



The Varied Lorikeet

The *Psitteuteles versicolour*, which means “various colours/variegated” is one of three Lorikeets in the Genus *Psitteuteles* and the only one of the Genus to be found in Australia. The others in the Genus are the Mt Apo Lorikeet (looks a bit like a Hybrid Scaly) from the Philippines’ and the Goldie’s Lorikeet from New Guinea (similar in size and looks to the Varied). The Varied Lorikeet could almost be classed as a Monotypic genus/species as it is the only Lorikeet with a periopthalmic (around the eye) ring which is white in colour. The eye ring gives the Varied its distinctive look and also makes the bird very easy to identify.

The Range

The Varied ranges from about the Fitzroy River of the Kimberley region across the top of WA and on into the top west of NT, then down south to about Elliot (halfway between Darwin and the Alice), and across the bottom of the Cape to about as far east as Hughenden (which is roughly halfway from Townsville to Mt Isa). Anecdotal yarns I have heard indicate that large flocks of Varied Lorikeets visit the north western towns of North Queensland, Hughenden in particular, when the Gum trees are in flower. This seems to be a popular time for breeding as many juveniles are sighted at this time. Back in the day, many birds were “taken” by placing drums of molasses in the areas where the birds

were, the birds would land on the molasses and get “stuck”. This method probably provided at least some of the original aviary stock.

Description

The Varied is a small stocky bird about 160mm to 180mm in length with mainly green plumage. The male generally has a streaky mauve chest and the abdomen area is a paler green streaked with yellow. The head has a scarlet “cap” and the back of the neck and throat is a bluey-grey with faint yellowy streaks. Ear patches are generally a brighter yellow. The most striking area is as mentioned before, that is the clean white eye ring which contrasts well with head colour. The hen is similar though the head colour is normally not as intense and the mauve streaky colouring to the chest is generally absent or very faint. The Varied can be considered to be sexually dimorphic and in most instances visual sexing of adults in particular, is reasonable reliable. I have though, on a few occasions, had to DNA sex birds for fellow birdo’s, whose Varied’s were bought as a “pair” and had shown no signs of breeding for a number of years. On most of these occasions the supposed male has turned out to be a brighter coloured female than her “partner”. I DNA sex my birds when I ring them at about fourteen days so do not have to wait for adult plumage to appear and I am a firm believer in sorting out pairs early rather than wait for years of disappointment before confirmation that you have been feeding two birds of the same sex.

Temperament

They are a very quiet and active bird though not quite as gregarious in behaviour as the larger of the Aussie Lorikeets. I have not experienced or seen a hand raised Varied but did have a mate who had one as a pet for many years and by all accounts it was quite tame and an engaging pet. They would be an ideal bird for a small suburban backyard or perhaps even a reasonably long patio cage. I guess the only factor to consider in a small flight cage is watching their diet to make sure the birds do not get overweight. Like most Lorikeets,

the nest box is used as a refuge and as their “sleeping quarters” so the dangers of night fright or fright from predators has never been a problem for me.

My First Pair

My first Varied Lorikeets were sourced from a mate who had obtained a couple of clutches of unrelated birds. The birds were juveniles and not fully coloured but after much deliberation we picked what looked like a pair. They were housed in a suspended flight, a bank of four that were 1200mm high, 1800mm deep and 600mm wide. The flight had a full width “swing” door. When I made the flight I had the thought of having the doors at the bottom but to make it easy to fit perches and feed dishes, I had placed the doors at the top of the flight instead. I was not aware of the ready availability of cage fronts at this stage of DIY cage building. The doors swung downwards and I didn’t think I’d have any dramas as I expected that the birds would fly to the back perch when I approached. I didn’t account for the day that Biggles, my faithful hound, wandered under the flight just as I opened the door. Varieds are very swift flyers and the natural instinct is to duck when something heads for your face and this combination gave the birds a clear passage to freedom. A very valuable lesson was learnt; the Record Book appropriately amended and the cage was modified to have the doors at the bottom. That was about seven years ago, and I have since discovered cage fronts and cage design has been modified substantially since then.

The Next Lot and Their Flights

With Varied Lorikeets being a bit expensive and hard to come by, it was about four years later until I got the next pair. This pair were, once again, barely coloured juveniles that I promptly had them DNA’d to confirm them as a pair. A second DNA’d juvenile pair joined them about six months later. The flights that the Varied Lorikeets are housed in (as are most of my Lorikeets) are a bank of three that are 1800mm wide (three at 600mm), 2400mm long and 900mm high. They are a very open design to combat our humid tropical climate, with a half roof, full length sides at the rear at 400mm wide and a full

length rear panel at 300mm wide. Holes are cut into the rear panel for the spouts of the externally mounted nest boxes to poke through into the flight just below and behind the rear perch.

Cage fronts are fitted at the front and rear. This allows for servicing/cleaning the front and back and also a secure access point for feeding etc. Nest inspections are made through a removable top on the externally mounted nest box and security is provided by a removable heavy mesh grill fitted just below the lid.

I have found that Varied hens sit tight and will not readily quit the nest box even with the lid removed. In fact they get quite agitated so nest inspections are generally carried out during the afternoon feed when she pops out for a treat. The two pairs of Varieds are in the outer flights and the centre one is occupied by a pair of Green-Naped Lorikeets.

There have been no signs of aggression and it has been my experience that Lorikeets, even of the same sub-species are quite compatible as adjoining neighbours without the need for double wired flights. The rear perch and nest box spout in the flights are shielded by a "privacy panel" between the flights and this perhaps accounts for a lack of aggressive behaviour during the breeding cycle.

