

Macaw Husbandry: Tips and Tricks

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For the last two and a half years two co-writers have been researching data on macaws. This research has led us into areas we never suspected and put to rest many myths that have been repeated for years. The data is published now in a book entitled "The Large Macaws: Their Care, Breeding and Conservation." Let me share a few of the highlights.

Identification

Several members of the macaw family have similar looking species. Confusion over Scarlet or Green-winged, Blue and Gold or Blue-throated, Buffon's or Military abound. To make matters worse, hybrids obscure the issue even more. This confusion over identity is not limited to aviculturists. Careful review of recent literature show that natural history, zoological, conservation and even specialty rainforest periodicals commonly misidentify various species of macaws.

Consistent misidentification bewilders aviculturists who specialize in the macaw family. Just like lory identification is simple for John Vanderhoof, or Amazon identification is second nature for John Stoodley, once the criteria for identification is learned, accurate classification is insured. Then the variety within the individual species can be fully appreciated.

Selection

Once the specific variety of macaw is chosen, the next decision is where to get the bird or birds. Prior to 1980, the only choice available was wild-caught birds. These birds were taken from the wild as either chicks from the nest or older, in many cases adult stock. During this early period of macaw aviculture the length of time required for wild-caught birds to breed was unknown. The hope was that by buying the older bird, breeding success would come quicker and easier. That premise turned out to be incorrect. Adult birds appeared to be shell

shocked and commonly did not take well to captivity. The most difficult to "domesticate" were known as "brancos." Broncos commonly screamed or would bite to convince you that interacting with them was a bad idea. The younger birds adapted easier than their older counterparts but the traveling, quarantine and human handling took its toll. Neither was ideal and I suspect many of us still have birds from the wild that have not bred for us. Some of these birds have had multiple homes and remained unproductive.

Most of the successful breeders learned quickly that the most competent breeding birds were those hatched in captivity. Our first captive-bred Blue and Gold Macaw was purchased in the late 1970's for \$1800.00. This was a common price for a baby Blue and Gold then, since few were bred in those early years. Two and a half years later she produced her first clutch of fertile eggs. After that I was convinced of the benefit of captive bred stock. The increase in cost was easily made up by the ease in working with the birds and their willingness to reproduce. Our conclusion has not changed. There are some extremely skilled breeders both in this country and abroad who consistently produce excellent, healthy birds.

Purchasing a Macaw

Once you decide on a species of macaw it should be evident that the most important concern is the health of the bird. All aviculturists should by now be familiar with diseases that could affect our birds. Psittacosis, Proventricular Dilatation, Polyoma, Papillomas and Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease (rare) are some of the more frequently discussed problems that could affect a macaw. Requiring diagnostic testing for those diseases where they are available is appropriate. Complications will arise if appropriate testing is not carried out prior to bringing your new bird home.

A veterinarian exam which includes a full physical, complete blood count, cultures of the vent and throat, chlamydia test and currently available viral diagnostic tests are a minimum entry level requirement to your facility. Some breeders provide birds with these tests already done. Make sure you ask what is included in the price.

Housing

Before we did our research we believed what bird books were reporting; that these birds had a wingspan of about three feet. What we found is that the wingspan for most species is about four feet. Hyacinth wingspans exceed four feet. Their lengths were 50 to 57 inches. There are a few commercially produced cages on the market that would meet their needs. In addition, many people build their own environments to house their birds in, which can often be far larger than what is commonly available. Ideally, birds should be able to fully extend their wings, with plenty of clearance for their head and tail. The feeding cups should be large to accommodate their large heads as well as their need for a greater quantity of food.

The decision of how to house your birds should be based on the species, number of birds and the length of time they will be spending in the cage. Long term housing of breeder birds requires more spacious facilities than a cage for a single pet.

Breeding Macaws

The choice to breed should not be taken lightly. Breeding macaws is a time consuming, absorbing vocation. Feeding birds around the clock; rushing home from the movies; canceling a dinner party, conference, or family vacation; or explaining to the family why feeding birds is more important than Aunt Martha's funeral can take its toll. Decide to breed macaws only if it is what you are really interested in doing.

