trickle down effect. Life starts at the top and can be divided into “types”, animals and plants. Each of these are split into “types”. In the animal world we find mammals, insects, birds, fish etc. Each of these are split into “types”. Bird “types” are split into flightless birds, water birds, perching birds, birds of prey and parrots, as well as some others. Parrots are further split into “types” known as genus. A genus is a group exhibiting very similar characteristics. The genus is broken down further into “types” known as species. A species is a more finely tuned group whose members share the same general characteristics. As if that isn’t enough, the species is broken down into more “types” known as subspecies.

The brown-necked parrot, *Poicephalus fuscicollis fuscicollis* belongs to the genus *Poicephalus*. The genus is always capitalized so you know you are dealing with a genus. The species is *fuscicollis*, which follows the genus name and always starts with a lower case letter, thus one knows it is a species in that genus. When the genus name is followed by duplicate species names, example being *Poicephalus fuscicollis fuscicollis*, one knows there are more than one species, which will constitute dealing with subspecies. One also will know, that the duplicate name is the nominate subspecies of that species, being the first one discovered. Once the genus and species has been established in published articles, the full spelling may be dropped and the genus and species names may be referred to by the first letter of each, respectively.

Some of the guidelines for defining a subspecies are bone structure, size, shape and color difference, habitat needs, and physical separation such as mountain ranges, canyons, deserts, or large expanses of unpopulated



areas. Unfortunately there are many gray areas when defining a subspecies and much depends on the group of scientists involved. In the reclassification of the Cape parrots, DNA was the final method used to establish the differences in the species.

I have a book titled "I Name This Parrot" (Published in 1968) and it tells how names were developed for many species of parrots.

Please remember, what is written below was written prior to the South African Cape parrot (*Poicephalus robustus*) being reclassified as a species by itself.

Taken from the Journal of Ornithology 46, 1898, p. 314.
The *P.r.s.* is named after the Swahili people.

In another section of the book this chart is shown.

Just for interest it also lists

Poicephalus robustus angolensis..... Of Angola.....Angola Brown-necked Parrot (Reichenow)

Species	Derivations	English Names
<i>robustus robustus</i>	Oaken, strong, robust	Levaillant's Parrot, Brown-necked Parrot or Cape Parrot
<i>robustus fuscicollis</i>	With a brown or dusky neck	Gambia or West African Brown-necked Parrot
<i>robustus suahelicus</i>	Belonging to the Swahili	East African Brown-necked Parrot.

I assume this was a separate subspecies before it was realized the *P.r.s.* had one continuous range.

Farther along in the book it lists a Gold Coast (I believe that would be Ghana) Brown-necked Parrot, *Poicephalus robustus kintampoensis* (Boyd Alexander)

P.r.s. is also called the Swahili Parrot.

There is also listed the Red-headed Brown-necked Parrot, *Poicephalus robustus rubricapillus* (Forbes and Robinson).



Un-Capes in the States

In the United States, with the information and references available, we do believe we are working with the two different sub-species. Since the grey-headed parrot's range is so extensive, it is conceivable we could only be working with extreme variations of just this one subspecies. American aviculturists are trying to sort through some of this, and until we know for sure we are at trying to breed "like to like".

When buying birds from quarantine, they were usually all trapped and brought in from one area and buyers had good odds of purchasing the same subspecies. In the event a mate was lost and was replaced, the un-Capes were so few and far between, that shipping from a breeder in another part of the country left one open to receiving a bird of another subspecies.

Fortunately, the two un-Capes, the brown-necked and grey-headed parrots were imported into the United States, although in small numbers. It appears that the California and Illinois quarantine stations imported the majority of the un-Capes in the 1980s, while Florida imported very few. At the time of course, no one knew the different subspecies so few people knew exactly what they were getting, in those days "a cape was a cape." The brown-necked and grey-headed parrots were not considered very eye catching and were not in demand. Most people buying from quarantine were breeders and pet shop owners, and birds in high demand could be purchased in much larger quantities for the same amount of money. Consequently, using good business sense, very few of the brown-necked and grey-headed parrots were imported.

In talking with some of the "old-timers" I have been told about some buyers actually having three or four pair of un-Capes crated up for purchase and changing their minds and switching for more commercially acceptable parrots. One breeder actually traded pairs of un-Capes for pairs of red-bellied macaws, *Ara manilata*. The brown-necked and grey-headed, back in the early 1980s, sold for about \$700.00-\$800.00 each.

