

Black-masked Lovebird

Black masked lovebirds are among the most common pet birds worldwide and second most popular of the lovebirds after peach faced lovebirds. These lovely tiny parrots are known as lovebirds because of the strong pair bond between mates. They are constantly seen sitting together preening, cooing and billing. They are hardy and easy to care for. Natives of Africa, Black masked lovebirds are admired for their beautiful coloration, engaging personalities, small size, and ease of maintenance. A number of color mutations have also been established in captivity, the most common being the blue-masked lovebirds. Black masked lovebirds are small bundles of energy, personality and vitality. They are always active, playing with toys, chattering, and interacting with each other or their owners. Black masked lovebirds are highly domesticated and have been bred for over 100 years. They are readily available worldwide and usually modestly priced.

When buying a Black mask make sure you buy a young bird. Young Black masked lovebirds can be recognized by a large dark patch on the upper beak which is not as bright red as the beak of adults. The black of the mask is also not as dark..

The voice of a Black mask is a mixture of energetic chattering and short high pitched shrieks. Black masked lovebirds are not easily taught to speak and have a squeaky speaking voice, which is difficult to understand. Adult Black mask tend to become nippy especially females. Males tend to be better pets for people who wish to handle them. They make nice pets for older children who are willing to give them a lot of time and attention. They are most commonly kept in pairs rather than as single birds and are ideal companion birds for people who prefer to watch the antics of a colorful lively pair of birds rather than handle a single bird.

Appearance

Wild type or normal colored Black masked lovebirds are a beautiful bright green with a blackish brown mask and bright yellow collar and breast. Mature birds have a bright red beak and white eye (periophthalmic) ring. Their eyes are black. Black masked lovebirds typically maintain their plumage in good condition and have very sleek feathering.

Through the years several color mutations have been established in captivity and Black masked lovebirds are now available in several colors mutations. Initial color mutations were blues masked lovebirds in which the body was green, the color white and the black mask was retained. Later mutations produced lights versions of the blue mask, called the white mask. Keep in mind however that color mutations are typically not as strong and healthy as the normal green color.

Black masked lovebirds are smaller than peach faces, approximately 6 inches long and usually weigh 40-55 grams.

These African jewels are sometimes called masked, black-headed, or yellow collared lovebirds or by their scientific name *Agapornis personatus*. They live in well-wooded grasslands with *Acacia* and other scrubby trees especially *Adansonia*. They are found almost exclusively on a plateau in east and south Tanzania at about 3000 to 5000 feet elevation. Feral populations exist in mountainous areas of Kenya. They are typically found in small flocks of 4 to 5 birds but may join into large noisy flocks of up to a hundred birds. They feed mostly on grass seeds millet and sorghum. They are typically found in the vicinity of water and drink several times daily. They often seem feeding on weed seeds in lawns. In some areas they can be crop pests. They nest in tree hollows or may build a domed nest of grass or bark strips. The female cuts the strips of building material and carries them to the nest site in her beak. They usually nest communally. The hen will lay 3-6 eggs in the dry season (March to April and June –July). Incubation lasts 23-26 days. Chicks take 5-6 weeks to fledge.

Young Black masked lovebirds are easily tamed but are nicest if hand-reared. Select a young bird which can be recognized by the black patch on the upper beak and paler and less extensive black on head. Clip the wings (Juvenile clip the outside 6-8 primary feathers) so that he can be handled and tamed but will not be injured if he jumps from your hand. Adult birds will need more extensive clip. Start by teaching the bird to “step-up” on your finger. Carry the bird, cupped in your hands, into a small room, such as a bathroom and sit on the floor. Allow him to climb onto your fore finger as you say “step-up”. If he jumps down pick him up again and repeat this process numerous times. Then practice step up to the forefinger of the other hand. This practice session should take place daily and will allow you to interact with him in an expected way daily. Lovebirds love to nestle into a shirt pocket or sleep inside your shirt.

Diet and Feeding

Historically Black masked lovebirds have been fed only seed mixes. While they can survive for an extended period of time on such a diet, eventually they fall into poor health. Lovebirds shell their seeds so vitamins added to the outside will be discarded. It is a common practice to give a Black mask a large bowl of seed (relative to its size, and leave it for a few days. The bird will then leave the shells in the feed cup as he eats and the cup full of seeds may appear to be a cup full of seed. This may lead to starvation. Preferably the bird should be given a smaller bowl and just a little bit more seed than he will eat daily. The cup should be emptied every day and replaced with fresh food.

