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Solid Food Requirements for Hand-rearing Cockatiels

by

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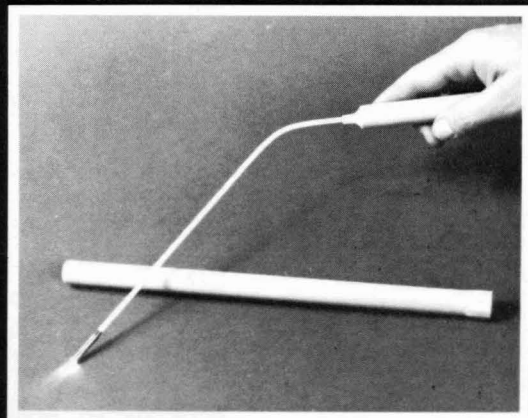
Aviculturists differ about the composition of the best diet for hand-rearing psittacine chicks; however, most would agree that an ideal mixture would duplicate the composition of the food that successful parents provide for their chicks. Unfortunately, information about the food that chicks normally receive has proved to be virtually impossible to collect. It is difficult to obtain a representative sample of crop contents because food passage is rapid and the solid and liquid portions may not leave the crop at the same time.

An experimental approach to determine the optimum diet for hand-rearing depends upon formulation of a nutritious dry diet, feeding mixtures of the food with amounts of water, and observing the effects on growth and survival of cockatiel chicks from hatching until they are able to feed themselves. We used this approach to determine the best mixture of dry food and water with the aid of a grant from the American Federation of Aviculture through its Research Committee. This research may also serve as a guide to solving problems of hand-rearing of other psittacine birds.

METHODS

Cockatiel eggs from the Avian Sciences breeding flock were incubated

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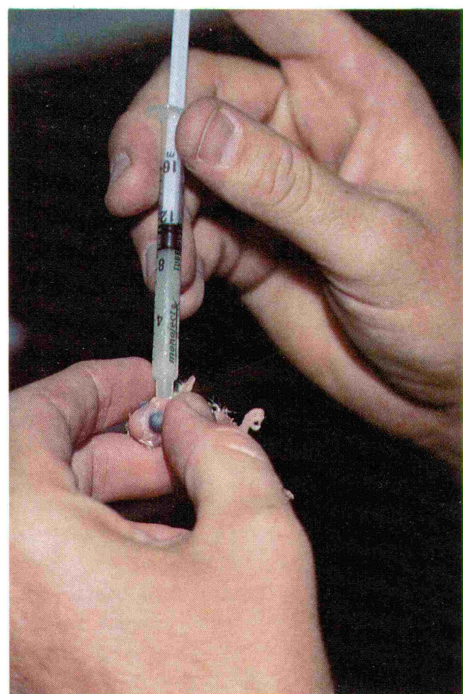
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Hatching cockatiel chick. Hatching eggs were placed within a plastic gridwork so the origin of each chick could be determined from the numbers on the hatched egg shell.



Handfeeding a chick less than four days old. No feeding tube was used for any of the hand-feeding.

artificially and within a few hours after hatching were placed in a Brower incubator where they were brooded throughout the experiments at a temperature of 35°C (95°F). Each chick was kept in its own paper bag (size number 2), with autoclaved shavings in the bottom to absorb droppings. Feeding was done with sterile, disposable, plastic syringes without

tubing or needle, starting with the 1 ml. size. For larger chicks, the 12 ml. size was used.

The dry diet, which was mixed with varying proportions of distilled water, contained 20% protein from a high-protein, isolated soybean protein powder, 60.5% corn starch, 3.75% crude soybean oil, 5% cellulose, 0.4% DL-methionine, and sources of purified vitamins and minerals. The dry diet and water to provide the desired proportions of solids were mixed thoroughly and heated in a microwave oven to coagulate the starch and prevent separation of liquid and solids. Occasional stirring avoided lumpiness or local overheating. Diets containing more than 10% solids were prepared by coagulating a portion of the diet, adding the correct amount of water, and then enough dry diet to achieve the final mixture. These manipulations were necessary to obtain a consistency similar to thick yogurt so that diets could easily be extruded from the syringe.