Another strong influence in people not buying the brown-necked or grey-headed parrots was literature written long ago, or written by aviculturists with only one or two pairs which limited the knowledge of their care and breeding. It was thought they required a specialized diet and this may be because the S. African Cape parrot is a specialized feeder in the wild. It was also thought they were easily stressed and died, and very hard to breed. Adding to the great expense right out of quarantine, it was indeed, a losing proposition all the way around.

The Captive Breeding Population

Thankfully our aviculturists threw caution to the wind and bought the un-Cape parrot, and despite the lack of interest in the brown-necked and grey-headed parrots, we did manage to get a substantial



number of pairs into private collections and they are breeding well. From some of our networking we have found there are probably a handful of aviculturists that have about 10 breeding pairs in their aviaries, while the majority has two and three pairs. There are also a few aviculturists with over 10 breeding pairs, and a few hold chicks back for future breeding. Aviculturists that breed the brown-necked and grey-headed parrot are serious about these birds and they network, trying to keep abreast of any new information regarding this species of *Poicephalus*.

Captive Requirements

True to the Genus, the un-Cape follows the norm for breeding and care, as most of the other *Poicephalus*. The smaller *Poicephalus* can be very aggressive and even kill when not paired properly. This aggression is not as marked in the brown-necked or grey-headed. For good breeding success it is in their best interest to pair birds for compatibility. In the early days, the numbers were low and finding compatible mates was not an option like it is now. A few aviculturists working with these species have multiple birds, allowing them to switch mates. The un-Capes are much more accepting of a mate and breeding, than are most of the other African species, after being in a pet situation. Many of my brown-necked and grey-headed parrots were obtained after being pets for many years, and have gone on to produce and are very devoted to their mates. Other aviculturists have reported this as well. There are also verified reports of un-Capes producing fertile eggs at two and one half years of age, although the majority will be about five to six years of age.

Diet

With the older literature stating specialized diets were necessary, many aviculturists were very concerned when it came to the subject of diet. Due to our increased knowledge of parrot's needs and our awareness of good manufactured diets, perhaps the diet of the un-Cape just fell into place. Many aviculturists are now feeding a pellet-based diet with fruits and vegetables added, for most species of parrots. With the un-Capes, a few nuts per day are added in the form of macadamia, almonds, walnuts, filberts, or pecans, in just about that order of preference. Other than what is listed above, we are not finding any special dietary requirements.

Caging and Nest-boxes

The un-Cape is more of a flyer than most other *Poicephalus* and larger than normal flights may be required. One should be aware that these birds, when wild caught, are very skittish and little provocation may cause them to thrash in a cage. Most accidental deaths in cages were due to cages being rather long and the birds building up too much speed before crashing into the side of the cage wire. If wild caught birds are calm, a long cage will do quite well, but if on the other hand, the pair is overly skittish one may want to reevaluate cage size.

It appears the un-Cape will nest in almost anything, although I personally like the boot box. Some



birds will throw out all the bedding prior to laying, so one should make prior adjustments to the box. I have been told by aviculturists that sand can be used under the normal bedding, as well as good astro-turf or cork glued onto the bottom under the bedding. I have not had any experience regarding the use of these methods.

Breeding

Since one can no longer simply run to the local corner quarantine station and handpick a few birds, it is important to network with un-Cape breeders. Most all of the un-Cape breeders know each other and refer clients to each other, so they know when breeding pairs come up for sale, or when domestic pairs may be available. In this respect, it is a good policy to work with one of the breeders if you are just starting out to purchase breeding stock. Many of the breeders are allowing the parents to feed and fledge their young just for the purpose of future breeding stock. In this case, do not expect to buy these birds inexpensively.

Mate Selection

In almost all instances, it is advisable to allow the African parrots to select their own mates. I was fortunate to have acquired two large groups of capes early in my collecting days. Naturally, not all were good producing pairs. I immediately set out re-pairing these groups. I kept all my single un-Capes in small holding cages scattered throughout my property. When pairing them up, I would place a single female in a small holding cage and centrally locate her in the group of males. After a few days I would hear the vocalizations and see the displays, which allowed me to choose the male for her cage mate.

