



Black-cheeked Lovebird Care



The **Black-cheeked Lovebird** (*Agapornis nigrigenis*) is one of the smaller species of Lovebird. They originate from the area around Victoria Falls (Zambia and Zimbabwe, possibly into Botswana). First bred by Keston Foreign Bird Farm in 1934, they have only become regularly available in the last 30 or 40 years. Black-cheeks have many virtues for the birdkeeper. They are relatively easy to breed, they are not destructive to woodwork, they are one of the quieter Lovebird species and straightforward to feed.

Determining the sex of any Lovebird species, other than the Madagascar, is difficult. Close observation of your birds may allow you to pick out some characteristics that may give you an indication, but these can not be relied on with potential new birds. Relying on the breeder's own findings may be ok, but to be sure DNA sexing is recommended if you are not prepared to wait for fertilised eggs and/or chicks.

I house my Black-cheeks in a 4ft x 6ft x 7ft tall outdoor flight cage. The nestboxes, which are 10" cubes, are attached in the feeding corridor adjacent. This allows easy access for cleaning of the box and means that I can inspect any chicks without entering the flight. I keep nestboxes in place all year round as the birds will roost in them – a clean dry layer of wood shavings is put in the bottom. Black-cheeks are not as hardy as some of the Lovebirds, although mine have been outside for over 10 years, so a snug roosting box is essential. The roof of the aviary is covered with plastic sheeting and for six months from October I cover the top half of the sides with plastic to provide a little protection from wind and rain. The floor of the aviary is concrete for easy cleaning and avoidance of parasites. I have never had to worm my Lovebirds.

Black-cheeked Lovebirds are quite peaceful and will live and breed in a colony setting; however, do not allow them to become overcrowded as this can cause stress. Therefore I remove independent chicks (about 9 -10 weeks after hatching) as a matter of course.

A compatible pair of Black-cheeked Lovebirds can be prolific breeders starting at approximately 1 year of age. It is not unreasonable to expect a well fed, stress-free pair to raise 2 or 3 clutches in a single season, which starts in early spring. Each clutch will be 3-6 eggs. I replace any eggs from later clutches with plastic ones, which the parents will incubate until full term. This gives the hen a rest as they are not raising another brood. The onset of the colder weather usually convinces them not to try again.

After 3 weeks of brooding by the hen the eggs should start hatching. The chicks have a sparse, pale down otherwise they are quite naked. The chicks grow well and after 9 or 10 days their eyes will start to open. It is at this time that any close ringing should be attempted. Size M rings are usually suggested for all Lovebirds, but I feel that these may be a little big for this species. You should keep an eye out for any rings being removed by the parents for a few days as they are incredibly loose. Once the chick has grown there will be few problems with a ring of this size. At 6 or 7 weeks old the chicks will leave the nest and start feeding themselves and if necessary can be removed if they are seen to be completely independent (this is usually after 2 weeks after you notice them feeding themselves)

Feeding Black-cheeks could not be easier. The basic diet is a good clean mix of various seeds. I provide a millet mix sold for Budgerigars and a "parrot" mix containing a wide range of seeds. I also supply small pieces of sweet apple, small dices of Carrot, halved grapes and an egg biscuit sprinkled over the top. This egg biscuit is a mix of two of the leading brands mixed together with added Oystershell grit and two powdered supplements purchased from one of the FBL advertisers. When they are laying, I add a liquid Calcium solution to the drinking water a couple of times a week.

I supply a mixture of both natural branches and dowelling for perching. The bark on the branches should be washed before being installed in the aviary as this will be nibbled and removed. The perching should be well affixed as loose perches can mean that mating is unsuccessful and you end up with clear (unfertilised) eggs. Thin twigs with a few tender new leaves, clipped from both Apple and Plum trees, are pushed through the wires every few days. These are relished by the Lovebirds. It is commonly stated that Peach-faced Lovebirds will push foliage and other potential nest material into their tails before taking it to the nestbox. I have never observed this with my birds, but I have found dried leaves in the nestbox.

Black-cheeks make good exhibits at shows as they are not easily spooked and tend to chatter away, especially if there is one of it's companions in another nearby cage. Some Lovebirds have a habit of hanging on the cage fronts – this is to be avoided by training as it damages the tail feathers. Although one bird in my care does not hang on the wires he doesn't perch well either. He prefers to sit in the seed in the bottom of the cage and shuffle around backwards in a "moonwalk" sort of way. He does not seem to be distressed by his experiences.