Hand-feeding Pigeons and Doves

by Jan Parrott-Holden

Vancouver, Washington

Dave's note was emphatic. "I will not hand-feed a bird. That's why there are big birds — to feed the little birds, dumbie!!"

I've saved that note for quite awhile, laughing over it each time I mix up a fresh supply of mash to hand-feed a nestling or two. True, Dave's words hold a grain of truth. I'm sure nature intended the big birds raise the little ones. And yet, you don't have to be in this hobby very long before you realize this is just another rule with many, many exceptions.

Dave tells me his pigeons number in the hundreds. (Who keeps an exact count when your loft reaches that size?) Me, I keep anywhere from 30-60 birds, depending upon the time of year. A lot of my birds are practically pets, riding upon my shoulder as I clean out nest boxes and replenish feed and water. We share a close association, leaving few surprises. Indeed, only upon one occasion did I find a bird whose lineage seemed to know about it. In short, if the big ones muffed their parental duties I always seemed to know about it.

Now some breeders won't pinch-hit under any circumstances. I don't condemn their view, just prefer mine. An unattended squab elicits more sympathy from me than a dozen squalling infants in a hospital. And I've found the display of gratitude from a rescued bird to be far more satisfying than that of a human child. Eccentric I suppose. But those of you who've reared one bird or another will certainly corroborate my testimony. Won't you?

Let's suppose you have a baby pigeon to feed. You may have found it in your own loft or, like the good Samaritan, discovered a stranded feral tossed from its nest. What's the first thing you do? Well, if it happens to be very young (no pin feathers) you will have to get it indoors immediately. I have kept four and five day old squabs in a brooder at about 90° until they sprouted pinfeathers. After that time period a room temperature of 70° should suffice. Warmer is not the biggest problem. Nourishment is really the stickler. You mustn't throw in the towel because you haven't a beak. A trip to your local pharmacy or a good department store should take care of locating the necessary tools for feeding a young bird. A pigeon or dove from about four days of age can be fed easily through a medicine syringe, like the type used in dispensing medications to children and invalids. You will want to locate some 1/4" rubber tubing (the type used by fishermen to secure weights to their line). Purchase several inches, it's inexpensive and fits snugly on the tip of the syringe. While some recommend aquarium hose as a substitute, I don't
advocate its use. Not only is it stiff, but inserted improperly, it could seriously injure the bird. As an added precaution, I suggest a tiny drop of magic glue to reinforce the bond between the tube and syringe tip. Nothing is more frustrating than having the hose fly off into the bird's crop along with the mash.

Well, now that you have the equipment, you need something to feed. Even if you can't throw together a culinary masterpiece for your family, you can create mash for a baby pigeon. The simple way is to soak regular pigeon pellets in water, whip them to smoothness in the blender or by hand, and add a few vitamins in either powder form (Vionate, Brewer's Yeast, etc.) or through a liquid like “8 in 1.” Whichever direction you take, the end result should be as smooth as bottled ketchup and not any thicker. For younger birds you may actually water this down a bit for ease in digestion.

If you have other birds to hand-feed you might opt for something different. The following recipe will feed young pigeons, as well as a host of cage-birds and can actually be frozen until needed (it keeps pretty well in the refrigerator for up to three days).

6 monkey biskets (powderize)
3 cups water
2 cups oats
Mix these three ingredients well then place in a pan.
Add: 4 cups water
⅔ cup Wheat Hearts Cereal
⅔ cup Malto Meal
1 heaping Tablespoon peanut butter
Cooking over medium heat, stirring constantly. The mixture should reach a thickness similar to ketchup before it is removed from the heat.

Finally add:
1 4½ ounce jar applesauce babyfood
1 4½ ounce jar Garden Vegetable babyfood
1 4½ ounce babyfood jar of water
Mix well. Prior to feeding, you may wish to supplement with powdered vitamins (grated cuttlebone is good if your recipe is for cage birds).

This recipe makes a large quantity that can be divided into freezer bags and thawed as needed. I like this aspect, as the pigeon pellet mash MUST be made fresh daily. Always offer the mash slightly warmed for young babies and room temperature for older birds.

Any squab of more than nine days old can survive adequately on two feedings a day. Of course, if time is not a big consideration three smaller meals are even

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Vitamins, pigeon pellets, rubber tubing and a couple of good syringes enable nearly anyone to feed a young, abandoned squab.

These young pigeons are taught to drink water from a cup.

Some pigeons are easy for one to feed.

Other pigeons are more than one person can adequately handle. Author resorts to a "strangle hold."

better. Be careful when introducing the tube, that you pass it over the air passage (a small hole in the bird's tongue), gently work the tube down the throat before administering the food. This way you will be certain to get the mash into the crop and not the lungs.

After a few days of this routine you might find your squab actually opening its mouth for the syringe, which shows that they adapt quickly to methods that differ greatly from the way nature intended they eat (squabs normally place their beak inside that of the parent and suck the regurgitated food from their mouth).

By the time your bird is two or three weeks of age it will take water from a cup, while still relying upon you for the main course. Be patient. By the time it is four or five weeks of age, you can provide a selection of small seeds (say wheat, millet, maybe canary seed), and it will peck about. It may miss more than it gets, but if you harden yourself to feed only in the evening, laziness on the bird's part will be overcome by need. This is part and parcel of the weaning process.

Maybe it's a good thing I haven't birds numbering in the hundreds, like Dave. If that were the case, I'd probably share his philosophy on hand-feeding. But I've had great fun with the few youngsters I've raised, which makes keeping my numbers small a necessity. I guess for me, hand-feeding is just another intriguing facet to aviculture.
Note: In this article I stress feeding birds of four days of age and older. Normally birds that are weak prior to this development may prove too much for a novice in terms of the physical feeding process (this is not to say that it is impossible, just far more risky). 

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