

Veterinary Viewpoints

Edited by

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All Pets Medical Center, West Hills, CA

Question #1: I have been raising Umbrella Cockatoos for years and all of a sudden some of the babies have intermittent gray feathers. Is this a significant problem?

S. King, North Carolina

ANSWER #1: There is some debate as to the cause of this phenomenon. I have observed this anomaly in a number of white cockatoo chicks from a variety of species including Umbrellas, Goffin's, and Sulfur-crested. However, after the juvenile molt, the feathers seem to disappear.

Some aviculturists have attributed this gray feathering to dietary peculiarities such as a particular brand of handfeeding formula. However, I have seen this trait develop with a variety of brands and not any one in particular.

I suspect that this is a juvenile change genetic trait in some chicks. Just as Cockatiels resemble the hen until the juvenile molt, it would not be inordinate to expect juvenile cockatoos to follow a similar development plan.

Although I cannot substantiate this claim, I have heard it said that this scattered gray feathering has been observed in wild cockatoo chicks. Not all chicks in the clutch may have gray feathering and I have seen one or all members of the clutch affected. The chicks are healthily and thriving and the coloration does not appear to interfere with normal growth. As the birds undergo their juvenile molt, the gray feathering seems to be lost resulting in the typically uniform white bird.

It may also be possible that those particular feather follicles underwent some type of "trauma" in early development resulting in abnormal coloration. This is certainly observed in mammals. I have also seen feather color changes result on rare occasions in some traumatically picked birds.

Whatever the reason, at this time it does not appear to be a detrimental change to the chicks.

Interestingly, many aviculturists

have observed scattering red feathering develop in juvenile African Grey chicks. However, this red feathering may or may not be lost and I have observed a number of adult breeding Greys with few to abundant red feathering. Again this appears to be a genetic trait unique to that particular bird.

Darrel K. Styles, DVM

Dripping Springs, Texas

ANSWER #2: At our breeding and research center, we saw a number of cockatoo chicks approximately five years ago with occasional grayish feathers. I cannot recall if they were all Umbrellas or not. At this time we had some beak and feather problems and we wondered if it could be some kind of early sign.

However, those chicks were all followed, and none ever showed any subsequent abnormality. On the subsequent molt, the feathers became white again.

Louise Bauck, DVM

Montreal, Canada

ANSWER #3: I have intermittently noticed a variety of gray feathers on the umbrellas I have hand-fed through the years, and in some of the clients baby birds that have come into the clinic. Many of these birds are very attractive and all have been clinically healthy. During their first molt they have lost the pretty gray feathers and have had them replaced with white feathers. I

have noticed these gray feathers on birds fed a variety of commercial hand feeding foods. The cause is currently unknown, but may be genetic or a combination of genetic and environmental factors. There apparently is some interesting process going on in the feather follicles themselves for this to happen. I don't recall seeing these gray feathers in any other cockatoos. I guess it is like the ugly duckling becoming the swan!

Amy B. Worell, DVM ABVP-Avian

West Hills, CA ➔

Breeding Poicephalus

by Jean (The African Queen) Pattison
Lakeland, FL



There are a few of the Poicephalus I do not breed so I will not address those. It all started about 15 years ago when my dream was to have three pairs of African Greys *Psittacus erithacus erithacus* and three pair of Senegals *Poicephalus senegalus senegalus*. Now, in 1998, my observations and success has led me to believe two things are most important for successful breeding. Whether it's your first pair or 100th pair, aviculture basics always apply — a mature sexed pair, healthy birds, a good diet, and proper husbandry. The two most important things are compatibility and territory.

Preventative Medicine

One thing I firmly believe in and have been practicing for about eight years now, is preventive veterinary medicine. No one knows my flock as well as I do except for my vet. I have been using Margaret Wissman, DVM,

DABVP, Avian Practice, since I started FLOCK management eight years ago.

