

## [African Grey Parrots: The Smartest Parrots of all?](#)

### **African Greys aka African Grey Parrots**



**African Grey Parrot** – *Psittacus erythacus*

© 2011 Photo courtesy of **Gerda Coetzee**, South Africa [gerdac@bfn.co.za](mailto:gerdac@bfn.co.za)

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**African Grey Parrots** (*Psittacus erithacus*) - also sometimes referred to as **Red-tailed Grey Parrots** or simply **African Greys** - are endemic to the primary and secondary rainforests of West and Central Africa, and some islands located in the Gulf of Guinea

Even though these birds have a wide range, their **numbers are declining** in most of the 23 African countries they naturally occur - mostly due to habitat destruction and capturing for the pet trade.

These popular avian pets have the reputation for being amongst the most intelligent of all birds. They are in demand because of their **human-like ability to mimic speech** and generally gentle nature.

The **most famous African Grey parrot** was called Alex. In 1977, Dr. Irene Pepperberg purchased him from a pet store hoping to disprove that Parrots were just mimics. In the more than 30 years that she worked with him, Alex has shown amazing cognitive abilities, being able to name more than 100 objects, actions and colors. Alex was able to identify certain objects by their particular material. Sadly, Alex died in 2007.



Congo African Grey Parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*)  
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## Alternate (Global) Names

### [Congo African Grey \(CAG\):](#)

**Chinese:** ... **Catalan:** Lloro gris ... **Czech:** Papoušek šedý, papoušek žako ... **Danish:** Gråpapegøje ... **Dutch:** Grijze Roodstaartpapegaai ... **German:** Graupapagei ... **Estonian:** hallpapagoi ... **Finnish:** Harmaapapukaija ... **French:** Jacko, Perroquet gris, Perroquet gris du Gabon, Perroquet jaco ... **Irish:** Pearóid liath, pearóid liath Afracach ... **Italian:** Pappagallo cenerino, Pappagallo grigio ... **Japanese:** youmu ... **Lithuanian:** Pilkoji papūga ... **Norwegian:** Jako, Jakopapegøye ... **Polish:** zako, żako ... **Portuguese:** rapagaio-do-congo ... **Russian:** жакo, Серый попугай ... **Slovak:** Papagáj sivý, papagáj sivý (žako) ... **Swedish:** Grå jacko ... **Spanish:** Cotorra Africana,

Loro Yaco ... **Swahili:** Kasuku

[Timney African Grey \(TAG\):](#)

**English:** Sierra Leone Gray Parrot, Sierra Leone Grey Parrot ... **French:**  
Perroquet timneh

[Grey Races / Subspecies](#)



Congo African Grey in flight

© 2009 Photo courtesy of Sanggay Dhorje - hcl\_sd@yahoo.com

# Overview

Provided by [Dr. Rob Marshall](#)

Originating from central Africa, the African Grey Parrot is a highly intelligent parrot and requires a committed and patient owner. Alongside the [Eclectus](#), these birds are one of the most intelligent parrot species and possess the ability to develop a large vocabulary and communicate efficiently with their owner.

## Description:

The African Grey is a medium-sized parrot that measures between 10 to 14 inches (25 to 36 cm) in length (including the tail).

## Average Weight and ID:

- [Congo Grey Parrots](#): 380 to 554 grams (light grey plumage - red tail)
- [Timneh Grey Parrots](#): 300 to 360 grams (darker / charcoal grey plumage - maroon tail)

## Plumage:

As the name implies, this parrot is predominantly grey, with accents of white and a red or maroon tail depending on the subspecies, and the area around eyes is usually white.

## Feet:

These parrots have 4 toes on each foot—two front and two back.



Timneh African Grey Parrot (*Psittacus erithacus timneh*) showing pale upper mandible

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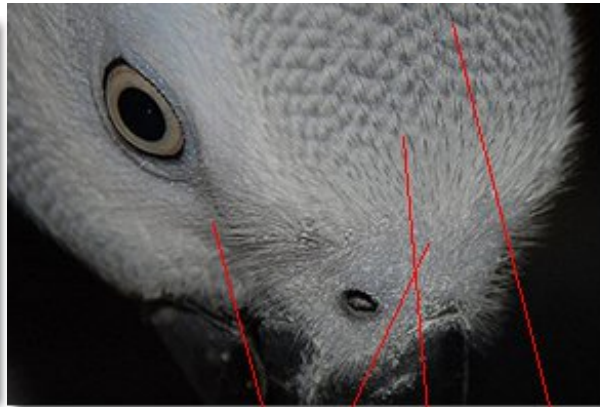
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Congo African Grey beak (after a meal)  
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Congo African Grey lores, cere, forehead & sinciput  
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## Possible Mutations / Different Colorations:

