

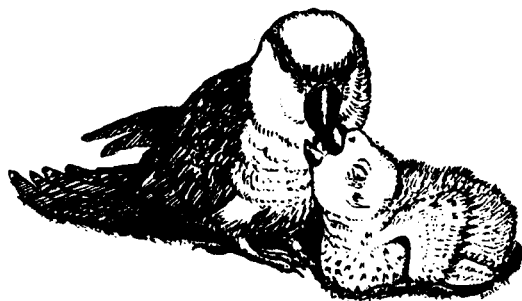
# Considerations in Parent Rearing

Roundtable Discussion at AFA Convention 1996

## Participants

*Eb Cravens, Hawaii • Rosemary Low, England*  
*Laney S. Rickman, Texas • Dale R. Thompson, California*

## PART II



### Question and Answer Segment

**Question # 1:** A macaw breeder made the statement that in her experience the first clutch of the season is noticeably stronger, healthier and larger. She suggested that one should hold back the first clutch for the parents to raise. Because it would take that pair out of the breeding season, the breeder might select an individual pair or an individual year to do this for the future of aviculture.

**Answer:** (DALE THOMPSON) At Aviculture Institute in the 1980s we had several hundred pairs of Cockatiels. We always held back the first clutch for future breeders as this clutch proved to be the biggest and best.

Your question is very interesting. This possibility had not crossed my mind until you stated it. I think we were saying to wait till the last clutch to get some babies. But if one is that progressively minded, I feel holding back first clutch babies is a fabulous idea. You may, however, lose out on a second clutch, depending upon the species and the time span it takes to rear their young in the nest.

**Question # 2:** If you have a pair of birds that were not parent-raised, will they ever be able to raise babies and will they be responsible parents? Or is that instinct lost from that generation on?

**Answer:** (ROSEMARY LOW) There are so many instances of handraised birds

that make perfect parents and their young likewise. A lot does depend on the species because some imprint more easily than others.

**Answer:** (DALE THOMPSON) I agree. It really does depend upon the species. *Pionus*, and *Aratinga* conures and many Amazons, even from day one, often never have a problem parent-rearing. It is their temperament in captivity. We are having 3rd generation *Pionus*, handfed all the way down the line, that are now parent-rearing. If you have a handfed parent bird and you are not having problems, take the risk. Let them take a try at feeding the babies. If you botch it at three weeks, you can regret it, but you haven't lost the gold mine, meaning the parent birds. They will learn from their mistakes. We did this with a pair of Sun Conures that probably were third generation handfeds, maybe even from day-one. They did not know how to feed well. We allowed them to learn. Even if it is with juvenile or first time breeders, they are not going to be as good as my 12 year old pair that simply pumps out the babies. They have to learn. Give them that chance and they will become some of the best feeders you have in your parrot collection.

**Question # 3:** If you have a pair of birds which for many years have had their babies removed after two to three weeks of feeding, and you decide to leave the babies with the parents, will

they raise them?

**Answer:** (ROSEMARY LOW) I would suggest that if they are good feeders up to two to three weeks, there is absolutely no reason why they shouldn't feed them to fledging. You can always pull them later if there is a problem. Just monitor it closely.

**Answer:** (DALE THOMPSON) They will generally feed all the way. The only problem I have had is with birds that repeatedly feather pick their young. You can work with this problem by placing more material in the nest such as chewable twigs to keep them occupied so they won't pluck. The fledging stage is also a critical time for parent-reared birds. There should be plenty of perches in place at the time the babies exit the hole. Without them, the babies have a chance of banging into the walls and even breaking their necks.

**Question # 4:** I have Senegals who lay fertile eggs but don't hatch them out. I've lost many eggs so I started pulling them for artificial incubation and they hatch. Can we take the babies now and put them back with their parents?

**Answer:** (ROSEMARY LOW) What I have done on quite a few occasions is to replace the fertile eggs with plastic eggs or even with infertile eggs that you have filled with some hard substance. Meanwhile the fertile eggs are either in an incubator or temporarily under some other species. When they pip, you return them to the first nest. With Blue-throated Conures, which are notorious for egg breaking, I used this system very successfully. When the pipping eggs were returned to the nest they were reared. That was the only way we got the Blue-throated Conures to hatch.

**Question # 5:** It has not been mentioned that one solution to the difficulties with the parents feeding out two chicks of unequal size, or just not feeding well, is to do supplemental feedings. How does the panel respond?