Kaytee manufactures Pelleted diets (extruded), made in a small size suitable for Black masked lovebirds and providing balanced nutrition in every bite. These can be substituted for seeds and seeds can be given as treats. Black masked lovebirds should also be offered small amounts of fresh dark green leafy vegetables, tiny slices of apple, grapes, melons, sprouts, or other fresh foods are relished by Black masked lovebirds, which have been introduced to them especially at a young age. Boiled eggs or commercial egg food are excellent for young and breeding Black masked lovebirds but care must be taken in avoiding contamination, leaving moist foods in the cage too long. Vitamins should also be given and can be provided in the water but the bowl or water

bottle must be washed daily to prevent bacterial over-growth. Vitamin supplementation is not necessary if the bird eats a polluted diet.

Contrary to popular belief Black masked lovebirds do not need grit. They will consume it and if they are in good health it will not harm them but if they don't feel well they may eat too much resulting in an impaction.

Housing

Black masked lovebirds are small but they are very active and should be given plenty of room to move around their cage. Since lovebirds are typically kept in pairs, keep this in mind when purchasing a cage and make it at least 50% larger than you would think is appropriate for a single lovebird. They should have at least 2 perches far enough apart to jump or fly between. A cage for a single lovebird should be at least 18 inches square and for a pair it should be approximately 24 inches square. If bars are horizontal they can more readily climb around the cage.

The floor of the cage should ideally be lined with paper, newspaper or craft paper. Sheets of paper cut to the size of the cage floor make daily paper changing easy. Make it a habit to look at the stools of your bird every day when changing the paper. This is an excellent way to monitor its health. If your Black mask is eating seeds the feces should look like a small dark round dot (the feces) with a smaller white spot (the urates or solid urine) on top. If he is eating pellets the feces will be slightly more bulky and may contain colors from the pellets, which pass harmlessly through the digestive tract. Some colors may also show up in the urates. If you feed greens or vegetables they can also make the stools more bulky and liquid. Stop feeding these food and the feces should return to the more typical appearance.

The cage should be placed so it is not directly below an air conditioning vent, or in a direct sunlight from a window, which could result in overheating. The cage should be in an area of the home where there is much activity. Black masked lovebirds are very social and like to be the center of attention. If you keep your bird in the kitchen, always be aware of the dangers of Teflon poisoning, and potential problems with other cleaning chemicals like oven cleaners. (Teflon poisoning occurs when a Teflon pot or pan is overheated, not during normal cooking temperatures).

The cage should have at least 2 perches. Don't use sandpaper perch covers as they are very abrasive on the feet. Place one perch near the food and water to allow easy access. Black masked lovebirds adore a swing and will spend hours playing on it. A small rope perch is also fun. Toys should be supplied to keep the bird busy and he should be introduced to a variety of toys at a young age so he is not frightened of them. Single birds, also love mirrors and will even court or spare with their image. If the bird is continually sparing with his reflection, the mirror should be removed. Black masked lovebirds love bells, toys with moving parts, and little plastic fake birds which they also spare with. They also like toys that they can enter like little snuggle companions, paper bags, boxes, etc.

Grooming

Black masked lovebirds love baths and small birds baths can be purchased that will fit into the door of a standard cage. This can be filled with luke warm water and all the bird to enter as he chooses. Black masked lovebirds can also be bathed by misting with a fine mist spray bottle. They should be bathed twice weekly to maintain excellent plumage.

Wing clipping is essential for initial training of the Black mask and will need periodic renewal as the flight feathers are regrown. Many people keep their bird full flighted and a flying Black mask in the home can be delightful. If you do choose to keep your bird flighted however there are safety concerns. Accidents are often associated with ceiling fans, birds falling into open toilets, swimming pools, pots on the stove, etc. Escapes can also happen very quickly when a door is suddenly opened and the bird becomes startled and flies out.

Nails should be kept an appropriate length, as overgrown nails can be a hazard as well. They can be clipped with fingernail clippers watching for the quick (vein) inside the nail. Since a Black mask's nails are white the vein can be seen easily and the nail should be clipped a little bit past the vein. In case a nail bleeds after it is cut, you can stop the bleeding by application of quick stop. If no such product is available you can stick the nail into a bar of soap, apply flour or cornstarch or you can light a match, blow it out and cauterize the nail on the hot head of the match. Because of their small size control of bleeding is important.

