

Pairing *Eclectus* for Breeding

Carolyn Swicegood, Hollywood, Florida

Eclectus parrots (*Eclectus roratus*) are prolific breeders so be careful what you wish for when setting up pairs for breeding. This parrot species breeds year round in captivity and most pairs do not voluntarily take the rest breaks necessary for continued good health. One or two Eclectus pairs can keep an owner busy year round raising chicks.

There are several Eclectus subspecies from which to choose and care must be taken to pair birds of the same subspecies. Crossbred Eclectus parrots, often referred to as hybrids, are so prevalent in aviculture that one cannot easily find a proven pair of same subspecies birds for sale. A first-time Eclectus buyer can make numerous costly mistakes in

selecting birds for breeding so the help of someone who is knowledgeable about the identifying characteristics of each subspecies is invaluable. Some Eclectus experts have predicted that in the near future, pure subspecies specimen will exist only in the wild, and the habitat of wild Eclectus is disappearing as quickly as the special characteristics of the individual Eclectus subspecies in captivity.

It is especially difficult for the novice to determine subspecies identity of Eclectus males. In fact, subspecies identification of the male Eclectus is sometimes a challenge for experienced Eclectus breeders. The differences between Eclectus males are subtle and one must observe numerous males of the various subspecies to become adept at

Photo by Crissy Carlile



Sammy and Hayley, Solomon Island pair owned by Chrissy Carlile

recognizing the subtle clues. Because of this difficulty, Eclectus pairs are sometimes matched on the basis of an educated guess at the male's subspecies identity. By the time a mismatched pair matures and produces female offspring (by which subspecies purity can be judged), the pair is likely to have been together for several years. Some owners are reluctant to break the pair bond, and unable or unwilling to obtain new mates of the appropriate subspecies for each bird.

Choosing a Subspecies

The difficulty of locating pure subspecies birds is sometimes the factor that determines a new breeder's choice. The last shipments of wild Eclectus parrots imported into the United States were Solomon Island Eclectus, so it is believed to be easier to acquire pure birds of this subspecies. Another factor that attracts breeders to the Solomon Island subspecies is that the smaller subspecies are capable of reproducing at an earlier age. Solomon Island can reproduce as early as eighteen months to two years of age. The larger subspecies such as the Vosmaeri Eclectus can take two to three years longer to mature.

Aviculturists in the United States who breed Eclectus parrots on a large scale often choose to breed all four of the commonly available subspecies. Breeders who maintain only a few Eclectus pairs might choose to specialize and breed only one subspecies. This is advantageous to the breeder because any unrelated birds can be paired when one member of a pair is lost or the bond is broken within a pair.



A beautiful pair of *E. r. vosmaeri* subspecies of the Eclectus Parrot.

Photo by George D. Dodge and Dale R. Thompson

The subspecies most common in Australian aviculture is the Red-sided Eclectus (*E. r. polychloros*). Although the Macgillivray (*E. r. macgillivrayi*) is native to Australia, there are restrictions that limit their numbers in captivity.

Eclectus Subspecies Available in the U.S.

Commonly available in the U.S.

- *E. r. roratus* (Grand Eclectus)
- *E. r. vosmaeri* (Vosmaeri Eclectus)
- *E. r. solomensis* (Solomon Island Eclectus)
- *E. r. polychloros* (Red-sided Eclectus)

Other Eclectus subspecies:

- *E. r. aruensis* (Aru Eclectus)
Available
- *E. r. macgillivrayi* (Macgillivray Eclectus) Available in Australia
- *E. r. biaki* (Biak from Biak Island)
Very few in U.S.
- *E. r. cornelia* (Cornelia Eclectus)
Very rare
- *E. r. riedeli* (Riedeli Eclectus)
Extremely rare
- *E. r. westermanni* (Westermanni Eclectus) Unavailable

Buyer Caution

Reputable Eclectus breeders occasionally go out of business and their problem-free breeding pairs become available, but these pairs most often go to friends or fellow breeders who know the birds' history. Proven breeding pairs without problems are not often advertised to the public and the opportunity to buy such a pair is rare. Proven pairs that are advertised for sale frequently have problems, such as one or both birds destroying their eggs and babies. Reputable breeders reveal such problems to the potential buyer but unfortunately, there are sellers who choose not to disclose this information, leaving the buyers to learn for themselves "how they got so lucky" to find a proven breeding pair for sale. It can be treacherous for a new breeder who is attempting to acquire good Eclectus pairs for breeding, but there is a good alternative and that is



A little fencing sometimes indicates a pair is forming and working out the details. After these little jousts the pairs often settle down one notch closer to bonding.

