

Natural Methods of Parrotkeeping

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PART II

Breeding

In a sense, the realm of captive breeding is the stage upon which natural methods of parrotkeeping achieve their ultimate success. For to reproduce normally, a pair of psittacines must be healthy, emotionally at ease, and in an environment which allows sexual instincts to dominate behavior.

I reiterate, "to reproduce normally." This means a hen and cock of the same species which make the choice to bond, enter courtship, copulate, lay fertile eggs, set them to term, hatch and feed chicks until the time when the keeper removes the babies for handfeeding or until the babies fledge and learn to feed themselves.

When a certain behavior interrupts this normal reproductive scheme in a breeding pair, there are two philosophies for problem solving.

The first is to utilize technology and man-made inventions. If Blue-fronted Amazons destroy their wooden nest box, give them an indestructible box made of tin or plastic.

The second approach says that if a wooden nest box is being chewed to uselessness, it is not a strong enough box! Double-thick hardwood, or a hollow log will allow pairs to chew to their heart's content.

Either philosophy solves the immediate problem. But the reasoning behind natural breeding methods implies that the birds are doing what is right in response to the conditions in which they are being kept. To cure a difficulty, change the conditions without modifying the natural behavior.

Aviaries run by natural parrotkeepers have one consummate goal in mind for each breeding pair in their flock: The development of instincts and behaviors necessary to parent-rear to fledging a chick or clutch. This is my own highest endeavor—for the good of my birds, for the good of aviculture, and for my own ease of workload.

Truly, once a pair of parrots is taught to naturally reproduce, we as aviculturists have a relatively simple time of it. At one time the label "proven pair" denoted birds adept at

hatching and feeding their own babies. That is why a "proven pair" was so desirable and expensive. When such a pair went to nest, they knew what they were doing; the aviculturist knew what they were doing; and when the third or fourth week arrived, he only needed to open the nest box and remove the chicks for handfeeding.

Training my breeders to develop the skills to eventually parent rear does not mean I consistently leave clutches with them and ignore the handfed pet trade. What it does mean is that I can leave one chick of the final clutch of the season with the parents to raise to fledging. This is the perfect culmination of a breeding season where I, acting as a natural predator, stole the healthy babies from the one or two previous clutches.

Allowing a parent-raised baby or two with my pairs is a natural completion of the psittacines' nesting cycle—and a reward, so to speak, for the parents. It serves to draw out their normal breeding months into a longer period allowing hormones to taper down to a correct off season. It is a natural way to break the cycle of a hen who continuously lays clutches to the detriment of her health. Experienced voices in aviculture are now claiming that constantly depriving a psittacine pair of the chance to hatch, feed, or raise a clutch of babies can adversely affect the bonding of the pair.

From a marketing standpoint, being able to produce parent-reared stock gives breeders an edge in the realm of selling breeding pairs.

Natural methods of parrot breeding start with male/female introductions and bonding. It is essential that such bonding be the CHOICE of the psittacines. This does not imply that we keepers must give our Sun Conure or Sulphur-crested Cockatoo several potential mates to choose from. It means the bonding environment of the two birds we wish to pair is relaxed, with individual space and privacy available to the birds. Psittacines should be given adequate time before being thrust into a hard core breeder facility.

"Pair 'Em and Hope?"

A typical mistake made by aviculturists is what I call the "pair 'em and hope" approach. An unrelated pair of birds is plopped into a neutral cage with a nestbox and very little introductory time. Natural parrotkeepers know that this can result in many negative results:

- Birds bicker and do not get along.
- They are bored with each other.
- The hen disappears immediately into the nestbox and lays infertile eggs.
- Or, as is common in aviculture, sexual urge results in a successful clutch, after which the pair never produces again.

It is unnatural to "pair 'em and hope" in the cases where one bird is of breeding age while the other is still a juvenile. This can result in several forms of frustration or mate abuse. There is little reason to give a full, dark nestbox to a juvenile pair of psittacines before they are fully mature. We utilize hollow logs or long boxes open on both ends for training and early bonding activity.

I hear a lot of talk in aviculture about the dramatically young ages at which certain species have produced chicks. We pay little attention to such claims. Instead we study the literature on species in the wild and in captivity, make judgments about the size of the parrots and how many breeding years they have before them, and often wait an extra season before giving a full nestbox.

