



CAPE PARROT IDENTIFICATION GUIDE

Compiled on behalf of the Scientific Authority of South
Africa

May 2015

A guide to distinguish the Cape Parrot (*Poicephalus robustus*) and the Grey-headed Parrot (*Poicephalus fuscicollis suahelicus*)

Background

Until recently the Cape parrot (*Poicephalus robustus robustus*) was not recognised as a separate species from the grey-headed parrot (*Poicephalus robustus fuscicollis*) and both these taxa were therefore included together in Appendix II to CITES and traded under the name *Poicephalus robustus*. The Cape parrot, a South African endemic, has a restricted and fragmented distribution with an estimated global population size of 1000 – 1500 individuals representing considerably less than 500 breeding pairs. The species is listed as Endangered in the South African Red Data Book for Birds, as critically endangered on the current Threatened or Protected species list (section 56 of the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act No. 10 (NEMBA) of 2004), as specially protected in the province of KwaZulu-Natal and is a protected species in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. However, due to the grey-headed parrot and Cape parrot not being recognised as two separate species, both taxa are together considered as Least Concern at a global level.

However, genetic work recently conducted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal (paper submitted and accepted by PLOS ONE – revision in progress) indicates clear genetic differentiation between *P.r. robustus* and the *P.r. suahelicus* - *P.r. fuscicollis* cluster, supporting previous recommendations that the Cape parrot should be viewed as a separate species, namely *P. robustus*, and that the grey-headed parrot and brown-necked parrot should be grouped under the *P. fuscicollis* species complex as *P.f. suahelicus* and *P.f. fuscicollis* respectively.

The Cape parrot (*Poicephalus robustus*) has been the focus of much debate over the past few years, from its taxonomic position, to habitat use and population declines. Various factors have contributed to population declines in the species such as the illegal harvest of individuals from the wild for the pet trade, habitat destruction and diseases, specifically psittacine beak and feather virus (Wirminghaus *et al.* 1999).

In preparation for the Cape parrot being treated as a separate species under CITES, the South African National Biodiversity Institute developed an identification guide to assist law enforcers with identifying the Cape parrot and distinguishing it from the grey-headed parrot. The guide highlights the main morphological and colour differences between the two species. It consists of

1. A brief description of the two species,
2. Tables listing the main ecological, morphological and biological differences between the two species (tables 1 & 2 and fig. 1),
3. Photographs of both sexes annotated to show the colour differences between the two species (fig. 2, 3, & 4), and
4. A colour palette (table 3) to assist in recognising the various colours described.

Brief description of the Cape parrot

The Cape parrot has small body dimensions, a narrow bill; the head colour is olive, yellow to golden.

The head, throat and neck are olive yellow to golden brown. The body and the wings are dark green. Thighs and outer edges of the wings orange-red and the tail and flight feathers are bottle-green to black. Females typically have an orange-red forehead. Males have a dark-earth fore crown and no colouration on the forehead. Juveniles resemble the female but without red on the tibia and wing edges.

Brief description of the grey-headed parrot

The grey-headed parrot has large body dimensions; the bill is heavier basally with the apex tapered and longer. Head colour is silver grey.

The grey-headed parrot is generally larger than the Cape parrot and has a short tail. The body is green. Adults normally have orange-red patches on shoulders and thighs. Just like the Cape parrot, females have a well-defined orange-red forehead. Similar to the Cape parrot, juveniles resemble females with the orange-red colour on the forehead.

Table 1: Ecological, morphological and biological differences between the Cape and the grey-headed parrot.

