

# My Personal Experience with Psittacine Beak & Feather Disease

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**K**nowing that Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease (PBFD) is no longer at the forefront in the parrot world, I wondered if an article at this time would be appropriate. But let me assure you, I have learned a lot more about PBFD than I ever expected to need. Just those letters can inspire more emotion and questions than I ever realized. Yes, folks PBFD still can rear its ugly head.

While my story has a very happy ending, I know that there are still some who may appreciate a new point of view on this issue. In addition, there may be others who can benefit from my personal experience. This is my story.

I have been trying to call myself a breeder since about 1995. I basically started out breeding smaller birds, finches, and canaries. Next was my first pair of Senegal Parrots. At this time my veterinarian pointed out to me that it was not ideal to have smaller birds in the same room with parrots. Parrots require a completely different protocol in their keeping. He mentioned quarantine, blood work, and other ideas I had never considered. He suggested that if I wanted to keep both types of birds I should keep them in separate areas.

Soon the Senegals were breeding and boy, what a happy camper I was. I had signed up on several lists on the internet, talked with bird club members, experienced hand-feeders, and was well on my way to become a breeder of parrots.

Then the most wonderful thing happened. In the local sales paper, I saw a pair of Congo African Greys for sale. I called and spoke with the owners. They informed me that they had a small aviary

and wanted to retire. They had purchased a travel home and were off to places of adventure. They had the greys shipped up from Florida as a pair. Unfortunately, this pair had never even laid eggs during the five years they owned them. They were anxious to sell and I was just as enthusiastic to purchase.

I took the pair to the vet for their CBC, CBP, protein electrophoresis, worm check, and toenail clip. I had contacted Bobbi Brinker, a large Grey breeder and she had been kind enough to e-mail me a list of the necessary tests and their costs so upon presentation at the veterinarian's office I was well informed.

After quarantine, into the bird room they went. By this time, I was becoming much better informed on the necessary steps in keeping parrots and was confident everything was fine. Again, my veterinarian reminded me I should separate the larger parrots from the smaller birds. This time I took his advice.

The house was in shambles. Lets see, I have to have how many areas? One for quarantine, one for sick birds, one for the nursery, and one for the breeders, one for food preparation and clean up. I wasn't sure how I was going to pull this one off with the family, so I finally decided to sell the smaller birds.

Lo and behold—just let someone get a few dollars in their pocket and the telephone rings. It was a good friend and vendor. He had just purchased some pairs of Timneh African Greys and other bird paraphernalia from a lady in New York and she also had some Congos for sale. If I was interested, I better give her a call right away. These were proven breeders and her only reason for selling,

was the loss of her husband. I decided to give her a call.

We chatted back and forth over the internet until the deal was finalized. I had just recently had surgery and would be unable to pick up the birds for several weeks until I recovered. Shortly, I was on my way to New York with my girlfriend who would share in the driving. My husband was left in the construction mode. Three walk-in flights lined with wire for climbing, three nestboxes, four feeding stations, and of course a clean-out door, a walk-in door: All too much one would think.

I returned home the following evening at 1:30 A.M. to find my husband moving the cages around in the bird room to accommodate the new flights. I arrived with a negative PBFD performed on the new birds in 1999. The new birds went directly into the new setup in the bird room.

Three weeks after arrival, two of the pairs began laying. I cannot express the excitement I felt.

Following pulling the babies and placing them in the nursery, I called the veterinarian to schedule an appointment for him to come to the aviary and vet check-up all the new birds. Then, it happened. The results came in from the lab on the new pairs and smack dab in the middle of the page was the terrible word POSITIVE. Boy, I know there are highs and lows in life, but this one knocked me for a loop. It was so unexpected. How could this be? What about all the babies? Did this mean they would all have PBFD. Why hadn't I listened to my vet and quarantined these new birds? How could I allow my enthusiasm to overwhelm my good sense? I learned a very

hard, but vital lesson.

Well, after getting over the fact that I had made a mistake I was going to have to live with, it was time to call the lab. I called the lab and asked to speak with the person who had performed the test and could inform me if this could be a mistake. The receptionist informed me that someone would call me back as soon as possible.

When he called, I explained to the good doctor that I had purchased three pairs of birds that came into my aviary with negative PBFD test. They had immediately gone to nest and produced babies. What was I to do? Could the test be wrong?

He explained that possibly the birds had been negative in the past, but upon entering the aviary without quarantine, they could have contracted it after arrival. He felt that it was very unlikely that the test was inaccurate. I just couldn't accept this, and I had to act now. I was afraid, however, to discuss this with anyone. How would I ever sell the babies if this got out? Should I even consider selling the babies. Should they be tested?