We annually go through the entire flock. Since doing this, I do not have a year of poor production, dead in shell, low fertility, and of course the infamous FIRES to put out. When deciding any treatment protocols for my birds all decisions are made taking into account seriousness of illness, ease of administration, efficacy of treatment, expense, and long term effects. We can only do this because of her in-depth knowledge of my flock. Her knowledge is gained through blood work, any viral screening that is available, serology, hands-on physical examination, culturing, prophylactic deworming, and doing gross necropsies at no charge. At no charge, how could I not have a necropsy done? And I admire her for the fact she sees this as a way of monitoring my flock, as it should be. I feel my vet strives to know all she can about my flock, and helps carry some of the load in doing so.

Specializing

The advantages of specializing are tremendous. When you have 10 to 15 pairs of the same species, you have a good base for reference. The birds within the species are going to act basically the same.

1. You learn they're incompatible by body language and you have enough resources to switch pairs.

2. When a snake or a mouse is in the nest box or on the roof of a pair, that pair will be acting differently than the rest of the group.

3. You can have a very uniform bank of cages with which to work.

4. When a pair of birds is sitting fluffed up or has eaten very sparingly, you can look down the bank of cages and if all the birds are fluffed up, it's probably nap time. If all birds went sparse on their food, it's probably okay — maybe it was hot or they're all busy working the nest boxes. The reasons will all start to fall into place with time.

5. Specializing in a species gives you concentrated knowledge. What a bird teaches you will probably apply to all of your birds. What a macaw teaches you will probably not apply to your Senegals. When you do research,

that knowledge is applied to 100% of your flock. If you raise 10 different species, that article you read on Macaws applies to only part of your flock.

The Group

First and foremost, I would like to stress what makes a temperament in these birds. I am sure some is in the genes, that is what makes *Poicephalus* basically the same. I do not believe there is a "substantial" difference in temperament between the species. Any differences I am pointing out is just fine tuning. Since we are working with a wild gene pool at this time in aviculture, those genes are set for survival.

As with many domesticated animals, their security, experience, and compatibility help play an important role in starting with a good foundation. The handfeeding and weaning stages also play an important part in helping develop steady birds going into the pet trade. Once a bird goes into a pet situation there should be continued nurturing and guidelines for responsible pet owners and their birds. I do not have a favorite *Poicephalus*, each is a favorite for a different reason

Overall Temperament

The *Poicephalus* species as a whole have an endearing quality. They have the potential to be very good, well socialized pet birds. They are not noisy and raucous nor do they scream for attention. Most are able to talk and some extremely well; some with hundred word vocabularies. Their voice is somewhat computerized, yet very understandable. For the most part they are affectionate and enjoy being cuddled and scratched. They are active birds and need a variety of toys for entertainment. They do extremely well in a one-bird household and the need to find them a "buddy" is not necessary. Working people have had great success even if these birds are left alone for much of the day. Of course, they need interacting time with their keeper on a regular basis. A neglected bird can and will become cage bound and anti social. Most make good first birds and some are wonderful for young adults (10 years and up). Some

are very tolerant of small children, and even friendly and gentle around them.

The Senegal

Poicephalus senegalus

Senegals love you loving them. They are the most common of the little *Poicephalus*. Senegals as pets are very charming, endearing birds. Some can learn large vocabularies and be willing to be handled by anyone. Others will, even if coaxed, learn only a few words. They are very playful, needing a variety of toys and entertainment (swings are one of their favorite toys). By the same token, they are not demanding. Senegals are self entertaining and are quite comfortable in a working mom situation. Intense is a word a lot of people use in describing them. They find mischievous ways of getting into things, almost as if to get your attention. Senegals are very loyal, and they expect the same in return. If a Senegal is allowed to bond to a certain person, he may perceive any one else as a threat to his "intended." They can at this time become possessive and may bite their owner trying to

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drive them to security, or may bite the intruder, trying to drive them away. Some Senegals have been known to all of a sudden freak out and become very fearful. These are being referred to as the "phobic" Senegals. No one seems to know why they just all of a sudden do this, and many behaviorists are searching for the answer. With time and understanding they do seem to overcome it. I recommend them as a great first bird. I do not recommend them for young children.