	Cape parrot (<i>P. robustus</i>)	Grey-headed parrot (<i>P. fuscicollis suahelicus</i>)
Habitat	Specialist: Mixed Afromontane <i>Podocarpus</i> (yellowwood) forest	Generalist: Low lying mopane and mixed broadleaf woodlands, savanna and forest
Range	Eastern Cape, Transkei and KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa	South-central Africa from Angola and South Africa to Uganda and Tanzania
Morphology	This species is smaller morphologically (table 2) The bill is narrower and smaller	This species has larger body dimensions (table 2) The bill is heavier, the apex is more tapered and much longer
Colouration	Head colouration is olive-yellow	Head colouration is silvery-grey
Vocalisations	Simple contact call	Complex contact call, clearer and more metallic
Diet	Specialist feeder on yellowwood fruits eaten when green and hard	Generalist feeder on a range of forest fruits and seeds
Reproduction	Usually nest in <i>Podocarpus</i> trees	Usually nest in <i>Adansonia</i> (Baobab) trees
	Usually nest in September to December	Breed from April to August in the south

Table 2: Morphometric comparison of the Cape and grey-headed parrot.

Description*	Cape parrot	Grey-headed parrot
Wingspan	Male: 210 – 230mm (average 218.3mm) Female: 205 – 219mm (average 210.5mm)	Male: 199 - 285mm (average 222mm) Female: 196 - 315mm (average 216mm)
Tail length	Male: 90.0 - 98.9mm (average 94.8mm) Female: 79.6 - 97.2mm (average 89.3mm)	Male: 77 - 106mm (average 95mm) Female: 83 - 107mm (average 92mm)
Tarsus length	Male: 18.2 - 23.5mm (average 21.7mm) Female: 19.9 - 22.4mm (average 21.5mm)	Male: 19.2 - 25.5mm (average 22.2mm) Female: 18.5 - 24.0mm (average 21.7mm)

Description*	Cape parrot	Grey-headed parrot
<p align="center">Culmen to cere (The distance from the nose to the tip of the bill)</p>	<p>Male: 37- 48mm (average 40.8mm)</p> <p>Female: 36 - 43mm (average 38.3mm)</p>	<p>Male: 42 - 52mm (average 46.9mm)</p> <p>Female: 38 - 49mm (average 44.2mm)</p>
<p align="center">Mass</p>	<p>Male: 295 - 392g average 306g</p> <p>Female: 260 - 328g average 294g</p>	<p>Male: average 326g</p> <p>Female: average 321g</p>
<p align="center">Bill length</p>	<p>Both sexes: 33.6 ± 2.7mm</p> <p>Lower mandible is more than 23 mm wide</p>	<p>Mandible is 22.6 – 28.3 mm wide and the lower mandible width is < 23mm</p>