Displaying

As long as I have watched and studied the mating displays and dances of the African parrots, I was in for a surprise watching the un-Capes. They are incredibly animated in their display. The group of birds would get loud and raucous and hop across the perch or around the cage, almost spring-like. Males would flip their wings rapidly, up and over their backs a few times, do the hop and flip their wings again a few more times. After performing this ritual numerous times, they would stand tall and open their beaks wide, throw their heads back and shake their heads, which seemingly made their beaks appear very threatening. This “dance” would be repeated over and over. Of course, all this commotion would catch the interest of the female, who would hop and flip her wings, in much the same way as the males. Both sexes did a lot of beak rapping on their perches. Hens did not do the beak opening and shaking as the males did. I would note that the single hen was doing her display in the direction of a certain male, and naturally, that is the male I would place with her.

Starting a Family

Pairs that have been selected, as described above, have proven to do well. Un-Capes appear to be more protective and devoted to each other than the other African parrots. The act of breeding seems to follow the rest of the African parrots, with the male mounting the female while drooping his wings on



both sides of the hen. Copulation lasts from five to ten minutes on the average.

The average clutch size is three eggs, with good hatch rates overall. As with the other Africans, un-Capes are good brooders and parents, and are very attentive to their chicks. Nest box inspections do not seem to be as hazardous as with the other African parrots, which can result in mutilation and sometimes death to the chicks. Un-Capes just move cautiously to the side when nests are inspected or chicks are pulled.

The un-Cape does not seem to have a marked breeding season like some of the other African parrots. Breeding takes place at any time of the year, allowing for two and three clutches being fairly dependable.

Chicks

The chicks hatch with some white fuzz, which they grow out of and they seem to look like melted, pink Silly-Putty™. The down at three weeks is very dense and snow white. One would almost think that the bird's natural habitat would be in cold country, since the down is so thick.

As with the other African species of parrots, the chick's coloration takes after the most colorful parent. In this case, the adult hen is the one with the coral feathering on the head, so both sexes feather with the hen coloration. With the first baby molt (about eight months) both lose the color and the hen gains it back with each consecutive molt. The amount of coral coloration can be quite variable from bird to bird. Often times, when pulling the chicks at three weeks, the color on the head is already apparent.

Un-Cape chicks are very responsive eaters and should be trouble free throughout the entire hand-feeding and weaning process. They do seem to require a higher fat content in their formula. If the chick seems unsatisfied and begging more than other Africans species, it does help to increase the fat intake. Aluminum bands should never be used on an un-Cape. With their huge powerful beaks they can bend them easily, and they do have a propensity for playing with them. Un-Capes will also stuff bark, bedding, feathers, peanut shells, and just about anything else they can think of, under their bands. With these parrots it is best to use a stainless steel band or microchip.

Pet Market

I don't know if I am biased or if un-Capes truly are an exceptional species of parrot. I have never been bitten by a tame un-Cape. They are very "mouthy" and want to feel everything with their tongues. Rarely can you handle an un-Cape that they don't have to feel and nibble on every finger. When I have purchased ex-pets from other people, upon opening the crate the birds emerge and step up as if I had owned them all their lives. Un-Capes that I have raised for future breeding have not "gone wild" or become cage bound. They can be left in cages for six months with no interaction on my part and when taking them out, one would believe they were played with every day. They are not demanding of one's time, but they are very active birds and play hard. In this case, I do believe a large cage is a necessity if



they do not have a lot of out-of-cage time.

There have been a few of my chicks that went through the “terrible twos” stage, but once past that, they were better than before in temperament.

The talking ability is quite good, although soft spoken. Unlike an African grey for example, they do not project their voice, so often times one is not sure they are talking as much as they do. Some of my birds even whisper. Naturally they are mimicking how I talk to them. They do use a lot of words and phrases appropriately.

Availability

I believe we have made good progress in caring for and breeding this species and we have a good group of aviculturists working with them. The un-Cape is much more available than ever before. We have aviculturists allowing all of their offspring to be parent raised for future breeders, and some of us are raising both; the parent raised and the hand-fed. Some breeders have done so well that they have an abundance of chicks for sale. In light of this, selling chicks into the pet trade is very feasible. Another plus for the species is the fact the ex-pets do go on to breed with a lot less difficulty than the other African species. Chicks being hand-fed (three to five weeks) can cost about \$1,000.00, while weaned chicks will cost about \$1400.00-\$2000.00 depending on the sex and who is selling.