The Meyer's *Poicephalus meyeri*

They love loving you. The Meyer's parrot is the second most available of the little ones. Meyer's have been described as a shy bird. I don't think they are shy, I believe they are a softer bird. They do not seem to be as athletic as some of the others, more to the easy going, roll-with-the-flow type of bird. Toys should be puzzle type toys, and things to work with and study. Meyer's seem to enjoy working on knots in rawhide for endless amounts of time, or trying to see why the little bell stays in the plastic cage. Meyer's are not the best talkers of the bunch, although some have been known to be outstanding. They seem better at sharing their person than the Senegals. Meyer's radiate love, they are the happiest when they can be loving you. I recommend them for young adults about 10 years old and up, and also for families with small children and common sense.

The Red-bellied *Poicephalus rufiventris*

The clowns of the group. The Red-

bellieds are the third most common of the *Poicephalus*. They are happiest playing and acting silly. Red-bellieds are show-offs, and that includes in front of company. They are one of the only parrots that don't just clam up, and will talk (even jabber) in front of strangers. Of the *Poicephalus* I think they are one of the best talkers. Red-bellieds can play with anything. In a cage with no toys, I believe they would make them up. I have seen them playing and attacking something in their flights and walk over to investigate and find nothing there. They play sometimes just to get your attention, and playing dead is one of their favorite attention getters, as well as standing on their heads. They will do just about anything to get in on the activity. Red-bellieds have gotten a reputation of being on the nippy side. I believe early on we had a lot of insecure breeders and that nervousness became apparent in the babies. Red-bellieds had a harder time coming through quarantine, and were pretty nervous birds. I think the breeders now are long time captives and have finally started to settle down. I do not see as much nippiness as I once did. I recommend them for adult families, not small children.

The Brown-headed *Poicephalus cryptoxanthus*

The blind date — not much on looks but what a great personality. Brown-headeds are very close to the Meyer's in personality. If you are happy with a plain looking bird, and don't have to have all the flash and color, you can't go wrong with a Brown-headed parrot. I have heard reports they can be similar to the Senegal in their possessiveness, but I have not found this to be the case. Their talking ability is somewhere between that of a Meyer's and a Senegal. I recommend them for young adults, families with small children and common sense.

The Jardine's *Poicephalus gularis*

The best characteristics of the Amazon parrot — in African. Jardine's are the Amazons of the Africans. Plain and simple, they just love being alive.

They live for life. They play constantly, and can entertain themselves for endless hours. They love being cuddled, and scratched, hopping around, chasing things and swinging. When they know they have been bad they have this little John Wayne walk, kind of sideways, and look at you with a cocked head. One of their big drawbacks is playing dead, takes years off my life. Most seem to enjoy being on their backs, on the bottom of the cage, in the food cup, or on their perch while holding onto the cage with one foot. They can be fairly good talkers, the voice quality can be almost as good as a Grey, but they usually don't use the good voice — more bird like. I recommend them for families, and young adults.

The Cape *Poicephalus robustus*

The gentle giant. Cape parrots are a very gentle affectionate bird. Some liken it to a cockatoo, without the demands of the cockatoo. They are fairly quiet and unobtrusive when kept as a pet. Breeders on the other hand, can be very vocal and almost obnoxious. They are capable of entertaining themselves with the simplest of things, much the same as a Meyer's, and also swing and play like the Senegals. I have found their talking ability to be limited to a few words and phrases. Perhaps because of their bigger size they seem to be very deliberate and purposeful in their movements and mannerisms. Although I do sell a few of mine as pets, at this time in aviculture, I believe they should be put in other breeding situations.