Natural parrotkeeping is most concerned with the long-term competence of the breeding pair. Urging parrot species to reproduce at marginal age—Cockatiels at six months, lorikeets and Sun Conures at 14 months, Eclectus at 26 months, etc.—is asking for problems. Many times young pairs are too impatient to set eggs tightly; or the male will become lonesome for his teenage playmate and enter the box and cause havoc with eggs. Early bad habits can become fixed habits in a young breeding pair—especially when the aviculturist, being most concerned about getting babies, makes the decision to pull eggs from the pair and incubate them. We believe that, just as in *Homo sapiens*, the ability to sexually reproduce does not always mean the maturity to do so.

At present, our favorite scheme for bonding is to purchase sexed, unrelated, unweaned parrots of the desired species and raise them together. By the time the two reach maturity the bond is extremely strong. So, is the birds' comfort with their keeper.

About the Incubator

Just a word about the incubator. Of course it is easy for me to practice aviculture minus this modern tool, since I live in the woods of Hawaii without county electricity. The incubator, however, is extremely useful in aviculture, especially when dealing with rare and threatened species. But we must realize that the practice of pulling hundreds of eggs a season for artificial incubation and handfeeding from day one has certain negative effects:

- It creates a tremendous amount of work for the aviculturist in feeding round the clock, a common cause of breeder "burnout."
- It produces a huge surplus of incubator-hatched babies in the pet trade, effectively depressing prices for everyone.
- It results in thoroughly imprinted psittacines which, never having known a mother and father, often cannot make the normal transition to parenting.
- It creates a dysfunctional egg factory breeding pair denied the natural opportunity to hatch and feed their own young.
- Under certain nutritional conditions or with certain species, it can cause retarded early development, even stunting in birds.
- The process tends to ignore natural selection.

Please, I do not wish to be misunderstood here. My intent is not to castigate aviculturists who utilize this wonderful tool. I only want to emphasize that merely because a breeding pair makes a few mistakes when they first try to reproduce at your facility, is no reason to give up hope that they will ever be solid, dependable parents. Sometimes it is necessary to lose offspring. Even in the wilds, parrots fail in their efforts to reproduce. The key is not to lose hope. Trust and cultivate your psittacines' instincts.

Each small step forward becomes

an addition to the accumulated breeding experience of one's pairs. First the two parrots learn to mutually preen; then they make awkward attempts at copulation. If the hen lays eggs, do not take them away from her even if infertile, until she has incubated them full term.

When something occurs to cause a failure, close observation is our best resource. Does the pair perhaps need forked branches upon which to mate? Are either male or female overweight or overfed? What sort of activity goes on around the cage? Changes should always be made carefully, one at a time. Keep notes from year to year.

In my aviaries, I have one hard and fast rule for first time breeding pairs. I let the birds undertake their first breeding without interference from a keeper. To this end, the initial nestboxes given these pairs do not have inspection doors. This totally eliminates what I call the "aviculturist disturbance factor" in the nestbox. Young pairs are given the first chance to lay, set, hatch and feed totally on their own. Monitoring is by indirect methods—watching behavior of hen and cock in and out of the box, observing food intake, counting days, and listening for the telltale noise of baby feeding coming from the box.

When baby noises are first heard clearly, we count back two days to hatch date and mark the calendar. Two to three weeks later depending upon the dedication of the parents, the entire nestbox is removed and the chicks taken for handfeeding. If a problem occurs before then, we have the option to take the box and remove the clutch. But seldom has this proven necessary. This technique has created many reliable pairs.

Once in the middle of the night an earthquake caused birds to bolt. I had to get up at 2 A.M. because parent birds had left their babies untended in the boxes. To avoid chills, boxes were removed and babies taken to the cabin for the night. An alarm was set for dawn. All chicks were replaced in boxes just before sunrise, and we began our feeding routine shortly thereafter. In every case, the hen calmed down after daybreak and returned to care for her chicks.

The same rules apply when opening a nestbox to give a small amount of formula to late hatched day-one and day-two chicks so that they may grow stronger and beg louder for food. This can be a cure for hens who habitually ignore the tiniest chicks—a cure much easier than taking away the babies.

Such working with the parrots' nurturing habits is the mark of natural birdkeeping. It has made aviculture for us a genuine pleasure—an intellectual puzzle, if you will, which is solved by encouraging development of the psittacines' instinctive abilities.

Natural parrotkeepers are there to aid in the reproduction process, but always within the sphere of placing responsibilities for the chicks back on the parents.

Basic Baby training and the Importance of Flight

If you retain one single point of paramount significance from this paper, let it be the following: Handfed psittacines whose wings are clipped before they have acquired a full range of flight skills are inferior psittacines.

