The African Grey Parrot has been called "the perfect mix of brains and beauty" (Bird Talk, Aug. 92) and the "Cadillac of parrots" (Bird Talk Sept. 93). Much of the notoriety of this species stems from the phenomenal gift of speech members exhibit. While many parrots learn some words or phrases, many cases have been documented of African Greys learning multiple lines of songs, prayers, or plays. The Guinness Book of World Records lists the best talking parrot or parrot like bird as an African Grey named Prudle. Prudle was captured near Jinja, Uganda in 1958 and when "he" retired from public life in 1977 had a vocabulary of nearly 1000 words.

Many owners have been surprised (and sometimes shocked) when their Grey learned a new word or phrase after hearing it only a few times. One of our favorite stories in this respect was one related by a priest that had a pet Grey. While hanging some pictures in his office, the priest hit his hand with a hammer. He let out a stream of obscenities that his Grey learned (from this one occurrence according to the priest). The priest's embarrassment was compounded by the other aspect of Greys gift for mimicking, that is they often sound exactly like the person that spoke the words or phrase.

Greys (the English spelling is usually used - not Gray) are not limited to imitating speech. Phones, microwaves ovens, answering machines, other birds and chain saws (in the African jungle) have all been documented as part of the Grey's repertoire. Many owners and some studies suggest that Greys (and other parrots) don't just mimic but can use words learned in new combinations to convey new wants, needs and desires. Alex, a famous Grey that has been studied for years by Dr. Irene Pepperberg, invented the term "long yellow" to express his desire for more corn on the cob. A European study found Greys to have the intellectual capacity of a 5-year-old human child with the emotional development of a human 2 year old (read as terrible two year old).
Greys are certainly exotic but are not unusual in aviary collections (like many of the rec.pets.birds crew seem to have in their homes). Compared to many other parrot species, they are relatively easy to breed, are moderately priced, moderately sized and adapt well to human companionship.

I'M SO CONFUSED. I'M INTERESTED IN BUYING AN AFRICAN GREY PARROT BUT THERE SEEMS TO BE MANY DIFFERENT TYPES OF GREYS. WHAT ARE CONGOS, GHANAS, TIMNEHS, AND CAMEROON GREYS? ARE THEY AFRICAN GREY PARROTS?

We can see why you are confused. Before we clear up the common name issue, lets examine the how the scientific community classify African Grey Parrots.

The African Grey Parrots are all in the genius Psittacus. Only a single species makes up this genus, Psittacus erithacus. This species is further divided into three subspecies or races:

**P.e. erithacus** - the nominate race.

The terms "Congo", "Ghana" and "Cameroon" all refer to supposed slight color and temperament variations of this subspecies. This is the subspecies most often pictured in books and articles about African Greys. The bird is about pigeon sized with a bright red tail, a solid black beak, and a light gray feathered body. Most every written or unwritten source (Bird Talk, American Cage Bird, breeder ads in these magazines, "The Guide to the Well Behaved Parrot" (a.k.a. the r.p.b. bible), the r.p.b. newsgroup, every exhibitor at every bird show we've attended and every pet store we've visited) refers to this subspecies as a "Congo" or an African Grey Congo. In rec.pets.birds the acronym CAG is used to refer to Congo African Grey.

**P.e. Timneh**

This is the "other grey". Commonly called Timnehs or African Grey Timnehs. These birds are on the whole smaller than the nominate race. The body feathers are dark gray. The tail is a duller maroon or red brown color. The upper mandible of the beak is all or partially bone colored. We have seen imported Congos are smaller than either of our Timnehs. We have also seen some Congos with body feathers that are as dark gray as our darker Timneh with less than bright tail feathers. However the beak color always has been the easiest most consistent differentiation. In rec.pets.birds the acronym TAG is used to refer to Timneh African Grey.
Some articles we've read have suggested that this subspecies is extinct or has interbred with the nominate race so much that any visible difference has vanished. This subspecies is (or was?) limited to two islands in the Gulf of Guinea (Principe and Fernando Poo). Forshaw in his "Parrots of the World" states that "this subspecies is probably not distinct from erithacus". The bottom line is you probably won't find one offered for sale by a breeder, pet store or bird show and you wouldn't recognize one as anything but the nominate subspecies if you did see one. We can't remember a posting in rec.pets.birds that discuss this subspecies.

Okay, now we've laid out the scientific classification stuff, but what do you, the perspective pet owner need to understand? Just this, from a practical standpoint you have two subspecies of African Grey Parrots to choose from as your pet. These two subspecies are currently referred to "Congos" and "Timnehs" by 99% of those dealing with these birds.

One last note about naming and this is mostly our opinion and comment. If you were to read Bird Talk issues of five years ago you'd find that it wasn't as simple as "Congo" equals nominate and "Timneh" is the Timneh subspecies. The "Ghana" and "Cameroon" terms were attempts by those breeding and in the pet trade to differentiate their "wares" from those of their competitors. The result was confusion. Now that things seem pretty straight forward a few members of the "African Parrot Society" seem to want to stir the pot again. They have suggested that the common name for the nominate subspecies become "African Grey Parrot" while the name for the Timneh subspecies become "Timneh Parrot". This sort seems like a deja vu since those suggesting striping "African Grey" from the name of the Timneh subspecies breed the nominate race for profit and would likely gain financially if people thought of their "product" as the only true "African Grey". They claim this proposed change is to avoid confusion, however we've never met anyone confused by the "Congo" = nominate and "Timneh" = Timneh subspecies terminology.

