

Considerations in Parent Rearing

Roundtable Discussion at AFA Convention 1996

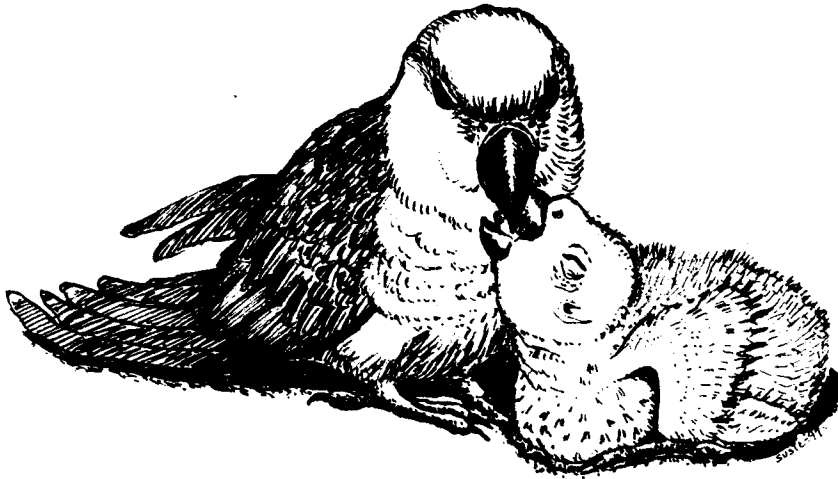
Participants

Eb Cravens, Hawaii

Rosemary Low, England

Laney S. Rickman, Texas

Dale R. Thompson, California



Opening Statements

Dale Thompson

What we are discussing here tonight, I feel, has an incredible bearing on just which parrot species will be in our aviaries in the year 2020 and beyond. There are many important things to be accomplished for the success of American aviculture and I feel tonight's topic touches on one of the top three.

With the enactment of the Wild Bird Conservation Act of 1992 (WBCA), the wild-caught birds that we have in our aviaries are much more valuable to us—not in monetary terms but for their gene pools which we must manage well.

This discussion is not for or against artificial incubation and hand-rearing from day one. Rather, I want to emphasize the positive influence of letting breeding pairs parent-rear some of their chicks some of the time. Maybe it should be just the last clutch of the season that you let the parents rear on their own. Such babies will have been taught by their parents and, hopefully, they will also pass this

behavior along to their own youngsters. This learned behavior is a very important tool that we must have in our future avicultural breeding stock.

I feel the more we go toward this direction and goal, the better success there will be for long term reproduction. With some of our parrot species, it could mean the difference whether or not they are with us in the year 2020.

Consider the following statistics and examples of how important it is that we pursue some parent-rearing in our aviaries.

Dr. Grau from the Avian Science Department of U.C. Davis (California), along with Tom Roudybush, did a study on the reproductive habits of the Cockatiel, which is a very simple bird to reproduce. They bred hundreds of birds to several generations in captivity. They took day-one incubator-hatched Cockatiels and isolated them in groups—single males, single females, males and females together, etc.—to see what they would do long-term in their breeding.

The scientists concluded that the isolated, handreared males reproduced

less than 50% of the time. And isolated single males had the poorest reproductive success of all the groups studied. Many times the male bird did just not know how to copulate, let alone know its duty about incubating or feeding young. This, in my opinion, was a fabulous study concerning Cockatiel reproductive needs. This information is especially important as I feel the key to successful reproduction in captivity is the responsibility of the male bird. It is the success of the nest that depends mainly on the female.

We can also, I feel, apply this information to the larger, more difficult birds to reproduce. I have seen the Australian parakeets in the European marketplace since the late 1970s when breeders there reared hundreds of Blue-bonnets, Australian King Parrots, Princess-of-Wales, etc., and were doing a much better job of it when compared with the American results. Over 99% of the European birds were parent-reared.

Now, over 25 years later, I have asked myself the question, "How are we as American aviculturists doing with the Australian parakeet reproduction?" I am in no way meaning to be negative, but there is cause for concern. The physical size of our Australian parakeets is shrinking because a great many of us in America are handrearing them. Though there is nothing wrong with this now, I feel we had better parent-rear a future portion of our Australian parakeets so we can increase their size back to what they were originally in Europe. This is especially true with some species such as the Princess-of-Wales Parakeet which has become really small in overall size.