Chicks were fed the diets, heated to 37.5°C (100°F), at intervals that depended on the age of the bird and the solids in the diet. Except for the period between 10 PM and 6 AM, crops were not allowed to be empty. An approximate schedule of feeding was nine feedings per day for days 1-4, five feedings for days 5-15, four feedings for days 16-24, 3 feedings for days 25-36. The shortest interval between feedings

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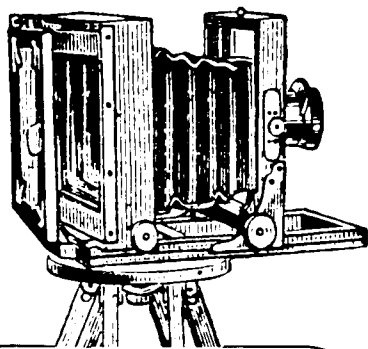
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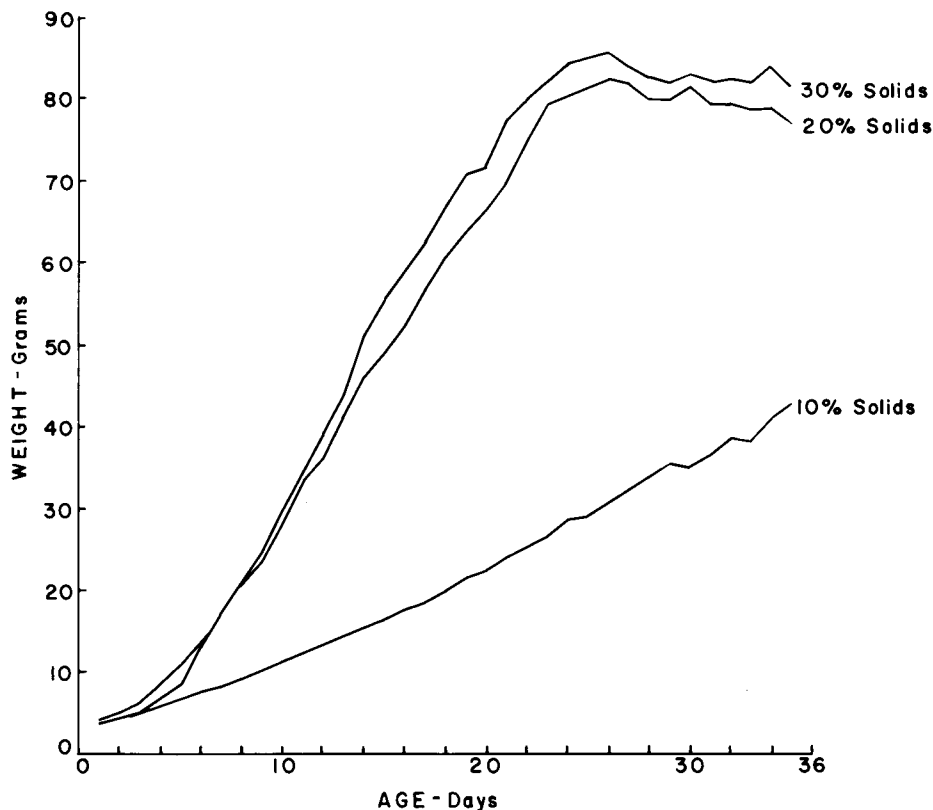
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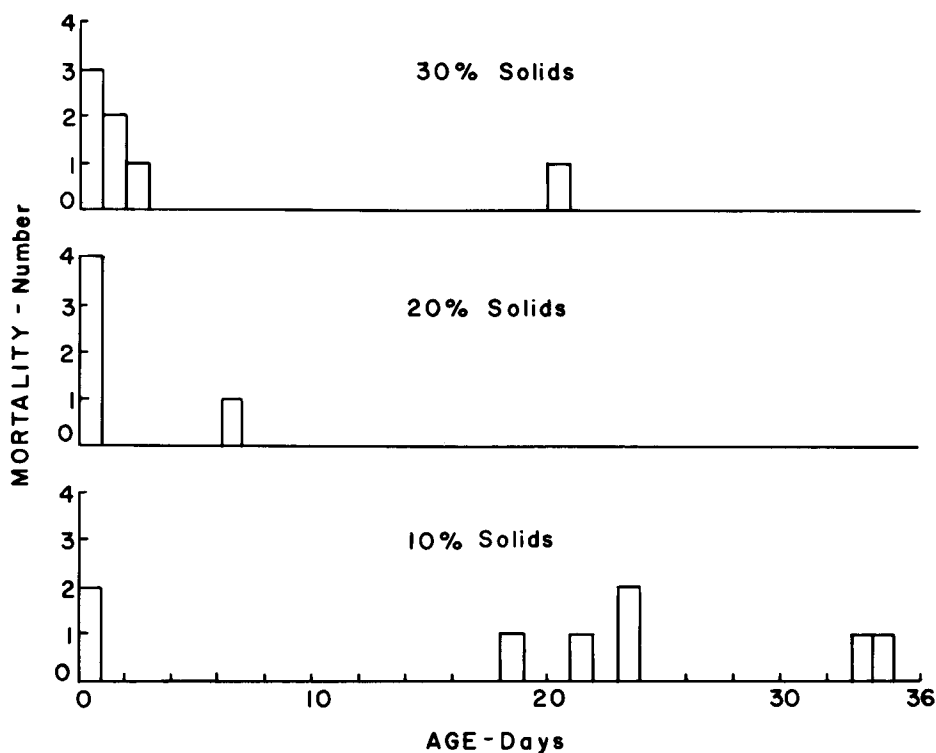
was two hours. Each chick was weighed daily before the first feeding at 6 AM.