**See figure 1 for the location of different body parts included in the table.*

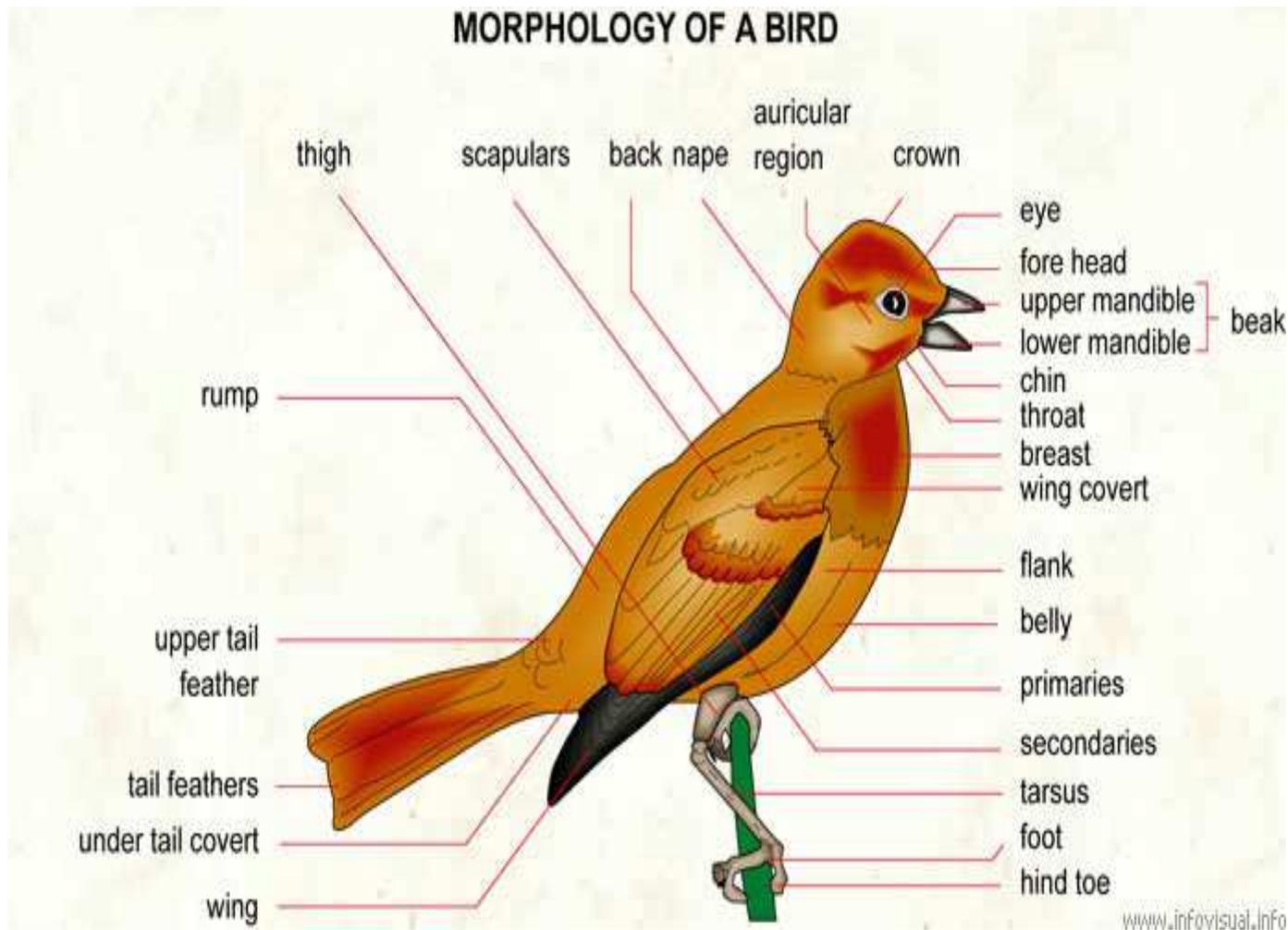


Figure 1: Different body parts of a bird (bird anatomy).

