



Derbyan Notes

by Eb Cravens, Waiohinu, Hawaii

Our first Derbyan Parakeets were obtained in the summer of 1991 from a reputable Northern California breeder who had a banner season with his numerous breeding pairs. The delightful pet qualities of this species were then (and still are) unpublicized so he was having trouble selling all the babies. We purchased five feathered but unweaned seven week old chicks – offspring of two unrelated pairs – for an extremely reasonable price.

We hoped to obtain at least one unrelated pair and to sell the extras at retail to pay the lab fees, shipping, etc. Blood sexing revealed two males and three females. Three were sold and one pair was sent to its new home in Hawaii in early 1992.

Our fascination with this lovely lavender-hued psittacine began years before despite the fact we had never seen one. Fellow aviculturists could tell us little about the pet characteristics and captive behavior of this, one of the

largest parakeets in the world. Reputedly, males were more scarce and valuable possibly because they were so esteemed in Asia for their brilliant coloration.

Had we the experience back then, perhaps we would have opted not to breed *Psittacula derbiana* in the subtropical clime of Hawaii. This is definitely a cold weather species. The birds have tight down feathers, sleek waterproof coats, and may quickly take to panting when summer days turn hot (above 80° F.). Indeed, one breeder specified that Derbyans in his collection took joy in breaking the ice glazing their water dish and bathing outdoors in the wintertime. It was not until we moved the birds in Hawaii up to new aviaries at an 1,100 ft elevation that breeding was successful. Even then, the female would leave the nest box frequently in the warmth of the day. Sprinkler baths were avidly taken and seemed to stimulate the pair.

With babies pulled for handfeeding, aviculturists should be aware of nursery temperatures which make the young uncomfortable – especially in clutches of multiple birds. My first chicks were kept in a one-room cabin with me. It was several nights of restless activity before I recognized that the Derbyans were, in fact, overheated in a 60° F. room with a towel over their plastic tub. The breeding pair, named Lapsang and Souchang after a favorite Himalayan tea, were installed in a 3 ft. X 3 ft. X 10 ft. cage with a 4 in. thick log perch at the eastern end and a 1½ in. hardwood branch perch at the other end. Unclipped *derbiana* are phenomenal flyers even in cramped quarters and can achieve tremendous speed in a cage.

Ten inch food and water bowls rest on the bottom of the cage at the sheltered end in a spot where the birds never defecate. We feed all birds on

the floor of their cages to encourage flight up and down. It also keeps any occasional rodent activity down and away from the nest boxes.

The aviary was constructed of ½ X ½ in. 14 gauge welded wire – a mesh which after three years is proving too weak for even pet Derbyans. Fresh plum, kukui and guava branches are introduced into the cage weekly at one or both ends and wedged above the perches. With fresh material to chew, the pair still have not destroyed the original perches. Nevertheless, the male has learned how to pinch and pop the welds on the wire at certain spots near the roof. We are preparing a new flight made of 1 in. X 1 in. 12 gauge mesh and, hopefully, can make it 16 ft. long. Derbyans are avid chewers and can become quite destructive in an unsupervised environment.

The nest box for the pair is 10 in. X 10 in. X 24 in. deep mounted inside the cage near the sheltered eastern perch. A wire ladder provides entrance down to a 3 in. layer of thumb sized wood chips at the bottom. A new box of hollow log material is being planned with an inner space of 7 in. X 7 in. as we are finding out that tighter nest boxes eliminate many potential aviary problems during the female's incubation cycle.

This pair has chosen to sleep at the western end of the cage where a single plywood board covers all but the top two inches of the wire. They either sit on the perch next to the open wire cage sides or hang on the wire with beak and claws, looking towards sunset. Most of the time the male is in the right corner, the female on the left. When fresh branches are introduced they will both crowd together amongst the greenery, but as these are normally chewed bare of leaves and twigs in one day, this does not last long. There is very little affection between the birds. No reciprocal preening has ever been observed during the non-breeding season. What's more, they can sometimes be heard bickering over a perch spot or a brief squawk in the night seems to announce "stay on your own side of the bed."

Pair bonding seems weak with *Psittacula derbiana*. It is likely that sleeping positions in the wild are determined by flock norms and associations more than by strong pair behavior. This agrees with reports of mild promiscuity and mate changing in cap-



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tive breeding situations.

On 13 February 1995 Lapsang and Souchang were seen feeding each other. The female squats down on the perch and utters a high squealing noise while the male stands above her and gently pumps food to her. On ensuing days the birds were active, noisy and sometimes bickering. Whereas for much of the year the female is quick tempered and seemingly dominant, the male was now coming into his own. At the morning feeding she no longer approached the dish but waited on the far perch with begging squeals for him to feed her.

On 17 February the female visited the nest box and on the 27th she slept in it for the first time. During the next three days she was in and out of the box then began setting in earnest on 3 March. The male continued sleeping at the far end of the cage.

With pairs nesting for the first time, we make it a rule to not check the nest box at all. In fact, to eliminate temptation, we did not provide an inspection door. Successfully raising babies is, of course, exciting. But what is more important, especially for adolescent pairs, is proper training of parents for future strength of instinct and reliability. Once the eggs are laid and the female is sitting, the process is truly in the hands of nature. If I open the box once or regularly as do many breeders, I interject an added variable into the natural choice of things. We find that pairs left strictly alone during nesting the first time are very unlikely to develop bad habits such as breaking eggs, bolting off the clutch, etc. These are some of the problems being cured by smaller boxes which give the females more control over her nest.