---

I THINK I WANT A GREY BUT I'M NOT MADE OF MONEY. I CAN AFFORD A TIMNEH BUT WILL HAVE TO SAVE A WHILE LONGER TO GET A CONGO. AVERY NICE PET STORE IN TOWN HAS TWO CONGOS FOR SALE. THEY TOLD ME THAT I SHOULDN'T CONSIDER TIMNEHS BECAUSE THEY ARE "INFERIOR BIRDS". IS THIS TRUE ? WHAT ARE THE MAIN DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TIMNEHS AND CONGOS?
If the "inferior" aspect of Timnehs is size, and one considers large as superior to small, the pet store is right. Timnehs are smaller than Congos.

Most people think the Congo Grey looks nicer than the Timneh. So if bright red feathers are superior to a dull maroon, again the Congo is superior to the Timneh.

The last major difference between Congos and Timnehs is price. Timnehs are often much cheaper than Congos.

What's more important to those considering a Timneh or Congo is how they are the same. 
In his feature article in the Sept. 93 issue of Bird Talk, Philip Samuelson writes: 
"When it came to talking ability of Congo Greys ... versus Timneh Greys there is very little difference except that Timnehs were consistently more gentle in nature. Considering that many of these Timnehs were tamed imports and most Congos in the survey were hand-fed, this says quite a lot for the peaceful Timneh. The vocabularies of some imported Timnehs consisted of several hundred words. Their use of phrases was just as appropriate as any Congo. Hand-fed Timnehs in the survey were consistently outstanding talkers, but several tame, older Congos that were hand-fed when young never said a word. Don't let anyone ever tell you that Timnehs aren't outstanding pets and great talkers. They have all the talking ability of a Congo. With both types of African Greys, however, hand-fed birds usually make better pets than imports which tend to be very nervous and prone to growling".

I'VE HEARD THAT GREYS ARE REALLY NEUROTIC BIRDS. ONE GUY I KNOW SAYS THAT IT TAKES HIM FOUR WEEKS TO GIVE HIS GREY A NEW TOY. ONE WEEK TO PUT IT IN SAME ROOM WITH THE BIRD'S CAGE BUT ON THE FAR SIDE OF THE ROOM. ONE WEEK SITTING THE TOY ON THE SAME SIDE OF THE ROOM AS THE BIRD'S CAGE. ONE WEEK NEXT TO THE CAGE AND FINALLY ONE WEEK HANGING ON THE OUTSIDE OF THE CAGE. ALL THIS JUST TO GIVE HIS BIRD A NEW TOY !

ANOTHER FRIEND TOLD ME HE GOT A YOUNG GREY THAT SPENDS HOURS TRYING TO "DIG" THROUGH THE BOTTOM OF HIS CAGE. ARE THESE BIRDS TEN CARDS SHORT OF A FULL DECK OR WHAT?

Sally Blanchard is a recognized authority on parrot psychology. She conducts seminars, offers consulting in Northern California, has written numerous articles and writes a
monthly column on this subject in Bird Talk. The following is an answer Sally gave (Bird Talk February 1994 pg. 22) to a similar query about a 15 month old African Grey:

"I believe that it's a misconception that parrots do not adjust well to change. The reality is that they don't adjust well to sudden change that they have not been patterned to accept. Unfortunately, many poorly raised domestic hand-fed parrots are not encouraged to explore or accept change and become quite rigid in their routines. These birds develop serious stress when even the smallest change occurs in their lives. It's critically important to make change acceptable in a young bird's life by safely (and slowly) introducing it to new adventures and objects.

Even older parrots can be re-patterned if it's done gradually with their security in mind. One way is by taking the bird into each room of the house and setting it down briefly on various pieces of furniture while reassuring it that everything is okay. Maintaining a rigid environment with no change is a definite step in creating a neurotic bird that will stress at any deviation."

Sally's question didn't deal with the digging behavior but we have seen similar questions asked in Bird Talk. The general opinion is that this behavior is not uncommon and the young birds out grow it.

SOMETHING IS VERY WRONG! MY 11 MONTH OLD CONGO GREY HAS NOT UTTERED A WORD. I BOUGHT A BUDGIE FOR MY SON ABOUT THE SAME TIME I GOT MY GREY AND IT'S BEEN TALKING FOR MONTHS. I THOUGHT GREYS ARE SUPPOSED TO BE SO INTELLIGENT AND GREAT AT TALKING. HOW COME THE BUDGIE IS LEAVING THE GREY IN THE DUST?

First of all not all parrots (even expensive hand-fed Congo Greys) talk. Granted the vast majority of Greys do talk and talk well. It might turn out that you have one of the few quiet ones. However at 11 months it's too early to tell. According to a Bird Talk readers poll most Greys don't start talking until they are 18 months old. Of course some will talk earlier, and some later. The three Greys we've had "passed through the talking barrier" at the 12 to 15 month of age. When they started, they really started, it was like someone turned on the "talking switch". So don't worry yet, your bird is still young.