Hints for Hand Raising Baby Parrots

by Kathy VerBeck
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The author serves dinner to a young macaw. The syringe is about 30 cc. full.

The following tid-bits are the result of much trial and error, much good advice, and much plain old experience. I hope the data will be helpful to you who hand-raise baby parrots.

First, I have three basic formulas each to be used at the appropriate time.

**Formula #1 “Starter”**
- 1/2 cup boiling water
- 1 tbsp. powdered milk
- 2 tbsp. Gerbers Baby Rice Cereal
- 1 tbsp. creamed corn (baby food)

Mix ingredients together and feed at the proper temperature. (Test it on your wrist — if it burns you it is too hot.) This formula is quite thin and is the first meal I feed any young bird. The ingredients are nourishing but also easy on the bird’s digestive system. If all is well after three feedings I advance the bird to Formula #2.

**Formula #2 “Graduated”**
- 3/4 cup Baby Rice Cereal
- 1/2 cup High Protein Cereal
- 1 tsp. Super Preen
- 2 drops of liquid vitamins (in the water)
- enough boiling boiling water to make a mixture of medium consistency
- 1/3 jar of baby food (fruit, vegetables, or chicken)

Allow the mixture to cool to feeding temperature. Add water to thin if necessary.

If this more complex formula should disagree with the chick the wheat is the most likely culprit. Feed Formula 2 for at least eight feedings while keeping an eye on the chicks crop and stools. Chicken is a good meat to use because it is low in fat and hypo-allergenic.
Formula #3 "Regular"
This is the same as Formula 2 except the rice is replaced by high-protein cereal. Twice a week I use Cycle I puppy chow instead of chicken for a different type of protein. Once a day I add "Calcium-Phosphorus with Trace Minerals" from Nutritional Life to aid the chick’s bone and nerve development.

Grits: To duplicate the parent bird's feeding of some hard grains I occasionally use Quaker White Grits in the formula. The grits are mixed in just prior to feeding. This makes a rather rough-textured food that seems to stimulate the crop and help avoid "crop sloughing" a complication probably caused by too much too soft food. This rough formula is made a little thinner than normal so the raw grits won't absorb all of the water in the crop and cause a compacted crop. I sometimes use chunky style peanut butter also for its rough texture.

Gatorade: Once a week I use Gatorade in place of part of the water in the formula. Use just enough water to make a very thick mixture. Then add enough Gatorade to bring the mix to the proper consistency. Do not boil Gatorade lest it lose its electrolytes which are very beneficial to many internal functions. Electrolytes are such that a chick uses only what it needs and eliminates the rest.

Since I've included Gatorade and Super Preem in my diets I've noticed a marked improvement in the sheen of my bird's feathers. Every two weeks I even use Gatorade in place of water with my breeder birds. They love it but it sometimes makes their stools rather loose.

Tea: The caffeine in tea serves as a strong stimulant that is sometimes necessary. A case in point is Friday, a very strong baby cockatiel abandoned by his parents. When I found him he was cold, stiff, starved, and barely breathing. I instantly put him on the heating pad and prepared a mixture of strong tea and baby rice cereal. Luckily the baby still had the will to live. I got a few drops of tea/rice in him and his respirations went from ten to twenty per minute, he opened his eyes and tried to stand. With his renewed vigor I was able to give him 7 cc's of Formula 1. Eventually the stimulant wore off and the chick was still too weak to eat. The tea/rice routine was used for two days during which the baby received enough Formula 1 to regain him his strength. Without the "kick" of the caffeine I don't think I could have pulled Friday through.
Loose Stools: There is a difference between loose stools and diarrhea. Certain fruits and liquids can cause loose stools. If the condition actually develops into diarrhea I use three parts water to one part Donnegel (banana flavor) and feed it for six to eight hours then use plain water for eighteen hours. This routine is repeated every twenty four hours until the stools are almost normal. Don’t overtreat lest the medication give the bird constipation which is harder on the bird than the diarrhea. Remember, if a little is good a little more is not.

Bacterial Diarrhea: A proper balance of bacteria is perfectly normal, indeed, essential to life. An imbalance can cause problems. The only sane way to combat this problem is to have a veterinarian do cultures and sensitivity tests to determine which antibiotic to treat with. A bird treated with antibiotics should be fed natural, plain yogurt which will replenish many good bacteria that the medicine killed. Hand-fed baby birds always have rather loose wet stools so the above remedies don’t apply to them.

The Feeding Syringe: I use a 60 cc cather-tip irrigating syringe. They are plastic and disposable but I can get weeks of use out of each one. When the rubber plunger dries out use a light vegetable oil on it to make it slide easier. You can buy these syringes at any surgical supply company and at some pharmacies. Each baby I’m feeding has its own syringe to help prevent the spread of disease.