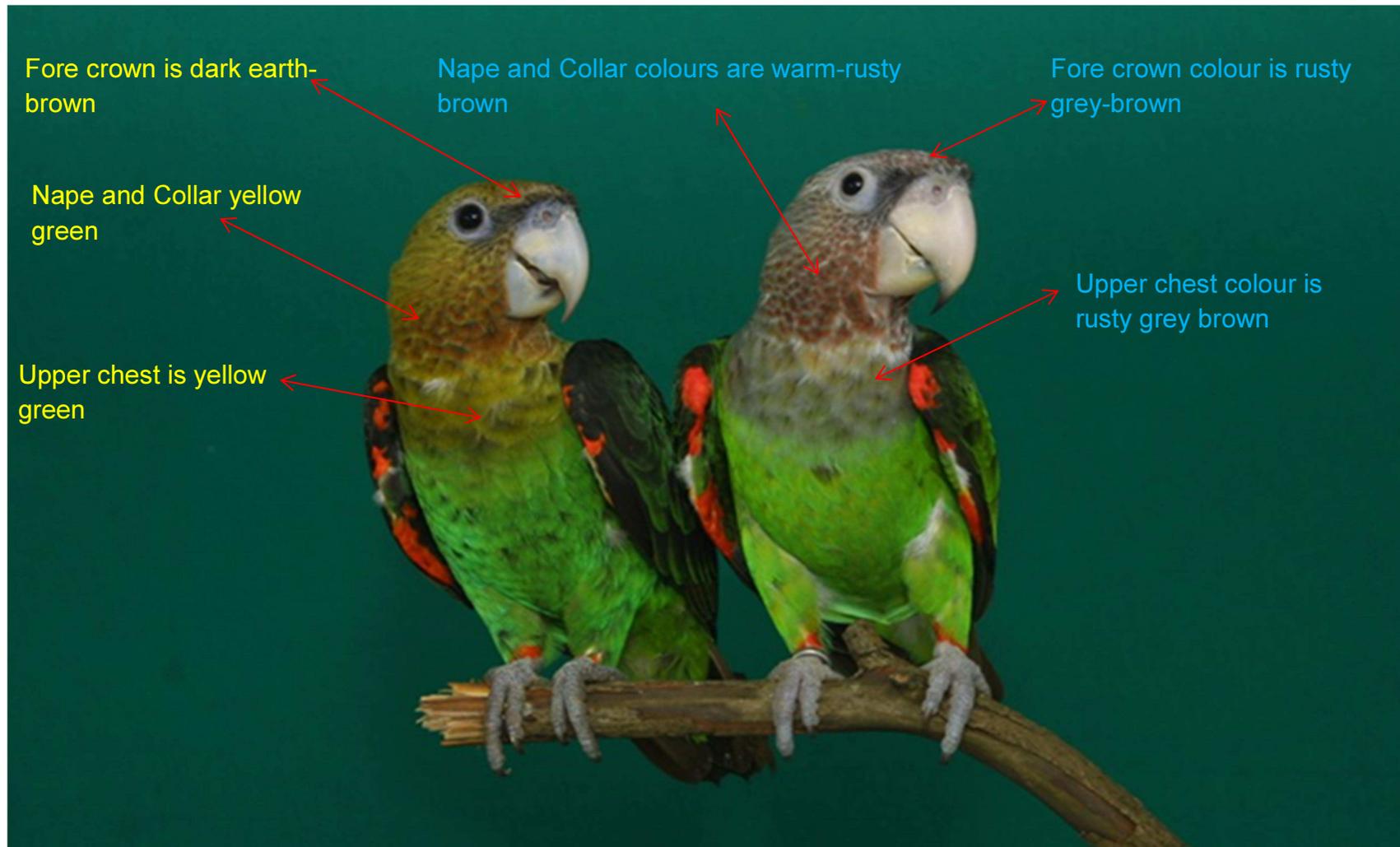


Figure 2: Male Cape parrot (*P. robustus*) (left) and male grey-headed parrot (*P. fuscicollis suahelicus*) (right)

