

A Tale of a Proud Pair of Macaws

by S. Balasubramanian, Chennai, India

I am an ardent aviculturist from Chennai (Madras), a city of seven million people situated in the southern part of India. I am also a keen reader of books on aviculture.

I acquired two Green-winged Macaws (*Ara chloroptera*) in the year 1991. When they came to me, I

knew neither their age nor their sex. I had them DNA-sexed and, fortunately, they turned out to be a true pair.

They were given a large aviary – 18' long, 6' wide, 16' high. In the top portion of this aviary, they were provided a small room, 8' long, 6'

wide, and 6' high, and offered a beer barrel for nest box.

Until 1996, the pair did not show any interest in breeding. In July 1996, however, the female laid two eggs but these were infertile. After this, she would play with the male but never seemed busy with the beer barrel.

In 2000, the Green-winged pair started showing an interest in preparing the nest box. By May 2000, two eggs were laid. This time too, the eggs were found to be infertile.

Fertility, Challenges and Response

I was so disappointed that I thought of getting another adult male for my female macaw. But she surprised us by laying three eggs on the 4th, 7th and 10th of June. I was extremely happy to see that one of the three eggs was fertile and I immediately corrected my thinking about the suitability of this male. What was even better, the hen proved extremely good in brooding.

The egg hatched on the 30th of June, 2000. The chick was removed for handfeeding on the 27th of July.

Within 20 days, the hen started again. Like the last time, she laid three eggs — on the 16th, 19th, and 22nd of August 2000. This time, all three eggs were fertile and all three hatched. The pair fed the first two chicks well, but the third chick looked weak and emaciated.

To remove the third chick for hand feeding, we had no choice but



The proud pair of breeding macaws.

to disturb the pair in the nest box. The parents were emotionally upset but we could not help it. We removed the third chick and found it weighed only 42 grams when seven days old. Normally it should have weighed about 100 grams at this stage. The second chick was clearly not getting proper nourishment from the parents, so it was removed for hand feeding on its 15th day. Only the first chick was under the parent Macaws' care.

On the first chick's 55th day, we noticed a parental bad habit. The pair was pulling the new blood feathers from the chick and chewing them. The chick looked bald and pathetic. So the first chick too was removed for handfeeding.

Another clutch of three eggs was laid 48 days after this event. This time only the first two eggs



*Bird breeder S. Balasubramanian
with five grown up chicks.*

Photographed on
16th May 2001

GREEN WINGED MACAW (*Ara chloroptera*) (Single clutch of five)



56 Days
1040 grams

54 Days
1060 grams

51 Days
980 grams

47 Days
1000 grams

43 Days
850 grams

were fertile; they hatched on the 18th and 22nd of January 2001. Three days after the second chick emerged from its shell, we could see that the male was not in proper form and health. So we had to catch him, put him in an 8 foot long hospital cage, and medicate him. The female became tremendously upset and refused to feed the chicks. The first chick was seven days old and the second a three day baby. Both were then taken out of the nest box for incubation and handfeeding. We also placed the female in another 8 foot long cage by the side of the male, so that she could have a full view of her partner under medical treatment.

When the male was found to have completely recovered, the pair was reintroduced to their aviary. This happened on the 5th of February 2001. But the separation had angered the female and she fought with her partner for a few days. Mercifully, the fight was not severe – it seemed akin to a petty quarrel between husband and wife. The female did not allow the male to caress her; she was trying to sit by herself without seeming to care for her partner. At that point, I worried whether I had ruined their compatibility.

A Clutch of Five

Yet, within a week, the pair became extremely attached to each other – just like old times!

By the 23rd of February, she started laying another clutch of eggs. To my utter amazement, she laid *five* eggs! The fifth egg, which was a bit

smaller than the rest, was laid on the 8th of March 2001. I thrilled to the knowledge that every one of the five was fertile.

My Blue and Yellow Macaws, *Ara ararauna*, which have been breeding regularly over the past five years, did not at any time lay more than three eggs. No book I have come across on macaws mentions a clutch of more than four eggs by a larger Macaw. So I was all the more

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anxious to see that the eggs were properly brooded by the female.

On the 21st of March, the first chick broke through its shell. The second and third followed two and five days later. After hatching three eggs, the female, who had been sitting over the eggs for more than 30 days now, seemed to be losing her brooding instinct. We could see her often come out of the nest box and play with her male. So the fourth and fifth eggs were removed and placed in an incubator. The fourth

egg hatched on the 30th of March and the chick weighed 21 grams on its birthday. The fifth egg hatched on 3rd of April and the chick weighed merely 18 grams. This was not unexpected, as the fifth egg was slightly smaller than the rest.

At this juncture, the female started preparing the nest box for another clutch and did not seem to be feeding well the first three chicks left with her. So we had to remove them for hand feeding on the 3rd of April 2001.

All the five chicks grew well. We photographed the lot together every 10 days – from Day 1 to Day 64 of the fifth chick, to be precise – meticulously weighing them on empty crop to register their growth.

Within 19 days of removing the three chicks for handfeeding, the indefatigable pair had another clutch in the beer barrel. Beginning on the 22nd of April 2001, the Green-winged hen laid four eggs. This time the first egg broke, possibly because it was soft-shelled. The three other eggs were found fertile and hatched.

These three chicks have also been removed for handfeeding. The pair of macaws has now been housed in an 8 foot long cage, sans nest box, of course, and given an involuntary rest from breeding for some time. Year's tally – 20 eggs, 14 chicks.

Thus, in a span of exactly a year, between May 2000 and April 2001, this pair of Green-winged Macaws has laid a total of 20 eggs – out of which 14 chicks are growing nicely. ➤

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