**African Grey Parrots with red feathers scattered throughout the plumage** are occasionally seen. Such birds are often referred to as "Kings" or "King Greys" and are marketed as more exotic and desirable. However, such red feathers scattered in areas where you wouldn't expect them can be an indication of damaged feather follicles (usually because of [feather plucking](#)), medication (for example administration of antibiotics at the time a bird is molting has caused temporary changes in feather coloration - these feathers are usually replaced with normal coloration feathers



Congo African Grey Parrots  
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at the next molt). There is also a good possibility of sickness, malnutrition or over-supplementation (please refer to [grey parrot nutrition](#)), [liver disease](#) or kidney problems. Although it is possibly that genetics is involved and that it is a mutation. It is easy enough to differentiate that -- depending on whether it developed these red feathers over time (which would be an indication of health problems), or whether they were born with it, which would point towards genetics / mutation.

However, several recognized mutations occur naturally in the wild, such as the F2 Pied Mutation, which results in a broad red band across the abdomen. In 1998 the first Grey mutation was created when South African bird breeder Von van Antwerpen and New Zealand partner Jaco Bosman selected F2 Pieds and created the first red Grey Parrot.

## Other mutations include:

- **Albino** (no pigment)
- **Lutino** (yellow pigment)
- **Incomplete Ino** (mostly white, but with small percentage of melanin)
- **Grizzles** (soft pinkish scalloped found in its feathers)
- **Blues / White-tailed Mutation** (white pigment in the tail) - A white-tailed mutation has been bred in New York City - please refer to the below photo. i will email you some photos. The blue mutation turns the red tail and rump white. Since greys are grey and hence lack psittacine, they don't actually turn blue (information provided by Lien Luu - breeder of this mutation).
- **Parino** (very light scalloping found in its feathers)



**Red-factor African Grey**  
African Greys NY - <http://www.africangreysny.com>  
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## Mutation Photos:

A **Red Grey Parrot** was bred by breeder Hennie Diedericks from South Africa.



© 2007 Lien Luu  
Breeder in NY City  
<http://www.lienluu.com/lb>

blue mutation (white-tail) african grey



For additional information on african grey species, please visit [this webpage](#).

## Gender Identification: Male or Female

Generally, males are bigger than females being about 12-14 inches at length. There are certain differences between sexes with females having a more slender neck and a narrower head.

- Avianweb Notes: It has been hypothesized that the bare patch around the eye of the female is rounded posteriorly, but ends in a point in the male.

## Grey Parrots as Pets

African Grey Parrots are beautiful, intelligent parrots, that would make a wonderful addition to any family who fully understands their capabilities and provides them with a stimulating, interactive environment.

Building a relationship takes lots of love, time and patience.

[Congo Grey Parrots](#) (CAGs) and [Timneh African Parrots](#) (TAGs) share many personality traits, although the Timnehs are said to begin speaking earlier than Congos, and are often said to be less nervous around strangers and new situations. Timnehs are often more social than Congo Greys who may bond more to one person. Individual personality differences do exist -- and much of it may depend on the level of socialization an African Grey got during its early stages of development as well as continued socialization throughout its life.

Chart provided by <a href="#">Dr. Rob Marshall</a>
<b>Size:</b> Up to 45cm
<b>Pet Status:</b> Excellent
<b>Talking Ability:</b> Excellent
<b>Lifespan:</b> 40-60 years
<b>Breeding Ability:</b> Good
<b>Number of Eggs:</b> 2-4 eggs
<b>Incubation:</b> 21-30 days
<b>Compatibility with other species:</b> Good with other equally intelligent birds (ie. Eclectus)
<b>Feeding:</b> Seed and Fruit Eaters
<b>Sexing:</b> Male is often larger than the hen. Surgical or DNA sexing is required. .

Due to their highly intelligent nature, these parrots can become easily bored and inactivity may quickly lead to behavioral problems such as feather picking. Bored parrots have a tendency to chew things and consistent training and a diligent owner are a must for this vivacious bird.

These intelligent birds are best suited to people who have experience with pet birds and are familiar with their ongoing care requirements.

If you fulfill his or her needs, you will have a lifelong friend - as the lifespan of an African Grey Parrot is up to 60 years. A big commitment, however, if you are a true parrot lover you will appreciate having a true friend for life.