Breeders often put bands on baby lovebirds prior to fledging as a means of identification. These bands often show the hatch year and code of the breeder. They may also indicate the family of the Black mask. If well fitted they represent negligible risk but may help you to retrieve your bird if it is lost.

Breeding

Black masked lovebirds are very easily bred and a pair will breed and raise their babies in the home, right in front of the family. Black masked lovebirds are monomorphic (males and females cannot be distinguished visually). Black masked lovebirds can breed when they are 1 year old. They can be bred in pair cages or in colony flight cages.

The breeding cage should be larger than a single pet cage. A good size is approximately 24 inches long, 20 inches tall and 24 inches wide. A small wooden box can be mounted at a top corner. The box should be approximately 6" x 6" x 8". Nest boxes are usually available at the local pet store. Pine shavings can be used as nest material however Black masked lovebirds also love to build a nest inside the box. Many breeders give them woody vines such as honeysuckle or pieces of palm fronds. Breeding age is approximately 1 year of age. The hen lays 4-8 eggs, 1-2 days apart and she usually starts to incubate with the second or third egg. This can result in quite a size difference between the oldest and youngest chicks in the clutch. For that reason some chicks may

be lost if they are too small to compete with their siblings. Incubation is 21-23 days. The chicks weigh about 3 grams when they hatch. They fledge at approximately 30-35 days and wean at approximately 45-55 days.

Provide plenty of food for the pair to feed their young, especially eggs food and some fresh greens. Both parents share in caring for the young and they are ready to fledge (emerge from the box) when they are 6 weeks old. Babies are clumsy and should not be allowed to fly free initially as they can be easily injured in their clumsy flight attempts.

Breeding pairs are often in a hurry to start another clutch of eggs and may abuse the chicks to force them from the nest. Chicks may be plucked or bitten. Such chicks may need to be removed for hand feeding. Hand feeding newly hatched Black masked lovebirds, is very challenging due to their small size but if they are left in the nest until 2-4 weeks old they are easily hand-fed and are delightful babies. A standard hand-rearing formula such as Pretty Bird 19/8 or 19/12 is a good formula. It can be fed with an eyedropper or 1 cc syringe. Always follow label instruction for preparation. If you have a gram scale, you can feed 10% of the body weight at each feeding, or fill the crop to the point where it looks and feels full but not overfilled.

Black masked lovebirds will breed year-round if allowed to which will exhaust the hen. After 3 clutches in a year the nest box should be removed and the birds forced to rest. Reducing the photoperiod (reduce to around 10hours of light daily) will also help to shut them down.

Many breeders produce lovebirds in large colony breeding cages, or in banks of breeding cages. Additionally most cities will have many hobby lovebird breeders. Many people just enjoy keeping a few pairs of the delightful little birds in their home and sell their offspring to local pet shops.

Diseases

Psittacosis or Parrot Fever – Caused by the bacteria *Chlamydia psittaci*, this disease can be transmitted to people. Birds should be tested, especially if going into the home of elderly people.

Liver disease – Probably associated most often with poor nutrition, however can also be associated with many disease processes.

Polyoma virus – First described as “Budgie fledgling disease” this virus causes death of chicks as they emerge from the nest. Lovebirds are often implicated as being asymptomatic carriers of polyoma and may not show symptoms unless they have other problems especially Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease.

Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease – causes poor formation of flight and tail feathers (often in combination with polyoma. This viral disease has no treatment and is infectious. Lovebirds are often implicated as being asymptomatic carriers.

Yeast infections – Affected birds are often observed to eat constantly and still lose weight. Yeast infections are especially common after antibiotic therapy.

Avian Gastric Yeast – previously called Megabacteria – Historically called “going light” this “bacteria” is actually a yeast infection and is treated with antifungal drugs. It causes chronic weight loss.

Traumatic accidents and accidental poisonings are common causes of death in Black masked lovebirds. Don’t allow them un-supervised freedom in the home. Pet Black masked lovebirds are often killed by other family pets (cats & dogs).

Ideally your pet Black mask should have a yearly examination by a veterinarian to help it live to it’s potential. Black masked lovebirds can live up to 18 to 20 years with good nutrition and care.