

Why Call it CONGO? Its Just an African Grey Parrot



By Mike Richard, co-owner/Farm Manager/RESEARCHER Royal Bird Company

The Grey Parrot has been a cherished pet in Europe since the reign of Henry VIII during the sixteenth century, and possibly even earlier than this time. This genus has 3 subspecies, one now thought to be extinct. The other two are well known and readily available in the USA.

UPDATED 2018: The African Grey Parrot is endangered species and is almost completely diminished across most of its African homelands.

The RACES of the African Grey Parrot

1# The small sub species *P. e. timneh* known as the Timneh Grey Parrot is smaller and darker in appearance than the nominate form and has a horn colored top mandible and maroon colored tail. The origins of the Timneh Grey is concentrated in the western coastal regions of Guinea, Ghana and the Ivory Coast of Africa.

2# The nominate form *P. e. erithacus*, is better known by several so called erroneous market names such as Congo Grey, Cameroon and Ghana or West African Grey. These misused labels and have created a very confused public for many years.

These names were normally used by bird importers to class and try to identify the African geographical origin of a particular bird's ancestry or where the birds were trapped, such as CONGO AFRICAN GREY: from the Central African Congo Republic(Zaire) and other central regions of Africa. CAMEROON AFRICAN GREY: from the Cameroon region of Africa also central Africa. WEST AFRICAN GREY or GHANA GREY: from GHANA or the more western regions of Africa such as the Ivory Coast and Guinea. But mostly the importers would place these labels on a group or shipment of birds to help with the sales and increase the value without actually really knowing the origin.

Some less informed breeders and dealers try to attach these exotic sounding market names to their birds today describing certain size or color variations, this is often used to make their bird seem more costly and rare, such as this little story, A local breeder once told me that he has a pair of large big silver Cameroon African Greys he would like to sell to me. I asked him, how did he know these birds origin or ancestry? He replied with " Oh, I don't know where they came from or where their parents or ancestors came from, but they are large and silver " therefore they are the silver Cameroon African Greys or so he was told by a "dealer".

Some dealers or resellers knew that by attaching these names they could demand higher prices from the general public and even to some so called experts even today, just look on the internet or pick up Bird Talk Magazine, the ads are full of advertisers with CONGO or CAMEROONS or the big silver Cameroons for sale. I get a laugh every time i see these ads from people trying to place these names on their birds, when they have no clue and do not know what they mean. I laugh even harder when I see someone calling their birds Bolivian or Colombian Scarlet Macaws for sale, but that's another story.

Our business was started as a wholesale brokerage that liquidated quarantine stations in the late 70's and early and mid 80's, we would actually liquidate part and complete quarantine stations and resell the birds to pet shops, dealers and breeders, and we also would keep birds for our own breeding programs and we sometimes would purchase and sell over 300-500 African Greys and other species in 60 days. Most all large Grey importers and quarantine station operators knew us very well due to the volume of birds we purchased from them as they would always call us to inform us what was about to be released and available. In the early-mid eighties during the heyday of U.S. bird importation, I had several business deals and conversations with several large well known U.S. African Grey importers and African exporters.

Some African Grey importers or exporters in particular in the USA was Darrell Alexander and Richard Furzer, Grace and Frank Curic, These were some of the largest Grey Importers at that time. I asked them about the different shades of colors and sizes of African Greys that we are seeing.

I Asked them all "was different sizes or colors or shades of birds from different regions of Africa?". every single one of these importers said " Maybe so", but there was no way of "anyone" including themselves, the actual importers and exporters in Africa ever knowing where the actual African region a shipment of African Greys actually were trapped.

Natives and trappers from many different regions trapped the birds in the ZAIRE or Congo, Cameroon and other areas and brought them to basically one export point, usually somewhere on the west coast, where they were purchased by exporters and all of them put in the same holding facilities as all the rest. Some holdings would have as many as 1000 greys. No one really knew from what region they came, no one actually cared. One problem that was always happening throughout many African regions, the unstable African governments were always changing in these regions, sometimes from one day to the next the governments would change and the rules would change just as fast. It was always problems with transporting birds especially from Zaire-the Congo. When these quasi governments changed and they sometimes would change overnight, then what was legal there today was not legal the next. So many times birds were sold as "True Congo Greys" when in fact they could not have legally come from these regions without more money being paid, and that would be most likely out of the question with bird exporters and importers. Many African regions with more stable governments banned the trapping and exports of their flora and fauna due to international pressure.

