

THE AFRICAN GREY PARROTS

Psittacus erithacus

The African Grey Parrot is a medium-sized parrot of the genus *Psittacus*, endemic to primary and secondary rainforest in West and Central Africa, and is one of the most intelligent of all birds. They mainly feed on nuts, fruits, and vegetable matter.

Some books list more, but there are generally only two recognised subspecies: the Congo African Grey Parrot and the slightly smaller Timneh African Grey. As their names imply, both are predominantly grey. They have dark grey wings and a pale grey rump. A bare area of skin around the eyes



CONGO AFRICAN GREY PARROT
Photo: L. Miguel Bugallo Sánchez

is whitish to light grey. The head and neck feathers have pale edgings, creating a scalloped effect. The Congo African Grey has a red tail and the Timneh African Grey a tail of deep maroon.



TIMNEH AFRICAN GREY PARROT
Photo: "Diana"

The African Grey is popular as a pet or companion parrot, especially the Congo African Grey, partly because of its ability to imitate speech. The African Grey is listed on CITES Appendix II which restricts trade of wild caught species, because wild populations cannot sustain trapping for the pet trade. The history of African Grey Parrots as pets dates back over 4,000 years. Some Egyptian hieroglyphics clearly depict pet parrots. The ancient Greeks also valued them as pets. Wealthy Roman families often kept pet parrots in ornate cages for their talking ability. King Henry VIII of England is also known to have had an African Grey, and Portuguese sailors are reputed to have kept them as companions on their long sea voyages.

This species was one of the many originally described by Linnaeus in his 18th century work, *Systema Naturae*, and it still bears its original name of *Psittacus erithacus*. It is the only currently accepted species of the genus *Psittacus*. The generic name is derived from the Ancient Greek word "*psittakos* (ψιττακος)", meaning "parrot".



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Congo African Grey Parrot (*Psittacus erithacus erithacus*): This is the larger of the subspecies, being about 33cm (13 inches) long, with light grey body feathers, a cherry-red tail, and an all black beak. Immature birds of this subspecies have tails of a duller, darker red towards the tip. This changes at their first moult. They also have grey irises initially, which change to pale yellow by the time they are a twelve months old. The Congo Grey Parrot is found on the islands of Principe and Bioko and is distributed from south-eastern Ivory Coast to Western Kenya, northwest Tanzania, southern Democratic Republic of the Congo and northern Angola.

Timneh African Grey Parrot (*Psittacus erithacus timneh*): These are smaller than the Congo Grey, and have a darker grey colouring, a deeper maroon tail, and a light horn-coloured area on the upper mandible. The Timneh Grey Parrot occurs in the western parts of the moist upper Guinea forests and bordering savannas of West Africa from Guinea-Bissau, to Sierra Leone and Southern Mali east to at least 70km (43 miles) east of the Bandama River in Ivory Coast.

African Greys are still not particularly abundant in Australian aviaries, but modern rearing techniques have seen the numbers increasing steadily over the last few years.

Reference: *Wikipedia*