All of the *Poicephalus* group are very good breeders. Good solid pairs can produce nine to 12 chicks a season. This has been proven with almost all of the *Poicephalus*, and I feel the Capes will fall right in place with the genus once more work is done with this species.

Caging

I think with the Africans, the size of the cage is not as important a factor as it is with some of the other species of birds. We all hear and read about the two by two by two foot cubes and the 12 foot flights and they both seem to

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work. If you have the space, time and money, by all means give them the best. Over the years I have observed the biggest isn't always the best. For myself, personally, space is a major factor.

I have noted that stability and calmness changes with the length of cage. This is based on how they act when I'm around. Their attitude doesn't seem to change when in a small or large cage when I'm not around. I have attached small cages to large flights and have seen that the Poicephalus would spend all their time in the smaller cage. They would only enter the larger flight to eat. This has been the case with domestic as well as wild-caughts.

Some of my Senegals in three foot long flights still thrash when I'm feeding, even after three and one half years. Senegals in four foot flights settle down in a couple of months. The height off the ground seems to be the most comfortable at four feet. I do have a dog, which may be a factor. I used to say they would get used to the dog, but production increased when the dog was more confined, and didn't have free run.

I use two by twos and two by fours instead of natural branches because they are easier to replace. They chew up the perches so fast that in a matter of days, sometimes hours, they are no longer of uniform size.

My feeding dishes are on the same end as the nest box and placed high. If the male isn't a good father, I believe the hen will feel more secure hopping out and eating on her own. Water dishes are very large, on the floor and at the opposite end of the cage. When I'm at the foot of the cage changing water, I can observe the nest box area where the birds normally retreat. Occasionally there may be an obstruction to the opening or a snake may be in the box, upsetting the birds and preventing their ordinary retreat. Since their ordinary reaction is interrupted, I am alerted to check that nest box for the source of trouble. Again, knowing your birds and their ordinary patterns can avert disaster. Water dishes are large so the hen can saturate herself before going back to nest. They do this quite frequently as the eggs near

hatching.

I recommend cages be made of $\frac{1}{2}$ x 1 inch welded wire. For African Greys and Capes the size could be 3 x 3 x 5-6 feet. For Timnehs $2\frac{1}{2}$ x $2\frac{1}{2}$ x 5 ft. A good size for Jardine's is $2\frac{1}{2}$ x $2\frac{1}{2}$ x 4 feet. For smaller Poicephalus 2 x 2 x 4 feet.

Nest Boxes

Any type will do, with some forethought. Again, specializing helps. Africans sit tight. They keep their babies warm and quiet. They are also nervous birds. With this in mind, I ruled out "grandfather" because of jumping in and smashing eggs. "Grandfather horizontal" wasn't a good choice because they throw out the bedding and leaving no cushion for the babies. I opted for the "L" shaped box.

I use a 12 inch L for the African Greys; 10 inch L for the Timnehs, Jardine's and Capes; eight inch L for all the other smaller Poicephalus.

I fill the base of the box about one half to three quarters full of pine, L/M brand of small animal bedding, a good part of cypress mulch, and a little 5%

Sevin dust. I tried all kinds of exotic stuff and it didn't seem to matter.

Number One in Importance: Compatibility

Body Language and Behavior are different when you are around compared to when you are NOT around; when you have only one or two pair compared to six, 10 or 20 pairs.

I use the term compatible, not bonded. We all know the birds act differently when they sense our presence. They will sit together, hang from the top together or jump in the nest box. A truly compatible pair share. When one is sitting on the bottom chewing a nut or twig and the other joins in, they share. They will pass the nut back and forth, taking it out of each other's mouths. If they are bickering with neighbors, often the other joins in. When they are not compatible, they act rather busy. When the other joins to share the nut or twig, the first one drops it and flies off. When one walks toward the other, the first one simply moves over or flies out of its way. These are not aggressive or

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defensive moves, as you may expect, these are very subtle gestures that say "You're not my favorite bird."