These syringes are marked in cc’s so I know exactly how much food a baby takes each feeding and each day. There is no guesswork. When the chicks go on their crash diet I know immediately. If the bird becomes sick and “goes off his feed” I can measure it in cc’s.

To use the syringe, put the warm food in a coffee mug; place the syringe tip in and draw the plunger back to about 30 cc’s or measure it in cc’s. To use the syringe, put the warm food in a coffee mug; place the syringe tip in and draw the plunger back to about 30 cc’s or measure it in cc’s. To use the syringe, put the warm food in a coffee mug; place the syringe tip in and draw the plunger back to about 30 cc’s or measure it in cc’s. To use the syringe, put the warm food in a coffee mug; place the syringe tip in and draw the plunger back to about 30 cc’s or measure it in cc’s. To use the syringe, put the warm food in a coffee mug; place the syringe tip in and draw the plunger back to about 30 cc’s or measure it in cc’s. To use the syringe, put the warm food in a coffee mug; place the syringe tip in and draw the plunger back to about 30 cc’s or measure it in cc’s.

Housing: At first my baby birds live in cardboard boxes with a heating pad under the box and a towel over two thirds of the box. Naked babies must have a temperature between 90 and 100 degrees. Semi-feathered chicks need 85 to 90 degrees. Almost feathered birds get along at 75 to 85 degrees. If the chick shivers or puffs up, slowly increase the heat. If the chick pants and stretches its wings out it is too warm. Slowly lower the heat. When the birds are old enough to take off the heat permanently, I wean them slowly by turning off the heat during the days. Eventually I leave it off even at night.

For a private little nest of sorts I put a shoe box inside the large box. The shoe box has one end cut out and is put upside down right on the floor of the large box so the baby can have his feet and chest right on the floor next to the heat. It also keeps the heat close all around him. If he becomes too warm he can leave the nest box and sleep on the floor of the large box. If he is still too warm (and if he is big enough) he can crawl on top of the shoe box. Thus he has a range of three temperatures to choose from.

When the chick is about five weeks old I put a few branches on the floor of the box to give the chicks something to play with. This play helps develop foot-mouth coordination and strengthens the grip. When the chick reaches about seven weeks of age I push a branch through the box to form a perch about three inches above the floor. This, of course, gets them started perching. It also helps to keep the chicks from dragging their rapidly growing tail feathers through the mess on the floor. Eventually the young parrots will begin...
to chew up their cardboard box. That is the
time to transfer them to a regular cage. (By
this time they should not need heat.) To
make the transition less traumatic, I put
their sleeping box in the new cage. At pres­
ent I am feeding two five-month old
macaws that still sleep in their little boxes.
Just their long tail feathers stick out.

The Crash Diet: When the time comes
for a baby bird to leave its nest it has too
much baby fat to fly. Nature has program­
med the fledglings to lose weight fast. This
is perfectly normal but still rather alarming
when you are hand feeding a bird. At
about eight to nine weeks (for cockatoos
and Amazons) the babies just quit eating.
This “slimming” process lasts for a
predetermined number of days. It is not
regulated by the amount of weight lost.
Since my hand fed birds will be pets and
never fly anyway I beef up their diet with
high caloric Sustical during the crash diet.
This way my chicks lose only about half as
much weight as they would without the
supplement.

Wing Clipping: About the time the slim­
ming process is over the birds are ready to
fly. I believe their wings should be clipped.
This prevents them from crashing into
windows and mirrors or flying out the
door to be lost forever. My clipped birds
have more freedom than the full flighted
ones. They can sit on the sun deck, take
showers outdoors, go for walks with us,
and even visit the neighbors. Clipped birds
are also more dependent upon their owner
and this makes a nicer pet.

Well, your hand fed baby bird ought to
just about be on his own by now. When it
is moved from its box to the cage you
ought to supply it with lots of soft food,
i.e., fruit, vegetables, and bread. Your
regular mixture of seed can be added and
gradually the bird will become indepen­
dent of hand feeding. I cut out the morn­
ing and noon feedings first but I feed the
evening meal for as long as the bird will
take it. I feel that this makes for a better
pet.

In closing, I have one final tid-bit or bit
of advice that is most important. Find a
good veterinarian. I mean a good bird vet­
erinarian. Don’t take it for granted that
the first vet you meet knows about birds.
Ask questions. Ask other bird people
which vet they use. Develop a good rap­
port with your vet and don’t hesitate to use
him when a problem arises.

The above hints and methods have
worked well for me. It is my sincerest wish
that they will serve you equally well. Any­
one with comments or questions regarding
hand feeding may get in touch with me by
contacting the WATCHBIRD editor.