



The Plum-headed Parakeet ***Psittacula cyanocephala* (Linne)**

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By Ron Grose

This very attractive ringneck from Ceylon, India, Nepal, Bhutan and Pakistan is known to some aviculturists in Australia. A colour illustration of the Plumhead appears on page 337 of "[Parrots of the World](#)" [Forshaw \(1973\)](#) and a detailed description given on page 334 is as follows:

Length: 33cm.

MALE: Plumage predominantly green, brighter and more yellowish on mantle and underparts; head deep red, strongly tinged with bluish-purple on the hind-crown, nape and lower cheeks; chin, broad stripes across lower cheeks, and narrow nuchal collar black; wide bluish-green band on neck; rump bluish-green; dark red patch on wing-coverts; long central tail feathers blue broadly tipped with white, lateral feathers yellow-green tipped with yellow; upper mandible orange-yellow, lower brownish-black; iris yellowish-white; legs greenish grey.

FEMALE: Head dull bluish-grey, more greyish on forehead and cheeks; black markings replaced by a variable yellow collar; no red wing patch; upper mandible pale yellow, lower greyish.
IMMATURES: Green head sometimes tinged with grey near chin; bill pale yellow.

I have kept Plumheads for 14 years, and at the moment there are three breeding pairs in the collection with the oldest pair being 16. These birds are housed in 16' x 4' x 6' high aviaries, with a 4 1/2' shelter 7 1/2' high. The floors are sand and two perches are provided - one at either end of the aviaries which face due north. Only one pair of parakeets is installed in each aviary.

The birds become interested in breeding usually in September or late August and are provided with a short log about 12" high and about 4-5" in diameter with 3" of rotted wood in this. They will usually lay four eggs but the best I have ever encountered is three young ones. The nest is hung about 5'6" in the shelter to protect it from the weather.

The hen starts incubation from about her second egg, and it is found that this is how the young birds hatch - one after the other, and she tends to lay every second day. The incubation period is 21 days, after which time the chicks remain in the nest for approximately six weeks. The chicks leave the nest in intervals of two days, although the last chick may take a few days. The chicks, having left the nest, are fed by the parents for three weeks to a month, and when feeding has ceased they do not become belligerent towards the young ones. The parents are always friendly to the young and never hunt them in any way, thereby forming a family group. In fact, all the Plumheads could be kept in the one aviary and there would be no trouble until the breeding season. The young ones are left with their parents until it is time to move them for any reason, which usually means that they spend a few months in the company of their parents.

This species has never double brooded, and I have never had other than a young hen lay infertile eggs, except on one occasion and for this I blame myself. One year I put dry shavings from a chain saw into the nest box instead of rotted wood, and the old hen laid a clutch but hatched none. She did not go to nest again that year. Every other year rotted wood has been given, which seems to indicate that they need that little bit of dampness.



Plum-headed Parakeet
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The Plumheads have bred every year irrespective of climatic conditions, except for that episode just mentioned. It is found that the first nesting of a young hen is invariably lost. This has happened with every pair, and the [Indian Ringnecks](#) are the same. If the hen does manage to hatch out a young one she loses it at about two or three days, and these hens do not lay again until the next season.

My Plumheads are fed [Budgerigar](#) mix with some [sunflower](#) added, plus unlimited fruit. They will eat any fruit offered from [tomatoes](#) to [oranges](#), in fact the only fruit they wouldn't eat when offered has been [persimmons](#). They love berries and greens such as [thistles](#). Interestingly, if you put greens in to them, they will not eat it on the ground but will fly with it up to the perch and eat the greens there, which is characteristic also of the Indian Ringneck. There is no different diet given while rearing young, except that they consume even greater quantities of greens.

The cock gives a very pleasant courtship display to the hen. He gives a little shrill whistle and cocks his tail up in the air somewhat like a [wren](#), and he jumps nimbly over the hen a number of times while on the perch. The shrill whistle is always heard at mating time. The cock also feeds the hen as a prelude to mating, and I have noticed that the pupils of the eye will dilate giving the impression that the eye is changing colour. Copulation takes place on the perch, that is, I have noticed mating take place on the perch; usually the perch in the flight, but it has never been noticed to occur on the ground.

Only the hen incubates. The cock doesn't enter the nest until the young ones hatch. In fact this is the first sign of the eggs hatching, because unlike other parrots which can be quite loud in the nest, the baby Plumheads have a very soft cheep and this is easily missed. However, when the cock enters the nest, this indicates that there are young ones. At first, the cock is noticed to feed the hen who then feeds the young, but after a couple of days he will enter the nest and feed the young direct. Both parents therefore feed the young. The Plumhead is different to Australian parrots such as [Rosellas](#) in that while the hen is sitting the cock tends to be quiet, whereas Rosellas will chuckle and swagger about. They seem to avoid attention. Also, Plumheads will not attempt to savage other birds in adjoining aviaries even during the breeding season. For example, Indian Ringnecks will bite the toes of their neighbours, but not the Plumhead which is a very inoffensive bird.

To sex Plumheads is a very difficult procedure and I have been wrong with them in the first year. I use the pelvic bone test initially because you can sex Indian Ringnecks in this manner; however, errors have been made and anyone could make errors at this early stage.

In the second year the top mandible of the cock becomes a brighter shade than the previous horny-yellow of uncoloured birds. However, I have been wrong here on one occasion as one year I kept two birds with different bill colour - one having become brighter, and they turned into two beautiful cocks. That is, the so called hen coloured to become a cock, but the bird with the brighter mandible was a cock, so this seems to be a fairly good earlier indicator for cocks.

Then in the third year either little red feathers are noticed in the head, or a reddish blush will be seen. This of course develops until you have the unmistakable colouration of the cock. Also, in the second year it is noticed that the cock will display if a hen is present. This species will breed at twelve months, but nearly always breeds in the second year. They come into full adult plumage in their third year.

After 14 years of breeding Plumheads a very interesting mutation occurred this year. The parents were normal Plumheads about 15 years old and had bred all normal birds previously. When one of the young ones came out of the nest it had a beautiful purplish-pink head and a purple collar. The front and under the wings was a bright pink. The wings were green with red bars right across them. It has now moulted and has lost a lot of the red, but still carries red down the side under the wings and also retains the barring on the wings. There is a small amount of red left in the head.



Fifteen year old and very tame hen Plum-headed Parakeet which gave the red mutation. Photo taken by Amo Slaminski.



Cock Plum-headed Parakeet and mate of the hen pictured above. This bird is also 15 to 16 years old. Photo taken by Amo Slaminski.

If this wasn't enough, the pair in the adjoining aviary bred a blue mutation. It was not a bright blue, more like a slaty blue, and this is still seen in the bird after the moult as blue wings; but initially it was blue on the back and front - in fact you would call it a blue bird. It also had a red tip on the end of the tail.

The hens which bred these mutations are related by being sisters; however, it is strange that after so long these birds should produce quite different mutations in the same year.

The Plum-head has been bred quite well and there should be a fair number around. They would be reasonably secure in Australian aviaries, but need watching because in the wrong hands we could lose them quite easily. This is why I am establishing a breeding nucleus of these beautiful parakeets because they are well worth the effort, and I would hate for them to be lost to aviculture in Australia.



View of the same cock. Red wing patch visible. This photo gives an indication of the very elegant proportions of this ringneck.

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