I recommend separating the pair. If, indeed, they are aggressive, separate immediately. Pocephalus can and do kill one another.

Jardine's males always herd their hens toward the back of the cage when I'm around. The male also positions himself between his mate and me, always. I have one pair that only breed twice a year and they don't feed their babies well. They just aren't as good as my other breeders. When comparing, I realize he doesn't protect his mate as the others do. I know this pair isn't truly compatible and I'm lucky they even breed. Jardine's, just as they come into season, will have a color change of the white eye ring. The eye ring, normally being ivory to flesh color, will take on a yellow tint. At the time near egg laying, the eye ring turns an orange color.

Senegals usually don't go in their nest box until breeding season. They both work the breeder box.

Meyer's are nest box birds but the male is the one that does all the digging. The hen will pace back and forth at the entrance hole while he is working. He will appear, the hen will go in briefly. Upon exiting she tells him how she wants the furniture moved and he jumps right back in and works some more. Many people call and tell me they are going to get their Meyer's re-sexed because the "supposed" male is the one always in the box.

Red-bellieds barely make a nest. One day all of a sudden there is a nest, sort of, and a few days later, eggs.

Jardine's and Capes work the box together.

When you have only one or two

pairs, you don't know if you have a compatibility problem. Please don't think they are compatible if you only see them when *they know* you are around.

Bonded Pairs

Bonded is not synonymous to compatibility. A lot of brokers and breeders sell pairs as bonded. Bonded has very little to do with breeding. Two birds of the same sex can be bonded. Your bird can be bonded to you. My husband is bonded to his motorcycle, TV or me, whichever happens to be around at the time. An incompatible but bonded pair will always have a more dominant bird while the other is submissive — a very stressful situation.

Number Two in Importance: Territory

How does a bird perceive territory? Perhaps as impenetrable space. What needs to be done to fulfill that perception? Provide security.

We really don't know what a bird perceives as territory. Thanks to PBS, National Geographic Society and others, we know an animal will fight to its death protecting its territory. Usually, with animals other than birds, the male is the protector. With birds, it seems they both get into the act. Anyone living in Florida has seen mockingbirds in action. The hen must feel secure. Nothing, including you, will get her babies. If that security is not met, she will abandon or kill her eggs or babies. The male must feel he is providing that security and he works very hard at it.

I'm sure there is a magic measurement for space between cages. I don't have the acreage so I've opted for partitions. I now use full partitions between all cages, and have switched from wood to space-age plastic as partition material. My Senegals and Meyer's are the most vicious and determined when it comes to fighting with neighbors. If there is so much as a quarter inch hole in their partition, they will work all day trying to get their neighbor. Consequently, they aren't breeding or tending to their mate while she's brooding. My Red-bellieds will bicker and breed, bicker and feed. My Jardine's could not care less when it comes to breeding. They go crazy when the eggs hatch, trying

to drive the neighbors away. Capes seem very territorial, they display almost like an Amazon.


Location may play an important factor here, but I no longer put them in the darkest corner. Having all Africans may be an alternative to location. They breed out in the middle of my yard, even in a high people-traffic area.

Courtship and Mating

Each species has its own dance and ritual which lasts about 10 minutes if the pair is really serious about copulating. Once the ritual is over, copulation takes place. The male usually mounts the hen, but not always. Some hens do the mounting and some times they take turns. Copulation lasts about 10 minutes. I have seen them last as long as 20 minutes. They are very slow and deliberate, with the male feeding the hen much of the time. This can go on for a month before any eggs are laid. Two to three weeks is about the norm.

Now comes the hard part, do you or don't you? If you've done your homework, you already know the answer. You know when the first egg was laid (you're checking every day). She doesn't get serious about brooding till the second or third egg. Add 28 days after the first egg for the hatch date. Add three weeks for the pulling date. O.K., now peek. Take babies. I really do that for some of my birds. I have some pairs that let me look in and even touch their babies. Some pairs jump out of the box when they hear the gate open.