In a single shipment of 500 or more greys there would be many color variations and sizes. It was common practice for importers and dealers to separate the color variations and sizes into groups, and attach the now famous names, exotic names such as Cameroons, Congos, and Ghana's without ever knowing if these birds were actually trapped in those regions. They did not care if it was correct. It did sound good and exotic. But by attaching these so called names they got more money from people, even so called thought to be avian experts actually fell for this ruse, One large grey importer would tell me about this type of action and would actually laugh about it, how easy it is to fool such these so called smart experts in the avian community.

Many breeders today still try to get more money from their birds by stating they have "The Large Cameroons" or something like that. These people do not even know what they are saying or talking about and they absolutely do not know where the original ancestors of these certain birds actually came from. Someone has told them by looking at the colors, shades of lighter gray or larger or smaller sizes that they have this or that. We have purchased 1000's of birds from african grey trappers and importers over the years during the heyday of bird importing and they themselves did not even know or care.

What is fact

There are 2 known species of African Greys today.

The Timneh subspecies and the African Grey, known as the red tail Grey Parrot. The only way, true way of actually knowing what a bird is , to be in Africa, Lets say you are in the Congo region and see African Greys and those would most likely be real CONGO, Now if you are in the central Cameroon area, and some african greys flew over those would be most likely Cameroon greys. To the surprise of some people in the USA, there are actually real Cameroon greys that are smaller, lighter, darker, larger, etc. Many different sizes and color variations occur in all regions. In a very bad breeding year in these regions in Africa by food lacking that season, low mineral available, not enough rain, droughts, etc, babies could be smaller and darker than the year before. By trying to differentiate a so called different type by size or shade color is impossible by looking at it.

Would these geographically different located birds mean they are different species and should be classified as such? NO. The same thing would apply if , lets say, that you have Italian ancestry, or so you are told, then what part of Italy did they, your ancestors come from? North, South,?? Are they larger, smaller?, darker? lighter?. Many are all these things. And lets not forget are your bloodlines pure? Did your people always pick a mate that was from the same region? So by not knowing exactly what came before you, you have no idea by size, color, pigment of skin that you are this or that. Just because you are a large Italian person does not mean your ancestors came from a special place. So the same thing applies this day and time when dealing of placing a name on a bird trying to say its a this or that by looking at it.

African greys are african greys, some will be larger and some will be smaller even from the large pairs there will be smaller offspring. some darker some lighter. The Timneh subspecies from the western regions is now here even close to looking like the red tail. They are small, dark, have a dark or maroon tail and have a light horn colored upper beak. This is the true and the only available subspecies is totally different. There is no way to confuse them with the real nominate African Grey. (red tails)

FROM: ROYAL BIRD COMPANY journals
RBC Breeding Farm RESEARCH: 1986-2010-ONGOING

Question: Why is there a known pattern of variance in size and color of Red Tail African Greys throughout their homeland regions in Africa, starting from West to East is the darker and smaller to the lighter silver and somewhat larger birds being found more to the East and central congo regions?

But these are not different species but only geographical differences due to long term environmental circumstances, natural selection and evolution. Some experts believe that diet and evolution can have the most effect on size and color. One theory is, since larger and much richer mineral deposits and unlimited highly enriched food sources are most likely to occur in the more central dense forest Congo(Zaire) regions due to the already higher mineral content in the soils, these birds would have over 1000's 1000's years evolved slightly larger and have less melanin in the feathers creating a lighter color and increased over all silver look about their feathers.

Joseph Forshaw the renown author of Parrots of The World and other Leading bird and animal researchers state that bits of quartz and many other high minerals and many types of nutrient enriched foods was found in the intestinal tract of African Greys and other birds trapped in Eastern and Central African regions.

However birds found in the western regions contained very little or the foods were not highly enriched and seemed less nutrient bulk. The foraged foods found in the intestinal tracts of the western birds differed greatly from the more central and eastern birds as well. It was compiled of much less nutrient dense materials as a whole. The western birds contained foods that were not thought of as highly nutritious compared to the birds from the eastern and central parts which contained highly enriched plant parts and other minerals. Also the weather patterns in the central and east has lots to do with food sources. Where in the western parts more droughts are known to happen, and just a much different food source would be available. These western birds would be of course evolved smaller and due to more melanin would create over time of evolution the darker birds and smaller birds than the birds in the east. Are they a different species?, absolutely not. Should any of these geographical separated birds be actually labeled Ghana, western, Cameroon, Congo or whatever? No.