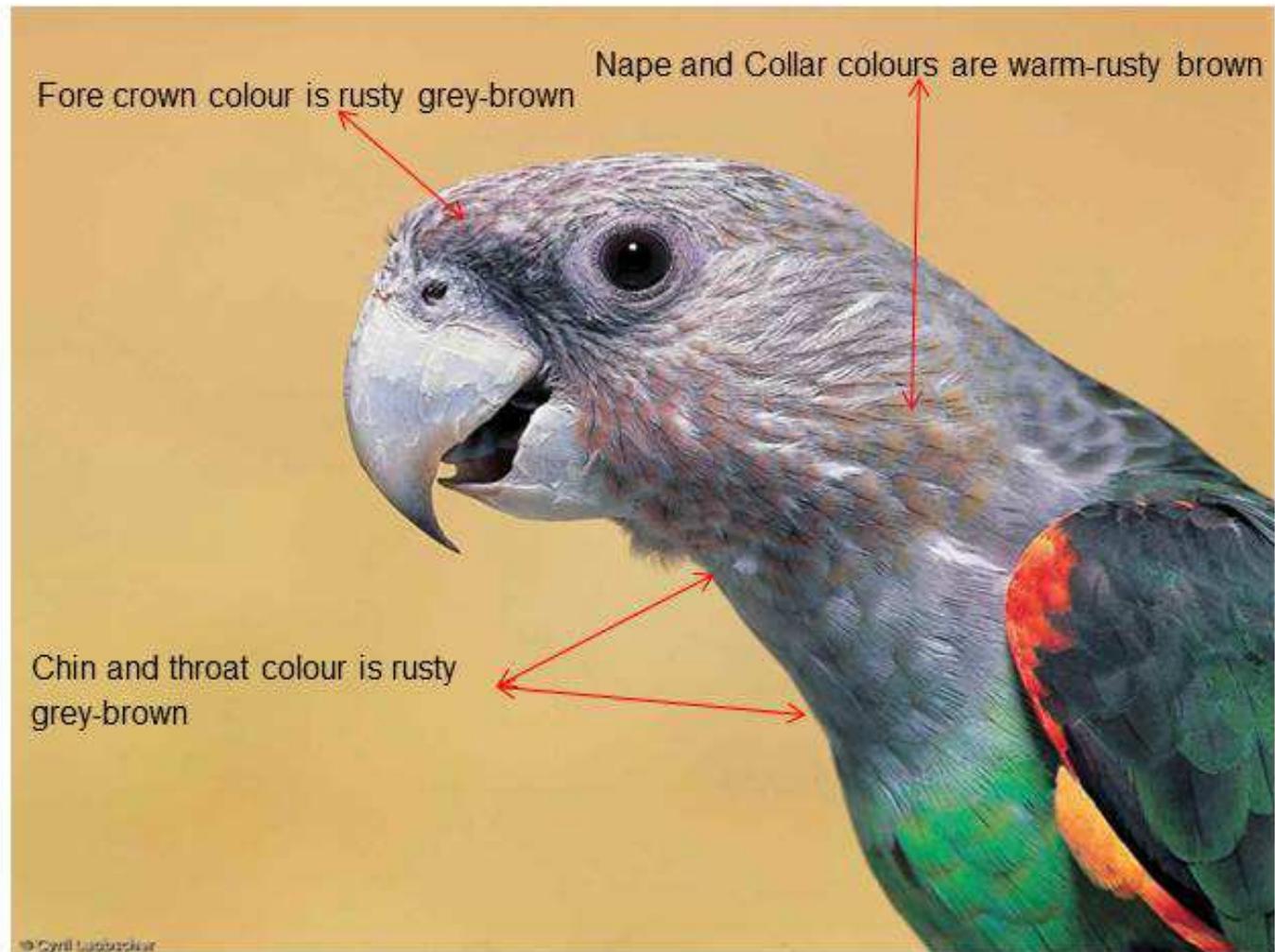


Figure 3: Male grey-headed parrot.