Breeding

In the wild, according to most texts, April to August is the regular breeding period and in captivity this seems to be a similar pattern. Courtship is a bit different to the other Aussie Lorikeets. Both birds tend to bob up and down on the perch, occasionally swaying away from each other at full stretch.

This seems to be the precursor for a short while before mating occurs. Varied Lorikeets have had the reputation of being somewhat difficult to breed and I guess that the current price and availability may support this. However, in saying that, so far I have not encountered any problems but the climate in Townsville is probably very similar to that which is the norm in the Varieds' natural range. Maybe it's quite a bit more humid than north western Queensland but it is similar to the "top end" and the eastern Kimberleys. I

guess in the southern States heated nest boxes and protection from chilly winds would be almost a must as the breeding period falls within some of the colder months.

My first pair was well into about eighteen months of age before the first egg of a clutch of four was laid towards the end of April 2009. The hen hatched two young while the other two eggs proved to be infertile. The babies fledged at about six weeks and were independent about a fortnight later. There was only one clutch and the second pair showed no signs of "going down".

Almost to the week this year she laid again. Five eggs this time, she brooded very tight and hatched all five. I should have probably pulled number one and perhaps number two for hand raising as, by the time number five hatched, its earlier siblings had quite some size on them and the youngest was quite hard to see in the huddle of various balls of "fluff". Number five lasted only three days but the other four powered on very well. I rung and DNA'd them at about ten to sixteen days; the clutch was two cocks and two hens. Within a month of the first lot of young being removed she laid again. Four eggs this time and she hatched two. About a week before this, the second hen had laid four eggs and she has hatched three young. As at the time of writing this article, the young are powering along and eldest is about three weeks old. The second hen was quite late compared to the other so I doubt if she too will double clutch. Perhaps next season they will be more in sync.

The nest boxes are approximately 150mm square and about 250mm deep. Nesting material is mainly a mix of peat moss and wood shavings and with the number of young particularly with the first clutch, a change of material was required part way through the nesting period. It will again need a clean out and replacement when the young fledge.

Feeding

As with all my other Aussie Lorikeets, the staple diet is my home-made dry Lorikeet mix. Generally I have shied away from feeding wet mix to the Lorikeets as most of my work has entailed very early morning starts and having a wet mix sit there all day is not a good idea in our climate. Because of this, I

prefer to feed the wet mix at night instead. The Varied's are not as messy as the larger Lorikeets and even though they like to "lick and sip" the dry mix and water, they do not make anywhere near as much "soup" out of their water as other lorikeets in my collection.

My pairs are a little bit fussy with the variety of fruit that they choose. I have tried them out on a variety but the three staples are apple, rock melon and a wedge of orange. Sweet corn on the cob is the only veg that I feed regularly and even that is occasionally ignored. They will tackle greens but only in small quantities and play with the offering rather than consume any great quantity.

The Varieds are given a third of a 75mm diameter stainless steel coop cup of dry mix which is generally enough for a pair for two days. When young are in the nest this will require topping up and eventually filling daily. All my suspended flights are 1200mm off the ground and with the coop cup hung alongside the rear cage opening. This is a convenient height to check and service when carrying out the daily watering which is a must, particularly for Lorikeets.

Are they a Hardy Bird?

In a word, YES. Like most of the Aussie and non-native Lorikeets/Lories, the birds are quite "bullet proof" and forgiving of the odd lapse in a daily routine. The predominant cause of illness and death that I have experienced with Lorikeets in general is Thrush/Candida which is a yeast infection generally caused by poor hygiene. It is fairly common affliction with hand raised birds also due to the same problem. It can be fairly readily noticed as the bird appears to have an excess of "mix" that looks like plaque, stuck to the base of the beak, and the bird can be seen flicking the head from side to side. Picking up the Candida at this stage makes it very easy to treat and cure. Nilstat, a liquid medicine used to treat infants, is 100% effective. The danger is when the problem is not treated promptly as the yeast infection will "grow" in the bird's mouth and into the crop. Vet assistance is needed at this stage and quite frankly in all probability you have left it too late anyway. Early detection and treatment is the go. Do not overdo the Nilstat though as the bird can become resistant to these anti fungal drugs.

Worms are not generally a problem as most birdo's house Lorikeets/Lories in suspended cages/flights. PBF is not common and I have only noticed it in the odd Rainbow Lorikeet. Because the Varied, like all pollen/nectar eaters, is a "squirter", cage hygiene is very important as is fresh water and clean food containers. Stick to these basics and the birds will remain healthy, breed and raise decent clutches and be reasonably long lived.

Availability

Varied Lorikeets are certainly not as readily available as the four larger Aussie Lorikeets and most times, the Purple-Crowned Lorikeet as well. In fact, I keep an eye on the advertisements in a number of magazines, Club newsletters and internet sites and these indicate that the non-native Lories are probably more readily available than the Varied. Maybe it's a perception thing where the bird's reputation as a "difficult" bird to breed has seen a decline in their popularity and, as a consequence, the Varied maintains quite a reasonable price. Another probable factor is the lack of any established colour mutations (that I am aware of) in the Varied Lorikeet. There is quite clearly a trend, that has been around for some time now, to hybridise the Aussie Lorikeets to produce mutations and it would appear that the Varied poses difficulties due to its "monotypic" status. I hope that it stays that way.

Conclusion

Lorikeets have been among my favourite aviary specimens and over the last couple of years the Varied Lorikeet has certainly joined this preferred group. I remember an observation that Peter Odekerken made somewhere along the line to the effect that there is no better proof of success at breeding a species than having regular clutches of parent reared young on the perch. If that is a good measure, I'd have to say that the Varieds in Jen and my care are well on the way to being in that category.

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