When I check nest boxes, I always tap three times on the box first. This avoids pure panic. A lot of the birds simply walk to the other side of the box, some leave the box. I have heard many stories of mutilation, abandonment and killing. I firmly believe this is the fault of the breeder. Whether it is messing with them too much or setting up incompatible pairs, we are in charge here. They fight to the death defending their territory, then they kill their babies. What's wrong with this picture? When the parents are feeding babies, I feed them as much corn-on-the-cob as they will eat. I feed their regular seed mix, also a cooked beans, rice, and corn mix.



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I have had clutches of Senegals, Meyer's, Brown-headed's, and Jardine's, sexed, going on a year of age and found them from maturing to sexually mature. Eye color on the Poicephalus is no indicator of age. Three month old Meyer's, Senegals and Red-bellieds have had adult eye color. It changed the minute they went outside. Three year old Senegals had juvenile (not baby) eye color. When they went outside it changed in a matter of weeks.

Parenting

I think the African birds are some of the best parents. As a general rule, a hen with her first clutch is constantly with her eggs and babies and a little nervous. You keep thinking she died in the nest box because you never see her. As she becomes a seasoned breeder, she becomes so relaxed that you even wonder if the eggs are warm. She really gets her act together. This is also reflected in the babies. As she becomes more relaxed, the babies become more relaxed. After you have fed five or six clutches from one pair, the difference in temperament of the babies is incredible. African birds will leave their eggs a few days prior to hatching. In my determination to not feed day-ones, and my inexperience early on, I didn't think a thing of feeling ice cold eggs two to four days before hatching. As a result I never pulled to incubate. I have found this is a normal thing, the eggs hatched with no problem. In speculating, I wonder if the babies need a cool-down period to avoid shocking them once hatched.

Pulling Chicks


I pull my babies at three weeks, barring unforeseen circumstances. The parents can keep eggs warm when the temperature drops as low as 28 degrees, babies, too, if they are young. I pull after the evening meal when they are all full of parent food. I leave them overnight and feed in the morning when they are good and hungry. You have to watch though, the babies don't cry a lot. Africans are very easy to feed. If you keep them fed too well, and don't let them get hungry, their feeding response can stop.

When pulling babies I have seen a pattern in temperament change with

regard to how traumatic the pull was. I have had consistently sweet babies from pairs that normally leave their nest box at the time of pulling. Those same pairs have had more traumatic pulls, when they didn't leave the nest box and I had to move growling parents to get their babies from under them. This I believe has affected the babies temperament, causing them to be less sweet than prior clutches. I believe *how* babies are pulled can affect them for the rest of their lives. I now plan pulling carefully and make it as problem free as possible. Knowing this ahead of time may make it possible for the handfeeder to work a little harder to compensate during the hand-rearing time.

Sibling Aggression

The Poicephalus seem to have a sibling aggression problem, with Jardine's being the worst, Meyer's next and less with the Senegals and Red-bellieds. What generally happens is when the babies are getting older, you have one that is a little nipper or a little more skittish than the others and

you can't figure out why. You gave them all the same level of care. The following scenario is what happened: (This is a very subtle display. If you don't know about it, you may miss it). As the handfeeder walks into the room, the babies run to greet her. In this frenzy, two of the three babies peck at the third one. After a few days of this conditioning, two babies run to greet you and the third one does back flips. To carry this a little further, I've had some babies sexed and found it is usually clutches with an uneven balance of sexes. If there were more males than females, the females were picked on. If the ratio went the other way, then the males were picked on. Is this a way of driving the opposite sex from the flock to prevent inbreeding? Is nature doing some very complicated things or are they really simple and we just make them complicated? It can't be easy. One very basic thing nature gave us that we don't use is our GUT FEELING. Listen to your birds. Hear what they are telling you. Listen with your *heart*. 

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