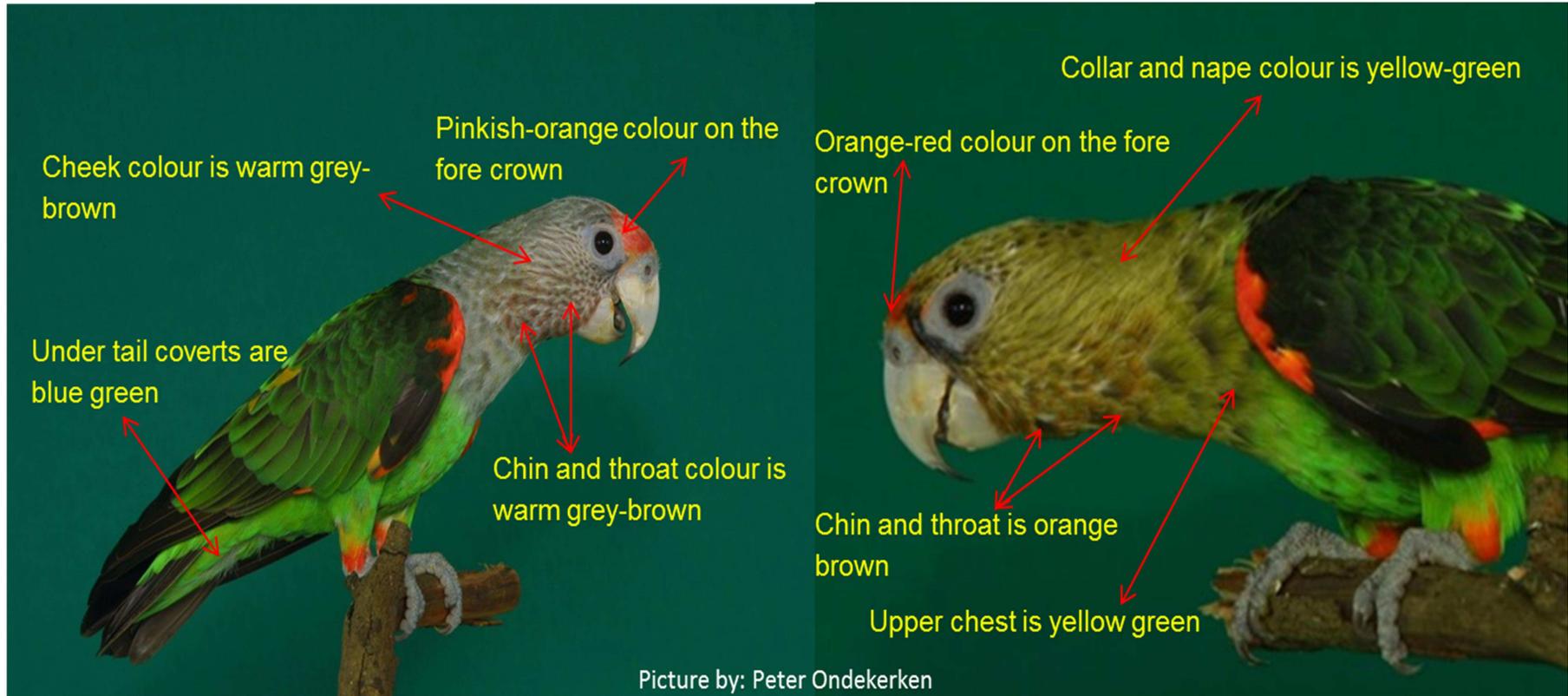
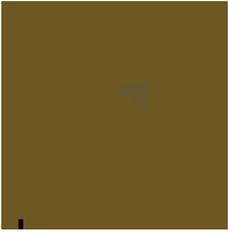
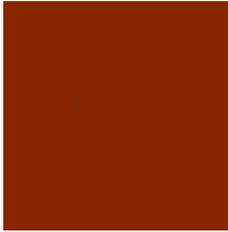
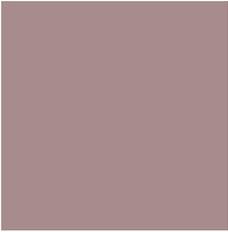
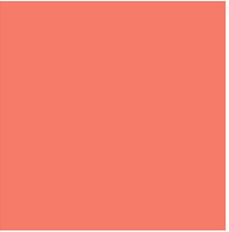
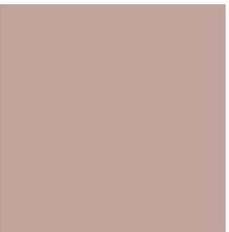
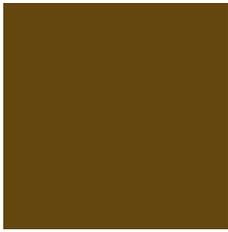
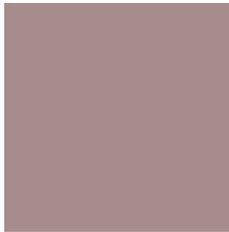
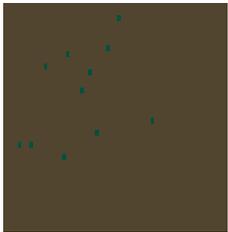
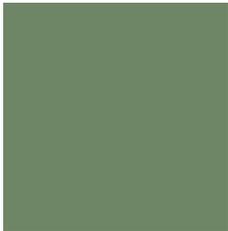
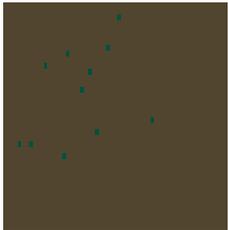
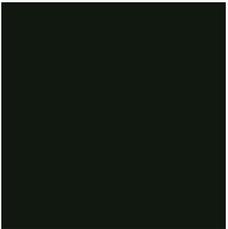
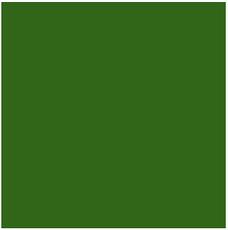
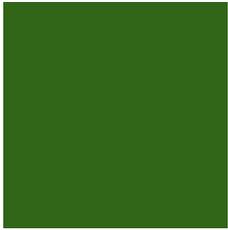
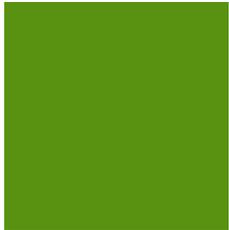
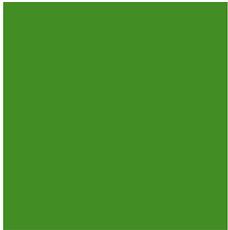