The Ones With the Real Name.....

Now that the un-Cape has been covered, let’s talk about the Cape parrot, the single bird in one of the new species. The Cape parrot of South Africa is only found in South Africa, with about five being rumored in the rest of the world. It is a shame more were not exported throughout the rest of the world since gene pools in other parts of the world could prove to be helpful in keeping the species viable. Although South African aviculturists and conservationists are working hard with this species in captivity, as well as in the wild, their future looks very bleak.

The University of Natal in South Africa has a group of conservationists/researchers trying desperately to save these wondrous birds. This group, known as the Cape Parrot Working Group (CPWG), work on many different projects for the Cape parrot, among them is organizing an annual Cape Parrot Birding Day with the purpose of counting the Capes in the wild. In the census of 2002 the count was under 600 birds. The CPWG is instrumental in working to save the Cape parrot from extinction.

Cape parrots have a very specialized diet, which is the fruit of the yellow wood, *Podocarpus* tree. This tree is also their favorite nesting site, especially the old dead trees. Feeding and nesting is rarely in any tree except the yellow wood. This specialization may be their ultimate demise. These trees, although protected, are illegally logged. The Cape’s habitat is being destroyed, as is so many other habitats of the world. The region the Cape parrot inhabits is



about 600 mile long and about 50 miles wide, which doesn't seem very small, but this range is very fragmented, and the *Podocarpus* trees, in these fragmented areas, are also very fragmented. One other note in dealing with their habitat is they are nomadic parrots that must follow the food source. In light of this, Cape parrots will not be in every area at any one time. When food sources reach a low, the Capes venture to pecan orchards where they are shot for raiding the crops.

Now that the Cape has been reclassified and trying to attain endangered species status, poaching has risen dramatically. The value to collectors has created a market that can't be ignored by poachers. The CPWG is trying to have all known Cape parrots DNA identified in the event Cape parrots are confiscated, then their parentage may be traced, and poachers can be prosecuted. Along with poaching, the Cape parrot is now being sought after as a magic medicine, known as Muthi, much the same as the rhino horn. In this instance though, it is the massive beak the Cape supports. It is not known at this time if this is a real practice among authentic Muthi practitioners, or if this may be an opportunity for some people to make a quick buck. Either way the Cape has yet another hurdle to over come.

As if this isn't enough, many of the Cape parrots in the wild are infected with Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease (PBFD). It is not known how this disease was introduced, but some speculate poached Capes may have been held in aviaries with PBFD. Upon confiscating these Capes, they were released back into the wild carrying this disease with them. The Capes, as well as the CPWG, are fighting yet another obstacle in an effort to save this species. The CPWG is actively working with researchers to get a vaccine to use on the wild birds, as well as the ones in private aviculture.

Although the future looks bleak there is hope. With 600 left in the wild there is a chance of turning the Cape's future around, even with all the obstacles. There comes a point with endangered species that when the species reaches a certain low population, there is a point of no return. This is referred to as, "species population density". Conservation experts have formulas to calculate what that number may be. This formula takes into consideration, the habitat, reproduction, longevity, and food etc. With the Cape parrot this figure may well be around the 200 mark before the extinction process is irreversible, in the wild. Much will depend on the finances made available for the project.

The Cape Parrot Working Group (CPWG) is raising funds to plant alternative food sources, such as pecan orchards. They are also placing nest boxes in the yellow wood trees in the hope the birds will eventually use the boxes for reproduction purposes. So far this has not been successful. The DNA mapping is also being done to help in prosecuting poachers as well as identifying relatedness in offspring in captive breeding efforts. The group is working with law enforcement to catch and prosecute the poachers of Cape parrots, as well as illegal loggers of the yellow wood trees.



I have personally been working on fund raising for the CPWG's efforts. In six short months we have been able to raise a bit over \$10,000.00 for the project. Four Florida clubs, Hernando County Avian Society donated \$2,840.00, and Imperial Bird Club donated \$1,500.00. Single individuals made all other donations. With the exchange rate being 1:9, this can go a long way in helping these birds. One other good note: the law firm in the U.S. handling the exchange and transfer of money to the University is not taking any money for their services and the University of Natal is not taking any money off the top for administrative costs etc. All the money received from our efforts will go, in its entirety, to the Cape parrots.