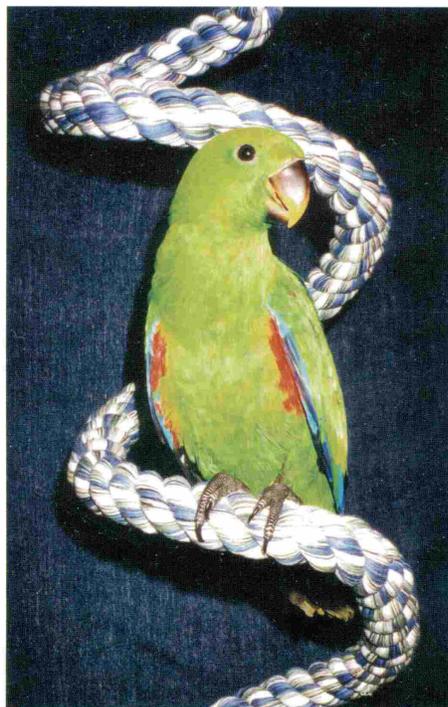
the purchase of single birds to place together as potential breeding pairs.

Acquiring Individual Birds

The new Eclectus breeder is more likely to acquire problem-free breeding

pairs by carefully purchasing unrelated males and females to pair for breeding. Inexperienced buyers would do well to enlist the help of an experienced Eclectus breeder to check out potential breeding stock. One cannot count on luck for this important step in setting up an Eclectus breeding program. Without healthy, unrelated stock of pure subspecies, the resulting problems can be endless.

Photo by Carolyn Swicegood



A curly rope toy gives this young male a pleasant place to perch and well as a wild and tangled rope to play with and beatup when the urge strikes.

Pairing Males and Females

Once the acquisition of individual males and females has been accomplished, the next hurdle is the successful pairing of the birds. One method is to acquire young birds and raise them together in a spacious cage or aviary. They should have ample space for both exercise and play. By the age of six months, properly weaned Eclectus have learned to eat a variety of healthful foods and have mastered most of their life skills. They can perch, manipulate toys and other objects, swing, climb, and fly. At this stage of life, they welcome interaction with other Eclectus. One advantage of pairing birds at an early age is that most six- to twelve-month old Eclectus are not yet aggressive enough to cause each other harm when rough play and sparring occurs.



This Red-sided Eclectus pair is blessed with a huge play pen in which they have all the luxuries nature can provide. They are able to fly, perch, look for something to eat, and do almost everything their wild cousins can do. They love their breadfruit tree seen here.

Another advantage is that younger Eclectus are more curious about other birds and therefore are more accepting of the companionship of a mate.

Ideally, if a breeder acquires numerous young birds for pairing, and has a space large enough for all of them to live together, the young birds can be observed as they eat and play together. If any males and females repeatedly gravitate toward each other and eat and play together, these birds are obvious candidates for pairing. At this stage, careful observation and note taking can increase the chance of successfully pairing birds that will form a strong bond and eventually become good breeders. Many Eclectus breeders agree that females mature earlier than males and consider it ideal to pair young males that are at least six months older than their mate.

Sylvia Denton, owner of AVERILL FARMS in Palm City, Florida, also prefers to pair Eclectus when they are very young. Sylvia shares: *"I like the male to be about six month older but it does not always work out that way. About two years ago, I held back a young male because the perfect adop-*

tive family for him did not come along at the time. Unfortunately, I did not have an unrelated female to pair with him at the time. Meanwhile, because of the name on his favorite food dish, this male Eclectus became known as Dog.

"Last year I was approached by the owner of Dixie, a pet female Eclectus that had become hormonal. The owner did not want to deal with this temporary stage of development because Dixie was doing some screaming. Dixie is about six months older than Dog, and since the opposite age difference is preferable, I was a bit skeptical about pairing them, not to mention that Dog is not a very assertive male. Nevertheless, I introduced them slowly and gave them a nesting box after I observed him feeding her.

"Dixie took to the nest box right away and shortly thereafter she laid her first clutch of eggs. Sometime within the first few days after the eggs were laid, they were broken. Even though the eggs were broken, Dixie stayed in the box for the normal incubation period of 28 days.

"The same thing happened with her second clutch of eggs. When I noticed her going back to nest a third

time, I decided to pull the eggs and replace them with unbreakable ceramic eggs. Sure enough, one of the parent birds tried unsuccessfully to break the eggs yet again. Even though I was unable to actually see him do it, I believe that it was Dog who tried to play soccer with the eggs.