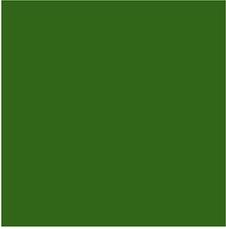
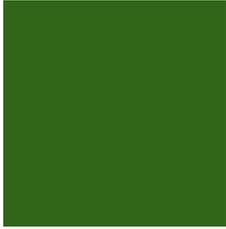
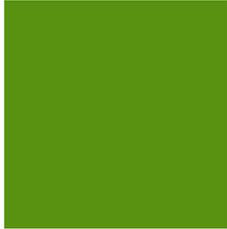
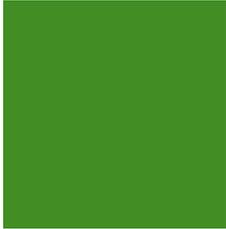
Figure 4: Female grey-headed parrot (left) and female Cape parrot (right).

Table 3: Colour palette showing the different colours occurring on the head and body of the Cape and the grey-headed parrot

	Cape parrot		Grey-headed parrot	
Character	Male	Female	Male	Female
Fore crown colour	Dark earth-brown 	Orange-red 	Rusty grey-brown 	Pinkish-orange 
Crown colour	Olive green 	Olive green 	Rusty grey-brown 	Silvery grey-brown 

	Cape parrot		Grey-headed parrot	
Character	Male	Female	Male	Female
Collar and Nape colour	Yellow green 	Yellow green 	Warm rusty brown 	Rusty grey brown 
Chin and throat colour	Orange brown 	Orange brown 	Rusty grey-brown 	Warm grey-brown 
Upper chest colour	Yellow green 	Yellow green 	Rusty grey-brown 	Grey-green 

	Cape parrot		Grey-headed parrot	
Character	Male	Female	Male	Female
Cheek colour	Olive green 	Yellow green 	Rusty grey-brown 	Warm grey-brown 
Mantle Colour (Area between wings – fig. 1)	Dark oily-green 	Dark green 	Olive-green 	Olive-green 
Belly and lower chest colour	Blue-green 	Blue-green 	Leaf-green 	Blue-green 

	Cape parrot		Grey-headed parrot	
Character	Male	Female	Male	Female
Colour of under-tail coverts	Blue-green 	Blue-green 	Leaf-green 	Blue green 

References

DOWNS, C. T. 2005. Abundance of the endangered Cape parrot, *Poicephalus robustus*, in South Africa: implications for its survival. *African Zoology* 4(1): 15-24.

PERRIN, M. 2012. Parrots of Africa, Madagascar and the Mascarene Islands. Wits University Press. 1 Jan Smuts Avenue. Johannesburg.

WIRMINGHAUS, J.O., DOWNS, C.T., SYMES, C.T. & PERRIN, M.R. 1999. Conservation of the Cape parrot in southern Africa. *South African Journal of Wildlife Research* **29**: 118–129.

WIRMINGHAUS. J. O., DOWNS. C. T., PERRIN. M. R. and SYMES. C. T. 2002. Taxonomic relationships of the subspecies of the Cape Parrot *Poicephalus robustus* (Gmelin). *Journal of Natural History*. **36**: 361-378.