These birds colors may change or morph when the diet is corrected. However the size is permanent in the adults. As we have researched and proved on our farm sometime ago. We have researched this species African Grey with over 100 breeder pairs of a control group, large, small, darker, silver, etc. This has been going on since the early 80's here at Royal Bird Company, Avicultural Breeding Research Center.

When we starting collecting African Grey breeding stock in 79-1980-82 we noticed some birds that first appeared darker and smaller become more silver in color over time once the diet was corrected, therefore the evolution theory may have some merit. Of course we could not increase the body size in the adult birds, we did see very apparent distinct color changes over time.

As we separated and set up some of these slightly smaller and once darker colored birds for breeding and started producing babies, we also noticed that the babies from these so-called smaller darker pairs were much larger and more silver colored compared to the parents. We did pull each egg and incubate and handfed from day one, 100's of eggs were pulled and incubated and hatched and handfed from day one, therefore controlling the diet and environment from a very early age. We saw very little difference in comparison of the babies from the smaller darker pairs when compared to babies produced from larger more silver pairs. Some of the smaller pairs actually would from time to time produce even larger babies than the other pairs that were larger and silver. We contribute this to the handfeeding diet used was highly nutrient based and much more available nutrients were available to our breeder pairs than to the original imported birds in their native homeland, where ever that was.

Most all the babies did seem within acceptable range of color and size when compared. Even within the same clutches, same pairs, we do see slight differences in color shades and sizes. Also when we fed a less nutritious hand feeding formulas (Kaytee) we did see smaller, darker babies as the end result. When we fed Lakes Diet we saw an extremely small and dark range over a year. However when we exclusively fed HAGEN Tropicana formula to our breeders and babies, we saw a more even range of color and size range being quite large and most silver in color both male and female. Also brooding factors can take its toll.

We have seen babies that were brooded in less than optimal temp range and they were smaller babies. Many babies in less equipped breeders and hobbyist breeders that do not have the skills to maintain very young babies, these babies will be stunted and darker in color as the brooding temps and the needed diet most likely were not met correctly. We feel that overall, diet and other environmental factors has more to do with color and size than anything else over a period of time.

However our research is still ongoing, we still today continue to see even larger more silver birds coming from the original smaller darker pairs. Our second and third generation birds are large and silver even those coming from the original smaller darker pairs. As we continue to increase our knowledge in the correct diets, incubation and brooding needs of these birds we see more and more robust and larger babies and much more healthier adults in the long term. We now have x2-x3 x4 generation breeders from these original wild caught birds from the 80's birds and they now produce even larger and lighter color babies than the original ancestors.

Therefore concluding, all the greys that were slightly smaller and darker and did not have large and silver coloration and were called a different species, when fed correctly over 2-3 generations of breeding, will produce very large and very light or silver birds, this proving that a corrected diet, good brooding practices, equipment and correct handfeeding practices will change the size, color and over all health. Label them as you wish, they are all the same African Greys. Since all of the babies now produced in the U.S. are offspring of these original imports or from first generation, second generation or even third generation breeders, there is absolutely NO way for anyone, to label a certain bird without absolutely knowing the origin and know that the birds ancestors came from that region such as Cameroon, Congo etc. No one can tell by looking at a bird. So do not be fooled by this practice by dealers and uninformed breeders that state they have something special such as Cameroon, Congo, etc.

We breed the one and only available nominate species of Grey Parrot. The nominate species, P.e. erithacus African Grey we call the Red Tail Grey for obvious reasons. In this species there are many different sizes and color variations, but do we know for sure that a certain birds ancestry came from a certain region in Africa? Are they congo, maybe, are they cameroon? maybe do we know for sure? No, we do not and no one else knows either. HOWEVER for simplicity sake we still say Congo African Grey, without going into such detail of explaining it keeps it simple as so many people are stuck on these names.

What difference does it make?

Red Tail African Grey is Red Tail African Grey. Some large some small, some light some dark. The sizes are many times determined by diet of parents, what type handfeeding diet used, stunting of the babies, handfeeding techniques, even incubation techniques can have effect on sizes of babies, etc. Our article has been published and accepted in many international newsletters, magazines, Scientific and Veterinarian journals.

Mike Richard, owner Royal Bird Company

Now classed as endangered and threatened in their native homeland due to illegal trapping and international trade.

US Fish and Wildlife is moving to monitor and control interstate sales and movement soon.

We own and operate one of the largest, selective and most successful breeding farms on the east coast USA. today.

We are professional responsible breeders and we continue to educate people how to properly maintain their birds

Other reference

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