"Unfortunately, Dixie's eggs which I placed in an incubator proved to be infertile. The next time she laid, I again took her eggs away and replaced them with fakes. Again, the clutch was infertile, but this time I waited until the eggs were due to hatch and replaced the fake eggs with one of her own infertile eggs – and one fertile egg which I took from one of my fertile pairs that had laid at the same time Dixie laid. Not only did the fertile egg hatch, but Dixie quickly learned to feed "her" baby and raised a beautiful baby girl that I pulled at three weeks for hand feeding.

"I was hoping that since Dog was such a good Daddy to "his baby," he might have gotten a clue and that maybe his hormones had been stimulated by the baby's cries for food and the feeding of his mate and the baby. I also hoped that

Dixie would be a bit more receptive to his advances the next time around.

"I could not believe my eyes when just two weeks ago I observed Dixie and Dog copulating on the perch! She now is sitting on two eggs which will be ready to candle in a few more days. I would not be at all surprised if at least one of their eggs is fertile – here's hoping!"

When unrelated adult birds are paired for breeding, there are several ways to optimize the chance for success. First, try to locate birds that were raised around other birds rather than birds that were incubator hatched and raised alone. It is important to choose healthy, steady birds that are not nervous or easily stressed. If possible, observe the bird with other Eclectus and select birds that are comfortable in a flock situation. Well adjusted birds adapt more readily to a new mate and a new environment. If a male and female have only recently been introduced, it is best to avoid the introduction of a nest-box until there is definite evidence of bonding. Pairing tame males with tame females, as well as untamed males with untamed females usually works out better than trying to mix tame birds with untamed mates. Sometimes an inexperienced bird can be taught the logistics of mating by an experienced mate. Eclectus are known to breed well around their own species and some Eclectus are disturbed by the sight and sounds of larger parrot species in the vicinity. To maximize the chance for success, Eclectus should be housed only around other Eclectus if possible, and definitely away from noisy, larger birds like Cockatoos and Macaws.

Colony Breeding

When creating pairs from a large group of single males and females, one method is to allow the birds to choose their own mates. This can be accomplished by setting up a colony with ample space and perches for the birds to congregate, interact, and observe each other. There should be minimal interference by caregivers and observa-

tion should be inconspicuous. A one-way observation window is ideal. Once a male and female have paired off and are obviously bonded as evidenced by perching together and possibly engaging in mutual feeding, the pair can be given a separate aviary or a private area within the colony with physical and visual barriers. There are few documented experiments with the colony breeding of Eclectus.

Introducing Potential Pairs

The gradual introduction of Eclectus pairs in two side-by-side cages or flights is the safest way to get potential Eclectus mates together. By observing the birds for stress, a comfortable distance between cages can be determined. The cages can then be moved closer together gradually as the birds become more comfortable with each other. As the birds indicate that they are bonding by sitting as closely together as possible, they can be given open cage door visiting privileges.

The late Richard M. Schubot, co-author of *PSITTACINE AVICULTURE*, shared his common-sense method of determining when pairs in this situation have bonded. He observed the location of the nightly droppings on the cage or aviary floors every morning. Once the droppings indicate that the birds are sleeping as close to each other as possible, bonding progress is indicated and the doors to their separate cages can then be kept open until they choose to start sleeping in the same cage. This indicates their readiness to share an aviary or large cage.

Breeding Failure of Tame Males

One of the most persistent problems of pairing adult Eclectus parrots is the breeding failure of tame males. Although incubator-hatched males do sometimes figure out the logistics of breeding and become successful producers, this is the exception rather than the rule. Eclectus males that are raised alone without interaction with other Eclectus are much less likely to become successful breeders than males that

have experienced interaction with other Eclectus parrots. The best chance for a sexually mature, "clueless" male to become a successful breeder is to pair him with an experienced female Eclectus who can train him, but experience has shown that even this method does not have a high rate of success. Fortunately, Eclectus parrots adapt easily to a variety of situations and many males that fail as breeders become wonderful companion birds that are treasured for their special compatibility with people. Both male and female Eclectus parrots are more likely to become successful breeders if raised with other birds.

The personality of the potential male breeder is important according to Nita Lomprey, owner of TOUCH OF EDEN AVIARY. *"One of the main factors to look for when pairing older birds is the personality of the male. If the male is very tame and the female is not, there will be almost no success. The tame male will nearly always be divided between his hormonal instinct for breeding and the desire for attention from humans. I find putting a tame male with a tame female works better. He should be patient and non-intimidating toward the female, but persistent"* says Nita.