Now I could have talked with a number of people about this and never gotten the information I needed. But again, I am one of the lucky ones. I thought to myself, who would be a right person? Who have you always admired and has always helped you before? That was an easy answer, Bobbi Brinker.

I rushed off an email at 7:41A.M. Bobbi got back to me within the hour. Bobbi informed me that she had never had any personal experience with the disease. However, she had gained knowledge from conferences, researchers' papers, talking with Dr. Ritchie, as well as discussing the experiences of breeders and pet owners with infected birds, and reading about the disease.

Bobbi informed me that according to Dr. Branson Ritchie, if the birds were over three years old, were supposedly infected after a negative test, and were in good feather, it was seriously doubtful that they had PBFD. She further explained that even if the Grey was

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positive, it had to be either sample contamination or the transient presence of the virus in the blood.

If all of my other birds screened negative, then it was probably sample contamination. "It is possible you brought some virus into the aviary, but most likely the sample was contaminated at the vet's office or the lab."

After our conversation I began more research over the net and found an article by Dr. Steven Radabaugh and Dr. Bob Dahlhausen entitled *Current concepts on psittacine beak and feather disease and avian polyomavirus*.

Between Bobbi's information and the articles I researched on the net, I first began to realize that there are actually several ways this disease can manifest itself. The first is the acute form of the disease that is mostly seen in young or fledgling birds when they first get their feathers, right after the down stage of development. Some birds with an adequate immune system may be able to develop the proper defense and recover. Other times, however, this can have a fatal result. The percentage of birds in this category has in the last several years remained at a level degree, but is very small in number.

Latently infected birds (the second possibility) are birds that produce positive test results and after 90 days continue to produce positive test results. Even though initially they may not display feather abnormalities, these birds can develop the disease in the future. The birds in this category should be isolated from other birds in your population.

Finally, another way PBFD can present itself is to first present a positive test result. The following re-testing in 90 days, however, presents as negative. All birds testing positive should be retested in 90 days. If they test negative after the 90 day time period, this suggests they are only transiently infected birds and will not actually develop the feather abnormalities and will remain negative throughout their lives. These birds should be kept separate from the flock during the testing phase. If they

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test positive, then probably another test is in order while they are in isolation.

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New World species appear more resistant than Old World species. The chronic form is declining. The majority of positive infections now appear to be the transient form. And finally, the environment can be a major contributor to transmission of the virus.

I contacted the lab in a much better frame of mind and asked what procedures should be undertaken in order to determine if I had the first form, the second form, or a lab error. They suggested that I have the veterinarian return to the aviary and retest the positive bird, along with one of her babies in the nursery. They also requested that my veterinarian include an environmental test of the positive bird's cage and surrounding area. These procedures were performed.

I requested that the veterinarian forward the tests to a lab with no prejudice involved. My confidence had improved, but I wanted to make sure the tests were looked at without any previous knowledge of the prior results. While I had certainly gained a lot more knowledge on the disease and the testing

methods, I wasn't sure my interpretation of such clinical data was accurate.

Here now is the happy ending. The tests all came back negative from the second lab. I contacted the original lab and informed them of the results of the tests. They requested one more environmental test and informed me, should this last test come back negative, I would have a definite case of sample contamination.

Again, the phone rang with good news. It was the original lab with negative results on my environmental tests. I asked them to consider my expenses in the matter. I explained that since the PBFD sample could not have been contaminated in my aviary, the contamination must have come from either the veterinarian or their lab. They stated that they would be more than happy to accept financial responsibility for the false positive test, as well as the additional expenses I had incurred since I explained I would still be using their services in the future.

See, just when you think there are no caring businesses out there, you discover you were wrong. They kept their word and I had a check in two days covering my veterinarian's farm call and the additional testing.

Many have asked me "Who were these culprits that messed up your test." I just reply, "They are not culprits. They are professional people working with others who have an error rate less than or comparable to the top avian labs in the country. They gave me advice, treated me fairly, and through this process I learned a valid lesson." Quarantine, quarantine, quarantine.

Needless to say my knowledge has matured over the years and I now have a MAP certified aviary where I am raising the most beautiful, healthy babies. I have many people to thank for this growth in education, too numerous to list. I have a wonderful veterinarian, a wonderful lab, and many wonderful friends. I wish each and everyone of you who read this article the same blessings. ❖