I know this to be true, because my focus in aviculture for more than 10 years has been training of handfed baby parrots at the all-important weaning/fledging stage. There is a full range of problems which develop out of improper and premature wing-trim techniques.

Prematurely clipped chicks lack the critical skills to brake and fly down, to land at will on a variety of surfaces, to bank and turn left or right with equal adroitness, and to take off from sideways and upside-down positions. Parrots denied an opportunity to fully fledge are often lacking in confidence and alertness of eye. The mental quickness necessary to perform instantaneous airborne maneuvers is replaced by apprehension and timid habits of waddling and climbing everywhere.

From a physical standpoint, properly fledged psittacines develop a larger, stronger upper chest musculature, tight slender hips and legs and tremendous foot-claw strength. It follows that, with flight being such an integral part of a bird's lifestyle, the inner organs of a handfed, walking parrot most likely lack peak conditioning.

Progressive Wingclip Method (PWM)

Wing feathers are always removed starting with the topmost, strongest, thick-ribbed shafts, working down towards the secondaries. These softer, wider feathers at the back of the wing which act as control flaps for braking and maneuvers are never clipped (except in the case of a Cockatiel which can still fly minus all primaries).

The PWM has several distinct benefits. In the case of a fully flighted bird being clipped, it is a gentle, non-traumatic way of phasing back flight abilities without a drastic "grounding." The latter can result in accidents or emotional shock, even self mutilation in more sensitive species such as Greatbills and African Greys.

Moreover, PWM gradually teaches a parrot to flap furiously and land with minimal wingfeather lift, something that takes an extremely secure sense of balance. Once taught to fly with clipped wings, fledgling species from Budgies to Hyacinth Macaws will exhibit all the normal flight skills of full-winged birds, but with a limited range and no chance to gain altitude.

The birds remain active and can react quickly to flap and hop from danger, should a stray cat or a slamming door threaten. (Incidentally in over 10 years of keeping such active, exercised parrots as pets and breeders, we have never had to trim a single toenail. Birds of our flock wear down their nails naturally.)

The number of flight feathers allowed each particular psittacine is determined by the body weight to wingspan ratio of the species—and the keeper's ideas of safety and mobility. My parrots are never so severely clipped that they become helpless or are hesitant to flap and jump. We have found that a PWM goal of four to five feathers cut in Amazons, conures, cockatoos, macaws and the heavier parrots, substantially limits their capacity to get away or fly up; while *Poicephalus*, lorries, Princess-of-Wales, caiques, etc. end up with five and six feathers clipped. Cockatiels tend to be in a class by themselves.

It bears mention that under no circumstances do we feel healthy psittacines should ever be clipped on

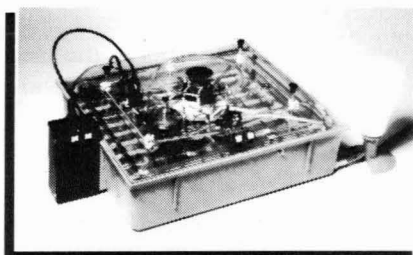
one wing only. This action takes away control and landing ability and results in distorted balance and muscle alignment, even injury to the bird.

Additional Factors

Other training factors we consider important for fledglings:

- Both to be caged and to learn to be out of a cage.
- To associate with other birds of like species and of different genera.
- To recognize and learn to enter a sleeping box or preliminary nestbox.
- To know the "up" command and to be comfortable on a human shoulder
- To be fond of water and bathing.
- To play with and chew on fresh greenery.
- To ride in the car.

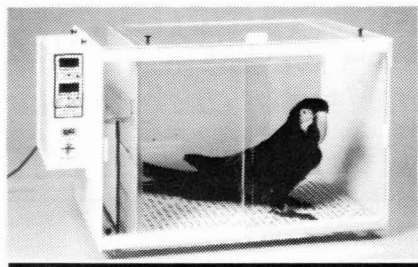
In conclusion, I would like to say that natural methods of parrotkeeping are scientific, progressive, humane, and far-reaching in their effects. They represent an attitude by the aviculturist to provide the best for his or her psittacine flock; and as such, they can easily be adapted to any facility. ➤



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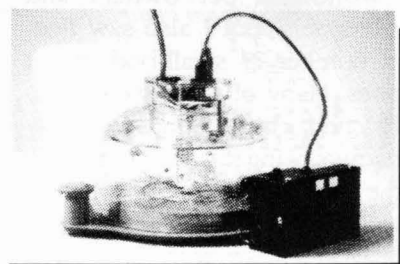
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