Tracie Reece, Solomon Island Eclectus owner from Marietta, Georgia shares, *"When introducing an Eclectus male and female, I think is it important to place their cages side by side for a while. I attach a rope perch between the two cages and allow them an open-door policy whenever I am at home. This allows each of them access to each other's space on their own terms. Eventually, the two birds get to know each other and start to hang out together. Once the two of them retreat to one cage for the evening, the need for two cages is a thing of the past but the birds must still be allowed to make the moves forward in their relationship. I do not believe in pushing or forcing them in any way when it comes to pairing. If enough time is allowed, the birds are likely to make bonding progress at their*

own pace and form a lasting relationship. The birds must be allowed to decide when they are ready to spend more time with each other."

Chrissy Carlile, owner of Eclectus Friends Aviary, in Florida agrees, "I was lucky with my prolific Solomon Island pair, Haley and Sammy. I did everything wrong when pairing them up. Haley is six or seven months older than Sammy and they were both raised as spoiled rotten pets rather than breeders. I do not consider myself an Eclectus 'breeder' but I could not have had better success with these two. The only thing I did with Haley and Sammy was to introduce them to each other. They were entirely on their own after that. I instinctively gave them the freedom to be birds and to follow their instincts, while still treating them as my pets, which has turned out to be the best thing I could have done. I did not let them get out of their companionship routines with me but gave them the space to bond without my interference."

Skiping Introductions

Some breeders prefer to place a male and female Eclectus together without an introductory period. It is important to keep in mind that parrots are naturally territorial about their living space and it is imperative to avoid placing birds together in an area about which one of the birds feels possessive. Pairing should always be done in a neutral flight cage or aviary so that both birds are in an equally unfamiliar place. Eclectus parrots are not known for killing their mates, and they are not generally aggressive toward each other, but placing a male, and especially a shy male, in the cage of an aggressive female is likely to end in serious conflict or injury. The same problem can be created by placing a shy female in the cage of an aggressive male. This problem can be avoided by the use of a neutral cage or aviary for the introduction.

The likelihood of problems occurring when placing unbonded adult birds together is highest when using small cages. Most successful Eclectus breeders believe it is important for newly paired

birds to have ample space and escape routes (such as double perches and ropes) in the enclosure in case of aggression or chasing and bickering. Owner supervision is always important when first placing birds together. A perch and a towel should be kept nearby for safe intervention in case of conflict.

Says Jaudon Vance, owner of ROCK CREEK AVIARY, Fredericktown, Missouri, "To date, I have never had a problem pairing Eclectus parrots, whether placing an old hen with a young male or an older male with a young hen. I believe the most important prerequisite for their happiness while learning to live together is a large, spacious flight cage. I have paired birds of various ages. Some were placed together at a very young age so they were required to live together quite a long time before becoming mature enough to breed. The large flights allowed them to live peacefully with ample space for both birds. I have heard horror stories regarding Eclectus pairing in small 'pet cages.' The birds are more likely to turn on each other out of frustration. I've always believed that the reason everything has gone smoothly here is that the birds had enough space to call their own until they bonded."

At any age, Eclectus parrots whether single or paired, need ample space. They are active birds and require sufficient room to exercise and play. It is not only unwise from the viewpoint of creating a pair bond to keep Eclectus of any age in small spaces, but it is cruel to the birds to confine them to a small space, especially if it forces a pair to spend all their time together. They need to be able to spend time apart. Gone are the days when birds were forced to perch side by side for twenty-four hours a day with no toys or exercise opportunities for distraction in the mistaken belief that this promoted bonding. Unhappy birds and broken pair bonds are the usual result of such practices. Experience has proven the wisdom of providing ample space and the opportunity for recreation and exercise to encourage pair bonding.

Female Dominance

Unlike most parrot species, the female Eclectus is the dominant member of the pair. As Eclectus pairs are bonding, it is not unusual to see the female chasing the male, jabbing at him with her beak and looking for all the world as though she intends to dismember him feather by feather. However, even though their behavior appears to be seriously aggressive, it rarely results in an injury. The female's body language and aggressive actions look ferocious while, in fact, she is only using this display of aggression to train her mate.

