

Interbreeding in a Small Masked (Yellow-collared) Lovebird Population

by Werner and Yvonne Lantermann

In the February 2006 issue of PsittaScene, Werner Lantermann first reported his findings from a trip to Arusha, Tanzania on the African continent. His observations involved the interbreeding of Masked (Yellow-collared) and Fischer's Lovebirds – two species that until the 20th century were separated by ecological and geographical barriers. Because of accidental releases of pet birds, it is now apparent they are not as separated as once thought.

News from the Arusha *Agapornis* Population(s)

Recently we have reported about a new *Agapornis personatus* population at Meserani Snake Park near Arusha / Tanzania (PsittaScene 18, No.1:12). This year in August we have had the opportunity to once again visit these birds, and during this stay we took a little more time for observations. As suggested during the 2004 visit, we are talking about an intermixed group of birds, consisting mainly of pure Yellow-collared Lovebirds (*Agapornis personatus*), but few birds are obviously mixed with Fischers Lovebirds (*Agapornis fischeri*) and show reliable signs of interbreeding with this species.

All in all the group comprises only 18-20 individuals, which are fully established at the campsite just beneath Meserani Snake Park, some 25 kilometers west of Arusha town. The whole area is driven by Massai people, who have designed the Snake Park, the campsite and a Massai museum within a small park area (about two hectares), which is nearly entirely surrounded by savannah grassland. So the birds always seem to remain within the park area, where they obviously have their special meeting points, their nest chambers and their resting places.

Now leading over to the facts, we counted 18 birds, two of which were obviously hybrids between the two referred species; 5-6 birds showed a markedly orange collar above the yellow belly feathers, and the rest seemed to be pure Yellow-collared

Lovebirds, but some with a less clear black head colour than others. The focus of their social life is the nest chambers that are situated within the strawboarded roofs of the tourist huts.



Group of Yellow-collared Lovebirds near their nest entrances in the strawboarded roof of a tourist hut. © Werner & Yvonne Lantermann



Pair of pure Yellow-collared Lovebirds preening under the roof top. © Werner & Yvonne Lantermann

On one of these roofs we found three nests in close proximity of only some 20 or 30 cm. Breeding and overnight sleeping takes place there; other sleeping and resting places are under the roof tops of these huts. From these nesting chambers they sometimes fly to their general meeting points. These are the highest points on the campsite in some tall trees, where occasionally groups of 7-8 birds meet. Others meet in the trees nearby (some 15 m away); never did we see the whole group sitting together. Family life is mainly occurring on the roof tops of the huts, where we observed courtship feeding, preening and one [mating] as well as agonistic interactions between nearby nesting pairs. We have no idea about feeding (maybe searching for grass seeds in the nearby savannah?) and the breeding status of the birds, but there was no indication on newly fledged young birds at that time.

The origin of these birds remains in obscurity. The operator of the campsite suggested that the birds have [possibly] come from the nearby Tarangire-Nationalpark, from a distance of at least 120 km (?). It finally cannot be excluded, that wandering birds of both species, that “can be expected anywhere”, by chance have met at this place some time ago (*see ZIMMERMAN et al. 1996: 429*). But the small population size with some intermixed hybrids may point out, that the founders of this group originally were escaped cagebirds, maybe from nearby Meserani Park that dealt with reptiles and other animals in former times. But nobody of the recent staff could remember. So all in all the past and the future of this *Agapornis* group remains mysterious.

Another intermixed *Agapornis* group that we found at the Meru valley very near Arusha town 10 years ago is not likely to exist anymore. A short visit that we paid to the former place didn't give any [clues] to the existence of that population (*see LANTERMANN 1999*).



Mating on the top of the roof. © Werner & Yvonne Lantermann



Hybrid bird with less clear black head colours and orange coloured breast feathers. © Werner & Yvonne Lantermann

Literature Cited

- LANTERMANN, W. (1999): Vogelleben in den Savannen Ostafrikas, Die Voliere 22, No. 10: 307-311
LANTERMANN, W. (2006): A new hybrid population of *Agapornis personatus* and *Agapornis fischeri* near Arusha, PsittaScene 18, No. 1: 12
ZIMMERMAN, D. A., D. A. TURNER & D. J. PEARSON (1996): Birds of Kenya and northern Tanzania, London