**Answer:** (EB CRAVENS) We've been doing that with our pairs for years. Rather than taking the babies away just because they are not being fed, you give a little formula to the day-one or

day-two baby. You monitor it. When it gets stronger and can beg louder for food and can bob stronger, quite often the parents will pick up the slack and begin feeding them.

There is another thing that you should be aware of. I learned from Dale Thompson that when I go into a clutch and find, for example, a very large Amazon baby and a very small one that hatched maybe five days later, my tendency used to be to take the small one into the house to feed because it was not being fed. The correct method, as I understand it and we've been using it ever since, is to take the larger baby. That one has a better start in life. It is going to be easier for you to feed. Let the mother feed the small one. She has already fed a small one to get it large. She'll feed the small chick. Whenever possible, try to put the responsibility for the parenting back on the parents.

**Answer:** (ROSEMARY LOW) I'd like to add something to that. I have also practiced supplementary feeding but it is absolutely essential to know the temperament of the pair in question. With Moluccan Cockatoos there is no way you can do it. The stress involved in trying to get a chick out from under the parents is horrific. And also you cannot do it with certain female Amazons who are so aggressive that they would be likely to turn on the chick and slash it if you keep trying to remove it. So, the most important thing is to know the female involved.

**Answer:** (DALE THOMPSON) When you do supplemental feeding, make sure all of the formula goes into the crop of the chick; don't spill it over the outside of the chick. If the parents are aware of some foreign substance, there is a risk that they might abandon it.

Another thing that has not been mentioned a great deal is fostering. It may be your last resort if you want more parenting done on your babies. You can also do a lot of cross-fostering to other like species.

**Answer:** (LANEY RICKMAN) One other suggestion that has been tremendously helpful to me is a lock-out door on the nest box. My wild-caught pair of Blue-throated Macaws is extremely aggressive. I have learned progressive-

ly from trial and error that if I lure them out of the box, and slide the door across to block their hole, I can easily inspect the nest, monitor the babies, etc. For example, at three weeks of age, I remove the babies long enough to weigh, band, swab for cultures, and blood sex them. I put them back into the nest box and open the door; the parents never saw them gone and I have not had a problem. The lock-out door is critical to the success of my parent rearing program. There is no way that I would risk the health of my babies because of what I am doing fooling around in their box. This has been a major breakthrough in our breeding program.

**Question # 6:** When I started breeding, people told me that for pets you should pull the chicks before their eyes open. I pull my Green-winged Macaws at three weeks and my Militaries as late as six weeks and they ate just fine. My veterinarian said I was lucky that they would eat. My question regarding imprinting is this. How does the amount of time babies spend with the parents affect their ability to be a good pet?

**Answer:** (EB CRAVENS) Sometimes if you leave them "too long," a chick may act "squirrely" and be difficult to feed. I've never had a situation where the birds won't eat. I have had situations where it takes more time and more of my training to get that baby in the right frame of mind. Maybe I feed it under a towel so it cannot see me. The temperature of the formula may be more critical. But I've never had one not eat. It is just that they are harder to feed.

**Answer:** (ROSEMARY LOW) I've had occasion to take macaws that were older than that, probably nine to 10 weeks. You might have a problem the first two to three days, but you can overcome that by just wrapping the bird in a towel. I've actually found that they tame down and make just as good a pet as those that were hand raised from a very early age.

But with some other species, *Eclectus* for example, that may not be the case. If you have to take *Eclectus* just before fledging, they can be really difficult to feed and they never really tame down to

the degree of young that are hand raised from three to four weeks.

**Question #7:** Am I going to have problems in closed-banding babies at the proper age and putting them back in the box? Will the parents recognize something shiny there and injure the babies by trying to remove the band?

**Answer:** (ROSEMARY LOW) I have banded about 100 species which were being parent-reared and with only one species did I ever have a problem.. It was the small Spectacled Parrotlet which is notorious for this problem. But with all the other larger birds—macaws, cockatoos, Amazons, lories and parakeets—there has never been any problem whatsoever.

**Answer:** (LANEY RICKMAN) I have had no problems banding babies at all. I know of one breeder who parent-raises Scarlet Macaws. He colors the bands with black Marks-a-Lot so the parents do not notice the shiny metal. I didn't even do that. All I did was lock the parents out of the box so they could not see what I was doing. I have never had a problem.