If the breeding bug has bitten you, learn as much as you can about the species you are interested in breeding. Get birds you really like, not just those that are the current rave. Once again, your number one concern should be the health of the bird.

Incubation

Macaws incubate their eggs for 26 - 28 days on average. Some variation occurs depending on the species, weather conditions and individual variation.

There are three ways to approach in-

cubation:

● **Parent-hatched:** Most birds will willingly raise their own young without the need for human intervention. This is certainly the most natural approach to macaw incubation and pediatrics.

● **Artificial incubation:** This method might be required with birds that do not successfully raise their own young. Some inexperienced pairs might fail on their first or even second nest. Usually these problems are eventually worked out. If not, human intervention might be required. Artificial incubation is not without its losses. Some aviculturists use artificial incubation as a means to increase their bird's production.

● **Foster incubation:** Some hens are very good sitters and will hatch any fertile egg given them. Foster incubation is useful if you do not have an incubator or do not have the time to handfeed chicks. It is important that the parentage of the chicks raised by foster incubation is noted. We have had a Blue and Gold hatch a Hyacinth, and a Buffon's hatch Scarlets. We knew the parentage and the foster mothers were apparently color blind and deaf since the calls for the species and their feathering was so different, yet the hens did not seem disturbed.

Pediatrics

No matter which way you choose to incubate, if the egg is fertile, eventually

you should be dealing with a newly hatched chick. In incubator hatched young you will be very busy for the first few weeks. If you parent-raise or a combination of parent-raise and human-raise it will be a little easier. Raising baby macaws is time consuming. It is amazing to watch them grow up seemingly in front of your eyes at every feeding.

There are three areas that require special attention for successful rearing of baby macaws: heat, humidity and nutritional formula.

● **Heat** must be adequate enough so the chick will not shiver. Shivering uses up calories maintaining warmth instead of using them to grow. If the chicks are too hot they will pant and lose valuable moisture. Instead of suggesting a specific temperature I suggest you watch the chicks themselves for clues. Multiple chicks will keep each other warm and need less heat than those that are alone.

● **Humidity** must be high enough to keep the chick's skin moist. If it is too dry the skin will show signs of flaking and peeling. Fluid content from the formula will be utilized by the body to replenish the low moisture content of the skin.

● **The bird's handfeeding formula** must provide the proper amounts of protein, fat, carbohydrates, calcium, vitamins and minerals to successfully raise a chick through weaning. Whichever formula you choose, your weight records should prove that the diet is providing nutritional

substance. For chicks to grow they require enough formula daily to exceed their basic functional needs. If they fail to gain weight then the volume is just enough to allow them to maintain themselves. If they are losing weight then the formula is not satisfying their basic needs. Insufficient volume of formula will also cause weight loss.

Weaning

Once the chick's peak weight has been achieved at about 50 to 80 days, depending on the species, the chick will start learning how to fly. They start refusing food and are more willing to try soft food. For this stage we put together a combination of soft food and dry foods. Initially, this may have quite a few foods to encourage the birds to eat a wide variety of items.

Weaning food -- dry: shelled almonds, shelled sunflower, shelled peanuts, raisins, Cheerios, (raw shelled macadamia nuts for the Hyacinths).

Weaning food -- soft: peeled bananas, apples, plums, melons, grapes, oranges, cooked broccoli, yams, etc.

Veterinary Care

Over the last decade avian veterinary knowledge has grown substantially. For you to succeed as a breeder, and for your birds to live a long life, it is important that you establish a long term relationship with an avian veterinarian. It is imperative that you contact him when a problem is first noticed, not after you have tried a dozen home remedies. Find a veterinarian that you are happy with and stick with him or her. Over the years the Vet's insights will be invaluable.

A good veterinarian will also listen to what his or her clients say about their birds. The most successful breeders have a good teamwork approach to their birds, combining their own expertise with that of their veterinarian.

Conclusion

Living with macaws can be an incredible experience. Providing the necessary environment, good veterinary care, nutrition as well as social stimulation will create a happy, healthy macaw.

These are normally long lived birds. With common sense and sensitivity to their needs they will give you a lifetime of enjoyment.

Literature Cited

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