We will be sending quarterly updates to all donors, so that the donors will be able to see where their money is spent in the project. Needs of the CPWG will be published in the news letters, and any progress made will be written up as well.

Musings

The un-Capes are the pinnacle of my avicultural endeavor. I am thankful that I was introduced to these wondrous birds, in this avicultural era, an age where knowledge and science escalated rapidly, and birds were still obtainable. With this combination, the un-Capes in the United States may have been spared the uncertain future of its once shared position within the species of..... the true Cape parrot (*Poicephalus robustus*).

As I wrote this paper, I had occasion to call on a few breeder friends to verify some facts. In doing so, I realized how much valuable information is out there with the "old-timers." In this day and age, we no longer have aviculturists being able to go to quarantine and purchase large groups of birds. Financially, for the average person just starting out, only one or two pairs of a species may be affordable. We also have much stricter zoning regulations, which will cause future breeders problems related to how many pairs of birds they may have on any given piece of property. In light of this, flock settings may become a thing of the past, and seeing the dynamics of the flock behaviors will be impossible.

As we retire from aviculture, flocks are sold and often splintered into different directions. Some of the breeding stock, of wild caught parrots, die in the process and many more will be dying in the near future just from old age. It is important that aviculturists record their observations and experiences so the knowledge is not lost.

Thanks to the many aviculturists, veterinarians and researches, which have given me support and have shared their knowledge.



Cape Parrot Working Group Shopping List

The following is a list of things we need to fund for the Cape Parrot project to keep on running. I have given a price where I know it. As you know the Cape Parrot Working Group (CPWG) is in Its Infancy and needs to get off the ground asap. Funds for a full-time coordinator are urgently required.

Field trips (eg. for nest monitoring, counting days, nest-box checks, parrot observations - funds required for fuel costs, approx \$0.20/km. We are currently able to use University-owned vehicles).

GPS (R2340 - \$2 10)

Photography (slide film, developing, making copies for others)

Nestboxes- erection and inspection

Education (costs to cover include transport to site, accommodation + travel costs and expenses of teacher).

We're also currently involved in getting the Cape Parrot conservation issues onto the national curriculum as a case study.

Posters (RI 5,000 - \$1,3)60 for 100 posters). We need to reprint a run in English, have currently got one coming out in Xhosa and need to produce one in Zulu.

Workshops (training forest rangers, nature conservation officials, local community members in the parrot's range - costs to cover include transport to site, accommodation + travel costs and expenses of workshop coordinator, stationary (hand-outs, posters, video-copies)

Censuses (Parrot Day - annual census of total population - total approx R31,000 - \$2818)

Includes costs of coordinator wage (R3,000 - \$270), covering costs (travel, communication, accommodating volunteer observers) of the regional co-ordinators (R500 each, total R6000 - \$550) and report production. See full breakdown attached as Excel file for this years count.

Stationary (data sheets, maps, photocopies of articles, species and sub-species id sheets, publicity material, video copies, postage, telephone use

We're also producing Species ID booklets for customs officials and a broadsheet for local magistrates on the importance of the Cape Parrot - funding required (we have the photos donated, just need the color printing).

Computer (for CPWG - urgently required for the admin side of the working group)

Cape Parrot Working Group coordinator salary p.a. (R60,000 - \$5,460)

Tree planting (seed collection trips (trees planted have to originate from seed collected within 50km),

germination and planting costs, also plans to plant shorter-term food trees like pecan nuts).

Microchips provincial permitting conditions are being revised to require keepers of Cape and Grey-headed Parrots to have them micro-chipped - we currently have sponsorship of 50



microchips from Identi-pet, and will require the funds to do this. Costs approx R75 per bird (\$7)

Another area we really need money for is as a 'reward for information' system. The Provincial nature conservation institutions (E. Cape Nature Conservation and KwaZulu Natal Wildlife) have methods for paying for information leading to people being charged with wildlife crimes - a fund for Cape Parrots is a top priority, Basically the illegal trade is organized from the 'white community' (who are also the consumers) and the 'black' community, usually local to the forest, are employed to do the catching. Invariably the catching of the birds is a well-known among local communities, but has little meaning or importance to them without an incentiveand to get a successful prosecution the offenders have to be caught in the act

The US \$s go a long way here!