If any unnatural events surface, I can most likely blame the conditions that I have arranged for the parrots' environment. When aviculturists call me and state that breeding birds eat their eggs or pluck their chicks, for example, I tell them that we believe rushing the eggs to an incubator every subsequent clutch, or pulling all babies before they begin feathering, is not solving the problem. Breeding birds is about producing babies. Aviculture is about solving problems. (Admittedly, when dealing with severely endangered species, special conditions apply).

Lapsang and Souchang proved instinctually competent parents. On 23

March during my customary after-dark stroll through the aviaries, I heard the distinct peep of a chick from the Derbyan nest box. How exciting! Creeping cautiously up to the cage each night, I heard two differently pitched peeps on 25 March. Incubation lasted 20 days in moderately warm and dry weather. Spray baths were given every few days the third week and even the female emerged to bathe.

We increase dramatically the amount of food to birds in nesting cycle. I normally walk around the

cages at 6:30 A.M. and offer a piece of peanut or almond to each bird in my flock. It gives them something while they wait the hour for me to gather and chop fruits and vegetables and prepare the morning soak mix. It also maintains my relationship with breeding pairs. Even the aggressive males will "humble" themselves to take a nut and often the female will emerge from the box to do the same. It is interesting to note the times females forego a morning nut while on eggs: 1) on rainy or cold, damp mornings, 2) during the

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critical seven to 17 day incubation period, and 3) mornings that eggs hatch. Of course, this type of rapport with breeding pairs who are also pets has been built up over several years. Sometimes Souchang would come out for her morning nut but would insist that Lapsang feed it to her.

We increased the amount of carbohydrate and fat in the Derbyans' diet as the chicks grew. Corn on the cob was often added to their regular food. Derbyans eat select fruits, of course, but are much more fond of seeds and grains. As they reportedly live wild in areas of pine forests, shelled pine nuts or unshelled "piñon" are close kin to their wildcrafted foods.

On 8 April the box was taken out of the cage and opened. Two plumply stuffed *Psittacula derbiana* were taken from the mother and the box was replaced. Both were closed-banded within a few days with size $\frac{3}{8}$ in. bands.

Handfeeding began some six hours after removal when the young birds' crops were 90% empty. I normally feed formula to newly pulled chicks before their crops are completely empty since I wish the working enzymes from the parents last feeding to mix as thoroughly as possible with the store

bought formula (normally Exact or Pretty Bird). I fortify all daily mixtures with spirulina flakes in amounts much as we would use salt or pepper on our own food. Raw papaya with seeds is also added every day or so. The spirulina seems to give a glossier feathering on fledglings and the papaya is an excellent source of raw vitamins and digestive enzymes.

As weaning approaches, we begin adding a sprinkling of wheat germ, nutritional yeast, rolled oats and quinoa grains to the baby food. The latter give substance and texture to the gruel. We also use processed formulas from various manufacturers but they, 1) are extremely different from the gobs of seed, beans, veggie skins and hulls found in babies which are being parent fed and, 2) cause fecal dropping to change radically in texture and color from green-white-dark on the parents feeding to a light runny tan on the commercial formula.

As the two chicks feathered out around six weeks, they began to flap and would climb out of the basket and walk across the room to "papa." They were moved to a low cage with perches, greenery and a top which opens up. Leaves, soak mix, and millet spray were provided. A few days later they began taking first flights and crashing somewhat through the tree branches they were given to land upon. At the same time, they began to exercise individual wills and would choose to sleep apart in the little cage.

Close scrutiny of the chicks led us to believe we had one male and one female. The older chick had a larger skull and forehead, was more vocal, while the second bird had a rounder profile and would sometimes hunker down and make squeaking noises like the begging sounds of her mother. In addition, devoted conservationist and aviculturist Fred Bauer clued us in to a very reliable method for early visual sexing of *Psittacula derbiana*. One should note the wide black band behind each cheek at the base of the skull; in young males the black most often directly touches the dark green of the neck feathers while in females there is a thin pale beige separation between the black and the green. In addition, we saw that as the orange baby beaks began to fade to black after fledging, the perceived male's changed much more slowly than that of his "sister."

At age eight weeks (18 May) the fledglings were nibbling well on their own, were down to one feeding per evening and, perhaps, a little in the mid-morning, and were flying around the cabin in short bursts. The progressive wing clipping of their flight feathers began. The outer stiffest two feathers on each wing were clipped to decrease the flapping efficiency. Two days later another feather was cut. At this point, they flapped faster but flew slower. Control on short hops was quite good.

We began to house them separately as they definitely did not like each other. All of our parrots destined for the pet trade are kept away from aggressive situations. On 2 June the older fledgling escaped his cage and was silent in the tree tops for four hours. Every hour I would take his syringe and baby food mug outside to walk around banging the two together in a familiar sound. At 4 P.M. the baby squawked at the noise and gave away his whereabouts. Going to the base of the tree, I coaxed him down to be fed and put away. Since at no time during the episode was he out of control, we did not clip him further after he was brought home.

Fully weaned and fledged (10 June) the babies were sold to two separate and very conscientious bird stores. At this stage Derbyans are noticeably independent and standoffish. They seldom endure heavy petting and are not fond of a hand over their head. Some, especially females, will flash eyes and snap if touched. Nevertheless, when raised sensitively, they are extremely well behaved, will "get up" on command, give kisses and will permit a surreptitious hug to the chest or stroking of the feet and tummy. We have found that the older a Derbyan becomes, the more it calms down and enjoys touch. We have pets who allow much stroking once they have entered the puberty years. But as youngsters, we give them plenty of space and patience rather than create a situation where biting may occur.

Personally, I find the *Psittacula derbiana* a wonderful pet, especially in a household with more than one parrot. They have been called one of the most underrated pets in America. They are breathtakingly sleek pastel-colored speedsters which produce minimal noise and demand little from their keepers. ➤



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