**Question #8:** When you are parent-rearing, do you make any changes in the diet for the parents?

**Answer:** (ROSEMARY LOW) I think a lot depends upon the species. For example, we used to provide the Amazons with a special rearing food consisting of whole grain bread, carrot and boiled egg. It was an excellent aid to rearing their young. Individual species do vary, and they will change their eating habits when they have chicks. So you have to experiment and find out what that particular pair needs.

**Answer:** (EB CRAVENS) It takes a tremendous amount of fresh soft food to keep those parents packing their babies full of food, especially as they get older. I feed three to four times a day when my pairs are feeding babies.

**Answer:** (LANEY RICKMAN) One of the best bits of advice I got was from Bob Berry who said, "You listen with your eyes." Watch what they eat. They know what they need at certain stages of feeding their babies. Give them a broad variety of food. With the Blue-throated Macaws, when the babies are very tiny, for about two weeks all the

parents eat is corn, corn and more corn. I will feed three ears of fresh corn on-the-cob a day, plus frozen kernels with wheat bread in a bowl to make it very easy for the hen. Suddenly, when the babies get bigger, The parents go to almonds. The hen will eat 20 to 30 almonds per feeding. That was such helpful advice to me because now I know when I see something disappear, I provide it in abundance. They will vary their diet as necessary to accommodate the chicks' growth at that point.

**Answer:** (DALE THOMPSON) The most important thing is variety of food items. You'll be surprised to see that with the development of the babies, the parents will eat foods that you have tried to get them to eat for years. You'll see them switch to broccoli, etc., and quadruple the volume. So be sure to provide a tremendous variety of foods. It is incredible how much they can consume.

**Answer:** (ROSEMARY LOW) Perhaps for those who do not have experience in parent-rearing, we should emphasize just how much food the parents really need and a minimum of three feedings per day. That's extremely important.

**Question # 9:** I've had a pair of wild-caught Meyer's Parrots for several years. They always lay three eggs, two of which are fertile and hatch. If I leave the chicks in the nest beyond three weeks, the male will kill the oldest chick and attack the hen and viciously try to kill her. I have moved this pair to several different locations thinking there was a territorial problem. I have given them more privacy, more feed, lots of fresh food and nothing has worked. What do I do?

**Answer:** (DALE THOMPSON) I would give this pair a vertical tunnel in their nest box, probably 3 in. x 3 in. inside diameter all the way down to the bottom of the heel of an L-shaped nest box. It doesn't always work, but it is more similar to a nest in the wild compared to a wide open type of nest. Then when the female is in trouble, there is just one big beak aiming up at the male as he enters the nest chamber. The space around the female is narrow and the male cannot get down

to nest level. The female can keep him above her. He is going to think about it next time. Shrink the diameter size of the vertical chamber and your may eliminate this aggression problem.

It is utterly amazing, if you work in the field, to see how narrow wild nests are. I have used 6 in. x 6 in. chambers for Rose-breasted Cockatoos and the parents can pass each other in this passageway. Certainly in the wild the chicks are packed into tight spaces. We can also be successful in captivity by shrinking the vertical chamber diameter.

**Answer:** (EB CRAVENS) There are innumerable problems of chick mutilation and mate abuse that can be cut back or solved by tightening up the size of the nesting chamber in nest boxes.


**Comment from Audience:** I have some African Grey Parrots I was having problems with, babies disappearing, etc., so I started pulling the eggs. The last time, instead of doing that, I pulled the male just before the eggs were due to hatch, and let the hen do

the feeding. One hen would come out to eat and did well. The other hen would not come out, so I put food in the box and she did fine.

**Response:** (DALE THOMPSON) We have also done that, but with birds which are tightly bonded—as some Amazons—we always have the male placed in a smaller cage attached to the outside of the breeding cage. Oftentimes when you take a mate completely away, it will cause a lot of stress on the caged female. Yes, this can be done with many species, especially with those pairs having the habit of breaking their eggs. The male is moved to a next door aviary while the female completes the clutch of eggs and incubates. Following this she will most often feed the youngsters. We have also placed fresh corn-on-the-cob directly into the nest. Great idea.


#### End of Panel Discussion

**Conclusion:** (DALE THOMPSON) There are some very dedicated aviculturists in this room right now. We may be the real old-timers some day. Let us all meet together in the year 2020. ➔



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