



## **Birding in South Africa and Namibia**

*(ASNSW Meeting - March 2013)*

**By Colin Morgan**

In October 2012 I was able to join Ian Ward (Avicultural Society of NSW and South Sydney Avicultural Society) and Peter Odekerken (well known bird photographer from Queensland) on a bird photography tour of South Africa and Namibia. Peter and Ian were to give presentations to the annual symposium in Vryburg South Africa organised by the Kalahari Bird Club and the African Lovebird Society. For Peter, this was an opportunity to update and expand his images of southern African birdlife, concentrating on parrots in the wild but including some extensive collections in aviculture. No doubt his series of DVDs will include these in due course.

From our limited experience it seems that aviculture is very popular in South Africa and certainly the number and scale of commercial aviaries far exceeds that we know in Australia. 500 – 600 flights were typical of the establishments we visited.

We stopped off in Singapore en route to South Africa to visit the world famous Jurong Bird Park and also to photograph Goffins Cockatoos and Moustache Parrots breeding in the street trees in the Changi Beach Village shopping centre. We were able to see these birds at short range from a vantage point three stories up in a block of residential apartments. As a first-time visitor I found Jurong very impressive, especially for the neatness and gardens. Both Peter and Ian felt that the bird collection was a little more limited than previously seen.

Johannesburg was our base in SA with a 10 day trip to NW Namibia, a few days in Natal towards Durban and several days near Vryburg covering a lot of territory. Even the birdlife in suburban gardens was very different to what we see at home (though there were a few familiar rogues like Indian Mynahs). More common were the colourful Weavers busy building nests and it was remarkable to see them working strands of soft grass into loops and knots – these were everywhere. Grey Go-away Birds (a Toucan species) were exotic to us and colourful Barbets made up for the lack of colourful Lorikeets.

Our priority targets for photography in the bush were the Peach-faced Lovebird (known as Rosy-faced in SA), Ruppell's Parrot, Meyer's Parrot and the critically endangered Cape Parrot, together with the many finches (mostly Waxbills) that Africa is blessed with. We found and filmed all but the Meyer's Parrot and the Cinderella Waxbill in multiple locations. We did not reach the right country for Meyer's Parrot.

The Cape Parrot is Africa's rarest bird with an estimated 1,000 left in the wild. Its dependency on the fast diminishing Yellow-wood tree is the major threat though there have been some reports that Radiata Pine might be emerging as a partial substitute, mimicking the Australian Black Cockatoo experience. Aviculture might yet prove the only hope for the species into the long term and this is something all aviculturists need to be conscious of.

Of softbills kept in aviculture we saw Blue Waxbill (like Cordon Blue without the red cheek patch), Black-faced Waxbill, Violet-eared Waxbill, Red-headed finch (similar to Cut-throat), Quail Finch, Scaly-feathered finch, Golden Breasted Bunting, Pin-tailed Whydah, Black Widow-bird. How we would love to have access to some of these finches in Australia. We also saw an amazing array from tiny Sunbirds to giants including Cape Vultures, Secretary Birds and the Crowned Eagle.

Of course our searching for birds was mixed with sightings of more exotic wildlife and big game that makes Africa unique and exciting.

Four aspects of aviculture stood out for us as visitors. Firstly, the focus on suspended flights for individual pairs was prominent, even for Lovebirds. Few birds could access waste on the ground/floor and flight dimensions were generous. No doubt cage breeding occurs with the smaller birds but we did not see it and selective breeding is just as important to South African Lovebird enthusiasts as it is to us. Would our Australian birds such as exhibition budgerigars recover the productivity they once had if they gained more space? Perhaps they would.

Secondly, birds were not fed ad lib. They were generally fed twice daily with small quantities they would consume quickly (a bit like feeding Goldfish only enough to last a few minutes). One feed was typically soft food and the other seed. No doubt the scale of operation and availability of cheap labour were relevant to this practice. But these were professional breeders, some farmers, and they know their bird management. Birds were fit and active, not fat and lazy.

Thirdly, breeders were nearly all focussed on colour mutations and variety in species, all chasing short term market demand with an eye on Europe. Many will be familiar with the explosion in Lovebird varieties here but we saw many more in South Africa. As is the case elsewhere, success in breeding a 'new' variety or colour mutation is recognised by a boom in numbers followed by falling prices, exiting of many breeders and then a shortage in supply. Australian Parrots are apparently enjoying a boom at present and we saw Rosella, Mallee Ringneck and other mutations in these. The lesson to be kept in mind is how some of the species kept in Australia have become scarce after a surge in popularity and numbers? Try buying a Normal Gouldian or Turquoise Parrot. Where would you get a truly Normal Green Budgerigar that is not split for anything?

Fourthly and very importantly, South African aviculturists have been able to import and export stock across borders (although this freedom has been tightening). This puts them in a position to contribute to conservation on a world-scale. They could potentially protect species from just about anywhere because they already have them (or can still get them) to an extent vastly greater than in Australia – and their conservation networks are strong. We can't even support the scarce Palm Cockatoo which is native to Australia (and elsewhere) while South African breeders produce them in numbers. However, I think there is some conflict between focussing on mutations and supporting conservation of endangered or threatened species.



Colin Morgan with Palm Cockatoos being

Lastly, we would all like to thank our South African hosts for their unstinting hospitality.

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