Grey parrots are particularly noted for their exceptional [talking](#) and cognitive abilities. Irene Pepperberg's extensively published research with captive Grey Parrots, including Alex, has shown that these parrots are capable of associating human words with their meanings. They also mimick sounds and voices quite accurately. (This [chart](#) lists other good and bad talkers, and respective care requirement.)



African Grey Parrot

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## Training and Behavioral Guidance:

African Grey Parrots are amongst the easier parrots to keep. This being said, they do present challenges, such as excessive chewing - especially at certain stages in their life. They do discover their beaks as method of "disciplining us" once they are out of the "baby stage" and they can generally be somewhat naughty, and it really is important to learn to understand them and to guide their behavior before an undesirable behavior has been established. Undisciplined parrots will chew on electric wiring potentially causing house fires. They regard anything in your home as a "toy" that can be explored and chewed on; destroying items that you may hold dear or are simply valuable. Even a young bird that has not been neglected and abused requires proper guidance; this becomes even more challenging when it involves a rescued bird that may require rehabilitation.

- Web Resources: I put together web resources for you to help you understand your pet



bird and properly direct him. Please visit the following website to learn more about [parrot behavior and training](#).

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(c) 2009 Photos courtesy of Char Grunewald

This rescued African Grey was neglected by her previous owner and was totally plucked on the chest and back when Char got her. She was poorly socialized and was fearful and quick to bite. Even more telling -- she was "cage-bound" (scared to come out of her cage - as she was not used to that).

It took a little while, but Char and her family were able to turn her into a great pet - who loves to come out of the cage and play. According to Char, she "talks up a storm" and is not at all aggressive towards them. To everybody's delight, she stopped plucking and her feathers are growing back nicely.

## Diet:

In the wild, they feed primarily on palm nuts, fruits and seeds, supplemented by leafy matter. They have even been observed eating snails.

However, captive-bred Grey Parrots are often fed a diet of seeds, grain, pellets\* and fruits / veggies. They are often inflicted with [calcium deficiencies](#), and I found it challenging to get my African Greys to eat from their cuttlebones. Please also refer to this article: "[Calcium Metabolism in Birds](#)".

My solution was to scrape it over their daily soft food. This method worked well for me. Grinding up egg shells and mixing that in with the soft food is also a great way to increase your Grey's calcium consumption.

- Please also refer to:
  - o [The Nature of Grey: Personality and Care Requirements](#)
  - o [African Grey Nutrition](#)



Congo African Grey eating a fruit  
© 2010 Photo courtesy of Sanggay Dhorje  
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**\*Please note:** When feeding pellets to your pet, please be aware of the fact that overly feeding citrus fruits (including oranges) or vitamin-C-rich foods to your birds can lead to "[Iron Overload Disease](#)" as vitamin C increases the amount of iron absorbed from foods.

## [Breeding Greys](#)

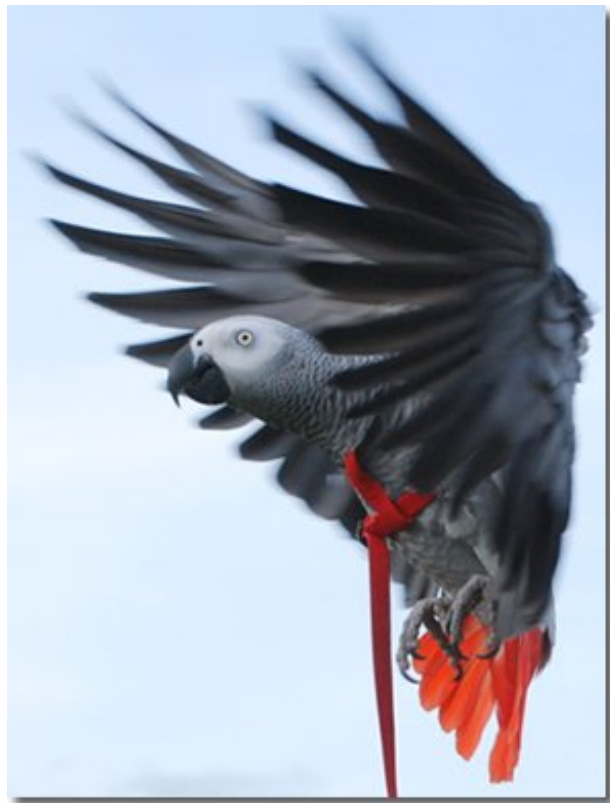
### Status

Their popularity as pets has led to many of them being captured for the pet trade. The African Grey Parrot is listed on CITES appendix II, which restricts trade of wild caught species, as wild populations cannot sustain trapping for the pet trade.

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Species Research by [Sibylle Johnson](#)

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Congo African Grey exercising with his harness on  
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