



Shushi at three weeks old.

Shushi's Story... Don't give up too soon

by Liz Andreoli
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Life presents us with an endless array of threats or challenges depending upon which way we look at it. At the very moment I thought I had hand-feeding of young birds, with all its delusions, down pat, disaster struck again!

Shushi (a lutino cockatiel) and his nest mate hatched on the 13th and 11th respectively of November 1987. The hatch was uneventful. The chicks emerged on time and the parents were known for taking good care of their young. So I figured I had nothing to worry about. In such cases I do not bother the brood until a few days have elapsed which gives the young a chance to develop some and the parents time to calm down. When I felt comfortable enough and decided to inspect the nest I noticed the oldest hatchling had a severe cut across the eyelid exposing the eye prematurely. There was some redness and swelling. This damage at such a young age would take its toll. I braced myself for the worst. Apparently the chick cut his eye while releasing himself from the egg. I administered tetracycline ophthalmic ointment for several days. As conscientious as these parents were they obviously could not resist pecking the strange protrusion at the eye, because blood began to appear. I had no choice but to pull the chicks for hand-feeding on November 24th. They were ten and twelve days old. At this time all other variables *seemed* normal. The chicks were otherwise clear eyed, seemingly average in size and weight, and they had normal appetites and droppings.

Thanksgiving came on November

26th and everyone watched me feed these little wonderful creatures in awe and delight. I noticed a slightly sluggish digestion in both chicks which is not unusual before I get the consistency of the formula to match the development of the chicks. Another possibility was that maybe the parents were not keeping the chicks as warm as they should have. So I thought things were going well. I continued with the ointment, and the blood dried up around the infected eye. It also seemed that the swelling was decreasing.

By the second week in December things changed drastically. The chick's newly emerging feathers were scraggly, sort of like teddy bear fur, there didn't seem to be any down feathers at all, and their growth was noticeably stunted. I rushed a culture to a nearby avian veterinarian, however, bacterial growth proved negative. It was now the 15th of December. The birds were obviously in trouble. They were six weeks old and the size of three-week-old chicks. The chick with the bad eye was the worst. The eye had ceased to respond to the antibiotic. Within a two day period his beak went from normal to scissor shape. Both birds had bald spots on their heads, under their wings, and on their hips. No feathers appeared on the legs at all. Every feather present was dingy and dirty looking. The birds began to cry insistently after each feeding. I could not fill their crops full enough for their needs. They insisted painfully for hours afterwards. Digestion was severely impaired.

After conversing with Teresa Micco, Animal Health Tech. at the veterinarian's office, I took the fledglings in for an exam. It could be that they suffered from a congenital defect.

The outcome was bleak, and I left the office feeling extremely depressed. At that time the consensus seemed to be leaning toward a congenital defect (malfunction in the formed egg). These parents always presented normal young in the past. What happened? There was nothing to do but offer "supportive" aid and hope for the best. The future was unpredictable. I was told that the eye could rupture at any time, in the worst bird, and successful surgery was not even thinkable under such feeble conditions. We sadly decided to humanely put this chick to sleep. I continued to have hope for the other chick, however, and dubbed him "Shushi" for his chronic whining.

Between December 15th and Jan-

uary 18th things remained pretty much constant. With a digestion rate of approximately 50%, I continued to either extract the old food or work it through the system with warm water. I never allowed the food to remain in the crop for more than twelve hours straight.

On January 18, 1988 a small miracle happened. Shushi began to digest his food at 75% to 100% so I began to



Shushi at three months displays ratty, "teddy-bear" fur.



New feather growth appeared at the end of three months.

feed him on a (leisurely) twice a day schedule. Shushi's estimated length at this time was between seven and eight inches. He was eight weeks old and roughly four inches smaller than normal. I wondered if he would ever catch up.

I placed him in a cage with a heating pad underneath. He began to crack spray millet but didn't ingest any. In spite of this, things looked good. On February 1st (at fifteen weeks old), Shushi began to swallow the spray millet he cracked. I cut the feedings down to once a day. His droppings began to improve to a more solid form. On February 6th shallow squeaking sounds came forth from this bird, and his chest began to fill in a little. Two days later he was totally on his own in the food department, eating seeds, scrambled egg and vegetable greens. I, on the other hand, was exhausted. Sure we had come a long way, but Shushi still looked awful, at three months old, with his scraggly feathers and his itty-bitty form. Was there a light at the end of this tunnel? Would he be capable of surviving on his own; would his feathers ever come in normally; or should I give up and have mercy on him? I was having a hard time thinking straight.

It came to me. I would pull a tail feather and if it grew back in a normal condition I would jump for joy. I would not give up. Surely only a week or two before a stump would appear and we wouldn't have to be in agony anymore. On February 8th, only two days later, an incredible miracle happened. In my impatience I picked Shushi up to hunt for a new tail feather stub and to my amazement new normal feathers were beginning to appear in all the original bald areas! We made it! Now there were only two areas left to deal with: his motor control, and emotional development. He appeared normal — just slow. At about five weeks old, Shushi had a hard time climbing and perching, finding food and accepting new situations. It was just going to take time, and we had lots of that.

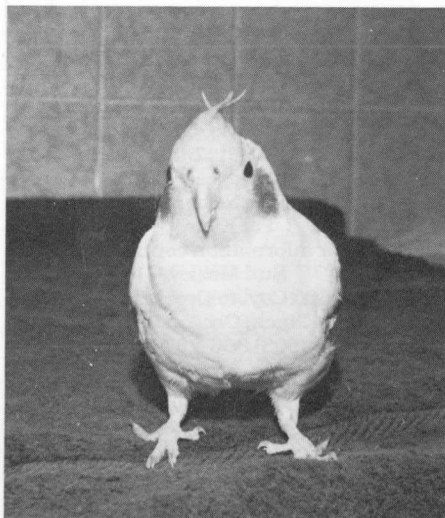
As time went by, progress was definitely but slowly being made. Shushi developed one of the sweetest personalities in a bird I had ever met. He never bit, and he would go lovingly to anyone, even offering his head for stroking. He began to repeat a few of my phrases and he was extremely content with his life. However, the last lingering question was where would I eventually put him? Although he grew

a little he was still about the size of an English budgie at nine inches long. My aviary birds would definitely pick on him. I couldn't handle him being plucked, or injured in one day after all we went through. Besides, I didn't want to waste such a sweet personality in the aviary. Someone should enjoy him. But who would want him? He's so little!

Around April 10th (when Shushi reached the equivalent of a six to eight week old cockatiel), I called Omar Gonzales of Omar's Exotics in Cypress, California. After I explained briefly, he told me to bring Shushi down when I was ready. On April 17th I took Shushi to the shop and Fran Gonzales had a possible customer waiting. I was a nervous wreck for both me and Shushi. Would *we* be accepted by someone? Would they understand? How could I explain the five months we went through in a few short sentences? I told myself to calm down. The worst that could happen is that we would have to turn around and go back home. I didn't care. I wanted a good home for Shushi, that's all! We would find a way.

At middle age I'm beginning to feel that it is on these occasions when we feel we are on the brunt of the *worst* of this world that we receive the *best*. The couple that awaited Shushi were what I had longed for: kind, loving, and intelligent. Brian wanted a bird that would go to anyone so he could work him into his act. His magic act! How exciting! What a happy ending to a sad story. We may see a "little, white star" up on the stage someday. His new name is "Veto Solomon" which means "life and wise."

We all went away happy, including Shushi. ●



At five months all feathers are normal. Viola! The Great Veto Soloman, formerly Shushi.



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