

# Princess of Wales Parakeets — Sleeping Beauties of Aviculture

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When the 1994 bird breeding season began I never dreamed I would be raising Princesses of Wales Parakeets. At an early spring bird mart I found a proven Princess hen that was so beautiful I had to bring her home.

Pictures do not do justice to the beauty of the hues of this species. Princess of Wales have a delicate dove shaped head with a blue-gray cast on the

crown and a small coral bill. The breast is a bright rosy pink which smartly contrasts with the lime green scalloping on the wing coverts. The back and tail are an olive green — while the rump is a blue gray. The belly is a silvery green and the thighs have a pink edging. Finally, the primary flights are a muted blue. When you see these birds you think of an artist's pastels. These birds have incredibly long tails which have a pink edging. Overall length of the bird can reach 18 inches. The body lines are graceful and elegant.

Males and females are sexually dimorphic at one year of age. The hens tend to have more muted colors and often shorter tails. The males have spatulate tips on the third primaries which may grow up to one inch. This charac-

teristic is very easy to identify.

At any rate, I brought the hen home and put her in a quarantine cage in my bedroom. Although a parent raised aviary bird, she was quite gregarious with us — loving to be talked to and calling to the other birds in the house. She tolerated my two year old son and the vacuum sweeper quite well.

In fact, she was so comfortable in her new home that she started laying eggs on the cage floor. It was obvious that this bird needed a mate and I began my search. I called Florida, Georgia, New Jersey, Texas, and California. I seemed that everyone I talked to was looking for breeder birds themselves or they had babies which were already spoken for. In all my conversations I never heard one



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One really experiences the delightful personalities of the Princess Parakeet while hand-rearing them. These two juveniles are five weeks of age.

derogatory comment regarding this species. Numerous breeders told me that of all the various psittacines they had raised, the Princess of Wales rated as one of the sweetest species.

I finally located a mature male in California from a highly recommended breeder of Australian keets and finches. Meanwhile, my hen continued to faithfully lay an egg every other day. When the male arrived and was placed in the same room with the hen it was love at first sight. Despite his cross country plane ride he immediately began to display valiantly.

The pair was set up in a flight cage measuring 6 ft. x 2 ft. about 3 feet off the floor. A wooden L-shaped boot box with the dimensions of 24 in. x 12 in. x 24 in. was hung outside the flight. A 4 in. layer of untreated pine shavings was added. Princess of Wales are notorious "hoppers." They will routinely jump straight down from perches up to 18 in. above the ground. Consequently, they may jump straight down onto their eggs if given a square or grandfather clock box. Therefore, a Z box is often recommended for this species. Unfortunately, they are hard to come by and even harder to make. To me a boot box could also circumvent this problem as well as provide better accommodation for the hen's long tail. A natural wood perch was placed adjacent to the nest box. Another large branch with multiple forks to aid perching during copulation was also provided. The pair was given free standing Petamine, cuttlebone, Pretty Bird and Lafeber mini pellets, and a small hookbill seed mix. Also, fresh produce was given daily - apples, grapes, corn on the cob, oranges, celery, squash, sweet potato, beans and legumes. Scrambled eggs with shells, and baby cereal were fed every other day.

As soon as the birds were introduced the male began his courtship display which is quite elaborate and amusing to watch. There is much eye blazing and fluffing of the head feathers — which culminates in an odd clicking sound. Also, the male would repeat a two-tone bell call and would jump down on the flight floor to bow and prance. I only observed the pair mating once and this was done on the flight floor rather than on a branch. The hen was soon in the nest box and was heard making begging cries. Within 48 hours of their initial pairing the first egg was found.

The hen continued to lay an egg every other day until a clutch of four eggs was

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completed. Typical clutch size is four to six eggs. She began to sit tightly after the second egg was laid. However, she came out of the box several times a day to eat, stretch, and relieve herself. Interestingly, she did not consume a large amount of cuttlebone until after she completed her clutch.

When the fourth egg was approximately one week old the eggs were candled and two of the eggs were found to be fertile. A daily nest check with all our breeding birds is performed and the hen was quite tolerant of this procedure. On day 21 for the clutch, strong begging cries were heard and a newly hatched chick was found. Average incubation time is 19 to 21 days. The chick was covered in a thick yellowish white down. Its sibling pipped approximately 48 hours later and was out of the shell in less than a day.

The parents were initially quite diligent in their care and feeding of the chicks. The cock went into the nest box to feed as well as the hen coming out to eat, drink, and be fed some more. Their favorite initial foods were the Petamine, spray millet, corn on the cob, celery and mini pellets. Providing greens of some sort must be very important to these

birds. Whether it is the water content or some natural enzyme in the cellulose for digestion remains to be determined. But the parents devoured the leafy celery tops and stalks daily.

The chicks were checked at least once a day to assess skin color and temperature, crop fullness, weight gain and general developmental milestones. As with all young parent raised psittacines the babies grew very rapidly. When the oldest chick was five days old, something caused the hen to abandon the nest. No amount of persuasion could return her to the chicks and they were pulled for handfeeding.

The chicks were initially fed Kaytee Exact Handfeeding Formula mixed with Pedialyte. Small amounts of Gerber First Foods were gradually added to the formula to broaden the chicks' diet. Also added once daily were Aviguard and Spiruline. Initially, they were fed five times a day.

The chicks were housed in a Big Mamma Water Nanny with Baby Bedding from Cage 'n Bird in Louisiana. The brooder was initially set at 88°F. and gradually decreased to 80° F. The baby's body posture, sleeping positions and skin temperature were used for tem-

perature adjustments. Also, a rolled up towel was placed in the brooder and the babies cuddled with it as well as each other. At four weeks of age the chicks were transferred to a ten gallon rectangular Rubbermaid storage container with a hardware wire top. The chicks began to wean themselves rather quickly as they approached five weeks. The oldest chick fledged at exactly five weeks. At this point they were at three feedings a day and sampling soaked pellets millet, and soft food eagerly.

Of the various psittacines Jamie has fed, he feels the Princess are as easy to feed as Cockatiels. They can be left with the parents up to three weeks and still readily convert to handfeeding. These birds have a good feeding response. They are quite charming and curious during their feedings. They are a delight to touch since their feather texture is similar to velvet. Many of Jamie's hand-fed babies have started talking prior to finding new homes.

In summary, we find the Princess of Wales to be a delightful avicultural specimen. The title of this article has a twofold meaning. Those familiar with the Princess will tell you that few birds enjoy their afternoon nap more than these fellows. A fluffed-up, slack necked Princess of Wales may resemble an ill bird to the untrained observer. However, once aware of your interest, they transform into a perky, gregarious creature. Secondly, when you learn that a movie or book is a "sleeper" — you should recognize that it is an undiscovered treasure waiting to be enjoyed. We feel the Princess of Wales Parakeet is just such a "sleeper." The color scheme of the normal birds is quite striking. Also available are blue and lutino mutations for those who are interested in more exotic pursuits. The Princess of Wales can be colony bred or kept in a mixed aviary due to its gregarious and non-aggressive demeanor. Due to their calm and steady nature they may be used as foster parents for other species, such as eclectus or other birds with downy young. Their size, innate fearlessness, low noise level, curiosity, and ability to mimic are all strong points for pet potential. We highly recommend the Princess of Wales to novices as well as experienced aviculturists - they are a true joy to have in your bird collection.

Epilogue: Two weeks after the two babies were rescued from the abandoned nest, their parents produced a clutch of four eggs - two of which are fertile... ➔



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