Four experiments were performed using a total of 108 chicks in 16 groups. The solids contents of the diets were

varied from 5% to 50% solids. Two groups were fed 10% solids for four days, then either 30% or 50% solids for the remainder of the experiment. Another two groups were fed 7% solids



Growth of cockatiels fed three levels of water and solids in the diet. Each group of birds was fed its diet from hatching to weaning.



Mortality of cockatiels fed three levels of water and solids in the diet. Each group of birds was fed its diet from hatching to weaning. Fourteen birds were started in each group.

for three days, then 30% solids to five weeks of age. All other chicks were fed their particular diets from hatching to the conclusion of the experiment.

The principal criteria used to evaluate the diets were growth and survival. Growth could be followed throughout an experiment, whereas survival yielded only the age at which death occurred. Observations were also made on behaviour and feathering.

RESULTS

It is usually true when exploratory studies such as the present ones are conducted that the results of one experiment lead the researchers to the next one, and the next, and so on, until conclusions can be drawn. Our first trial included only 5% and 6.7% solids, the second 10%, 20%, and 30%, and the third combinations of solids compositions. From these experiments it appears that growth and survival, although clearly related in some ways, must be examined separately as well. The growth curves for three levels of solids presented in the graphs show clearly that 10% solids is inadequate after the first four days of feeding as compared with 20% or 30% solids. An alternative way to consider the composition of the diets is in terms of its water content. Thus, 10% solids (90% water) appears to be so dilute that for older chicks nutrition is impaired: there is an excess of water.

The survival results with three levels of solids presented in the graphs show that chicks fed 10% solids had a small mortality the first day, then survived well until they were 18 days old when more died. Fewer than half the original birds survived to 36 days of age. When chicks aged 18 to 20 days died, they were emaciated but had full crops that had not emptied. Crop contents were not sour. Both 20% and 30% solids groups had significant 1-3 day mortality, but subsequent survival was excellent. In a previous experiment, survival of chicks fed 5% or 6.7% solids was excellent for the first 16 days, after which it declined rapidly. At the other end of the solids concentrations, 50% solids after three days of 10% solids resulted in poor survival and growth, whereas chicks fed 30% solids survived and grew well.

In a confirmatory study, mortality was low and growth was rapid when the solids content was 7% for days 1 to 3, then 30% for the remainder of the trial.