To be a successful as a breeder, the male Eclectus must protect and provide food for the matriarch while she incubates the eggs and provides warmth and sustenance for the chicks. She will depend on the male for most of her food during incubation and the rearing of their chicks. During the teaching phase, she chases the male and demands regurgitated food from him. The female will feed the male repeatedly in an apparent attempt to show him what she wants him to do. After feeding the male, she will repeatedly pump his beak and wait expectantly for him to feed her. She bites at his feet or other areas of his body if he does not cooperate. If the owner perceives this behavior as dangerous aggression and interferes with the game plan, the bonding and teaching process will be interrupted. It can be difficult for the inexperienced Eclectus breeder to refrain from well-meaning intrusions on during this process but unless real aggression is observed, such as hard biting or minor injuries, it is best to not interfere.

We probably do not fully understand the relationship of an Eclectus pair. We could easily misinterpret the naturally aggressive behavior of the hen as a lack of bonding. Chrissy Carlile shared that her Solomon Island pair, Haley and Sammy, seem to have a genuine love for each other. Chrissy says, "They are inseparable. Haley is not as bossy toward Sammy as most Eclectus hens, and Sammy follows her like a shadow, carrying out her every

wish. They rarely have any time alone since their first clutch of babies hatched last year. When the little ones come out of the nest, Sammy takes over their care and Haley works on a new nest and prepares for more eggs. Then the cycle begins again so there is always a job for them to work on together. Sammy and Haley seem to hate being away from each other. They must do everything together or the screaming begins as soon as one of them is out of sight, except when Haley is in the nestbox. Haley and Sammy perform like a well-oiled team and they seem to have a strong love for each other.”

The Best Laid Plans...

Sometimes, no matter what we have in mind for two Eclectus parrots, they simply do not click. There are many examples of paired Eclectus that prove to be incompatible no matter how long they are kept together. A good example is Michelle Mondschein's attempt to pair Cleopatra and Hogan. Cleopatra was the BLUE MOON AVIARY mascot until Michelle acquired Hogan

with the hope that he would be the perfect mate for Cleopatra. However, she had had other ideas. Michelle says, “We kept them in separate cages which were not close together but they could see each other. Cleopatra only glared at him. After a couple of weeks we moved their cages next to each other. Then she only squawked at him. Then one day when they were exploring their intended breeding cage together, she attacked him! With loud screams and feathers flying, Hogan fled to the safety of his human flock with Cleopatra in hot pursuit with a look of murderous intent in her eyes. Needless to say, we separated them and I began searching for suggestions on how to perpetuate ‘Eclectus Love.’

“Fate soon intervened when we found Ruby, another stunning Vosmaeri female, and to our delight it was love at first sight. Hogan immediately called her ‘pretty girl’ and she pinned her eyes at him. Hogan and Ruby were honeymooning in their own flight cage just waiting for a nesting box in an amazingly short time.

“I can always tell when Hogan

and Ruby are copulating because Hogan never fails to say, ‘Awww, good girl’ – I kid you not! Then came the first clutch. Hogan and I were nervous wrecks but Ruby had it all under control and blessed us first with a lovely little girl and after that with many more large and healthy babies. We keep them on a schedule of three clutches followed by three months of rest. This schedule works well for all of us.”

Signs of Pair Bonding

How does the new Eclectus breeder know when a pair has bonded? Eclectus pairs do not engage as extensively in mutual grooming as Cockatoos and other parrot species that are more openly affectionate. There are other signs of bonding such as mutual feeding, sleeping side by side, calling when separated, a “bonging” sound made by the male, touching beaks, intertwining necks, and other courtship displays.

Timing of the Nest Box

Most experts agree that it is best to not provide an Eclectus pair a nestbox until mutual feeding and other signs of bonding have been observed. If a nestbox is provided before a pair has sufficiently bonded, the hen will more than likely disappear into the nestbox for up to 23 hours a day, effectively ending the opportunity for continued bonding. Even after bonding has taken place, the hen needs time to train the male to feed her at the nestbox opening so that she can incubate eggs and feed chicks while he delivers the necessary food. Once the nestbox goes up, if the pair is truly bonded, eggs and chicks are likely to follow soon.

As Nita Lomprey says, “It’s fun and fascinating to put pairs together and watch their relationship develop. What a feeling of accomplishment to watch them, in all their gentle beauty as they work together to incubate and hatch their first baby chicks. My best advice is to enjoy the miracle taking place from start to finish and anticipate holding those first babies in your hands, knowing that you were a part of it all.” ❖

Photo by Jandon Vance



This roomy indoor aviary provides an abundance of things to make Eclectus pairs happy enough to breed. There is room to fly and keep somewhat fit (important in breeding), toys to play with and a large nestbox in the private back corner.