DISCUSSION

From the data reported here it is clear



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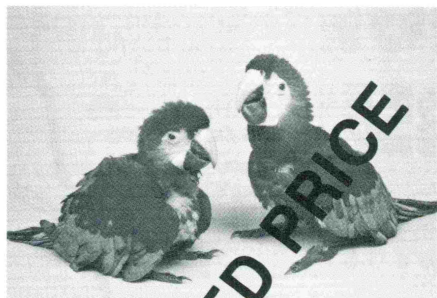
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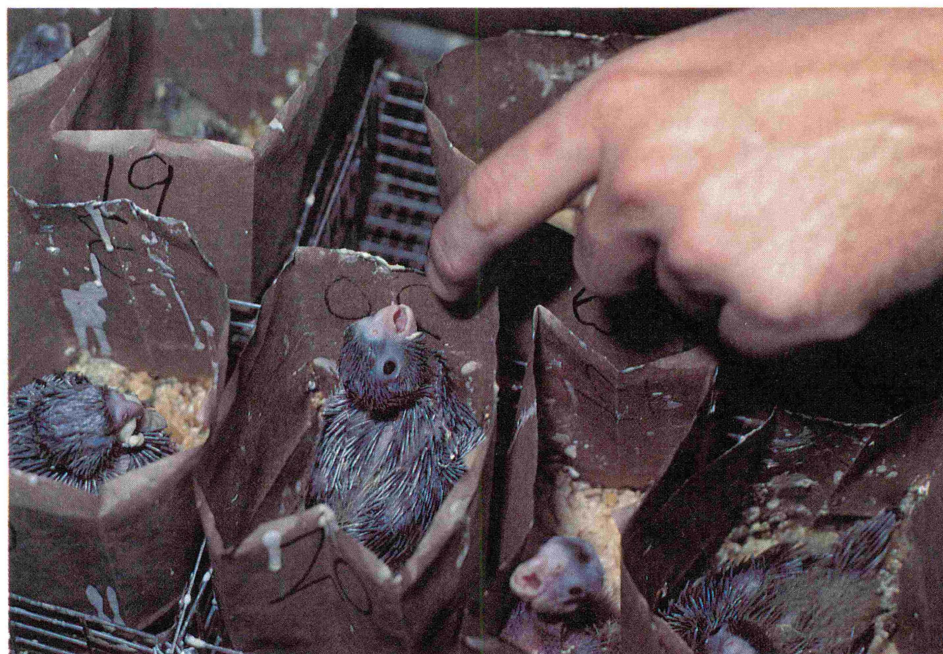
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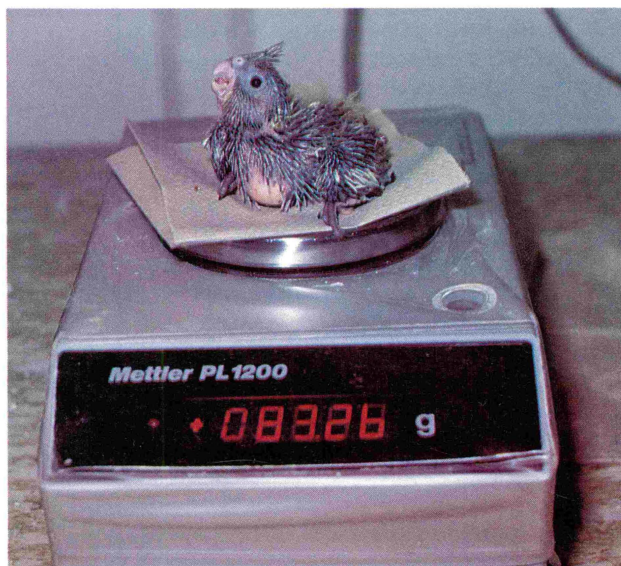
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Chicks from newly hatched to three days old in their bags in the brooder. Pine shavings are used as litter.



Chicks in the brooder at about 2-1/2 weeks of age.



*A chick being weighed.
Chicks were generally
weighed at 6:00 AM
before their first feeding.*

that the solids and water requirements of cockatiel chicks change with age. During the first 3-4 days, an adequate water supply is crucial, with perhaps 93% water (7% solids) satisfying the chick's needs under our conditions of brooding. Different temperatures, humidities, and air movements may affect the results. After four days chicks did well on 30% solids but not on 50% solids. One minor practical point is that high-solids diets provide the advantage of requiring fewer feedings per day than low-solids diets.

All experiments reported here were conducted with diets in which the dry mixture contained 20% protein. Interactions between the water content of a diet and other nutrients may complicate nutrition research or psittacine and other altricial chicks. To keep the system as simple as possible, we have expressed the nutrient composition on the basis of dry diet. The solids contents of the diets are best expressed as dilutions of the dry diet and defined separately.

The sensitivity of chick survival and development to water and solids supply, especially during the first three days after hatching, may mean that some of the problems of chick-rearing arise from an insufficient supply of water to the chicks. This emphasizes the importance of a plentiful supply of water for parents during chick-rearing periods.

The sensitivity of cockatiel chicks to the solids contents of their diets also means that aviculturists who are hand-rearing chicks can expect better success if they weigh the solid components of their diets, add the measured weight or volume of water, and carefully record data on growth and survival of the chicks. The viscosity of the diet is affected by heating and is, by itself, a poor indicator of the solids-water proportions.

CONCLUSIONS

Cockatiel chicks were hand-raised successfully from hatching to fledging when they were fed a 20% protein dry diet appropriately diluted with water. It was found that best results were obtained when the diet was diluted to 7% solids during the first four days after hatching. Diets of 10% or higher solids caused mortality during days one to three. After four days, good growth and survival were obtained with a diet diluted to 20%-30% solids. Diets of 10% or less solids resulted in mortality beginning at about two weeks of age and extending to five weeks. ●

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