It is also amazing to me how increased numbers of pet female rosellas lack their upper mandible. In my opinion, the reason for this is because they have been handreared to the point where they have lost some of their instinctual breeding behavior. They do not have the right response during the breeding season and will not react correctly to a breeding male. A breeding male "pushes" his female to enter the nest box and many times a handfed female does not respond so the male attacks her, often ripping off her upper mandible. The mandible-

less female syndrome has greatly increased over the past few years compared to what we had in the 1970s and early '80s. Why should we be importing more Australian parakeets (which are on the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Approved List) from Europe. Our own reproductive stock should fill our needs.

Regarding larger birds, over the past seven years I have asked, "Has anyone reproduced a captive-reared Moluccan Cockatoo (being F 1 generation) that is feeding babies into the 2nd generation?" I have found several captive-bred *Umbrella* Cockatoos having success, but no Moluccans. I do hope someone responds affirmatively someday.

The great majority of Moluccan eggs are removed from the nest and artificially incubated because the eggs are stepped on by the parents resulting in either being broken or disappearing completely. I feel this problem can be resolved by correct management of the Moluccan's aviary and nest box. It can be done as I, personally, have had several wild-caught pairs of Moluccans hatch and partially rear their babies in the nest.

When you observe a wild-caught Moluccan that "knock, knocks" on the perch with its foot, you easily recognize that this is a "wild" behavior.

Compare that to a handfed adult and you will see a totally different kind of attitude. The greater the difference between what is normal in the wild-caught behavior and what occurs in a handfed bird, the greater the risk of losing the species. I feel that if we are not careful in American aviculture, there will be many years yet of breeding Moluccans and then it will crash. As soon as all of our wild-caught stock quit reproducing or have passed away, the production of this species will go to nothing. We will lose the Moluccan Cockatoo, an absolutely fabulous species. We should be aware of this dire possibility now, so we can respond and hopefully rectify the problem.

We raise most of our psittacines for the pet market. Do they always have to be handfed to make good companion birds?

Dr. Jim R. Millam and the Psittacine

Research Project at U.C. Davis have done some very interesting work with Orange-winged Amazons that have been parent-reared. While the chicks were in the nest being raised by their natural parents, several of the student volunteers would remove them from the nest (starting at 21 days), touching and talking to them for a minimum of 15 minutes at a time before placing them back into the nest (and doing this three times a week). These babies knew very well what a human was because of the tactile sensations they received from the students. There was no handfeeding done whatsoever.

This study showed that weaned, parent-reared baby Orange-winged Amazons were very close to the same pet quality as handfed birds.

In fact, they were better in many respects. They knew how to entertain themselves for hours at a time while the owner was not present. I feel that these Orange-winged Amazons are more self-sufficient because they were given something more—something undefinable, perhaps, but real—by their parents than we can provide by handfeeding from day-one.

They still were very good companion birds without having many of the neurotic behavior problems noted in many human-imprinted, handfed birds. The other important difference is that these parrots also had the script needed for becoming future breeders.

I feel now is the time to use this technique for other species. These parent-reared Amazons certainly are less likely to feather pick or self-mutilate than are many handfed African Greys and other species.

I feel we have a positive future in American aviculture if we allow our pairs of birds to do more parent-rearing. Leave the last clutch of the year or just one baby in the last clutch for the parent birds to rear by themselves.

It is helpful even if you just allow the parents to keep the young of the last clutch a few more weeks than they did the previous season. If you add a few weeks each season, eventually you'll have a completely parent-weaned clutch.

In my aviaries, over 95% of the parrots feed their young for the first few weeks. Only with a very few pairs are

the eggs removed for artificial incubation and this is mainly because of an accident or in the case of chronic egg eaters.

All of my Rose-breasted Cockatoo pairs feed their own babies and at five weeks the youngsters are fully feathered miniatures of the adults. They are more fully developed than their incubated, handfed-from-day-one counterparts of the same age.

In my experience, handfed from the egg Rose-breasted Cockatoos, Golden Conures and Hyacinth Macaws have great difficulty gaining the same growth and weight of parent-reared stock. The greatest difficulty is in the first seven days of life.

If you know how to sex youngsters in the nest (as Eclectus, some Senegals and macaws) allow the pair to rear a male youngster to weaning. You will be surprised. The parents will have closure for the breeding season and you will have a wonderful bird to use as future breeding stock. Hold back 10% of your babies for breeding stock and maybe next time hold back 30%. It is a better way than purchasing unknown stock from outside your aviary. This is the ultimate closed aviary.

In the long term, I feel, we may very well have a better price and a better market for our parent-reared birds. It will depend upon the species. There will soon be a new market out there and it will be for the breeder bird. There is an aviculturist in Arizona who is parent-rearing caiques. Also, Amazons, macaws and a few Great-billed Parrots are being parent-reared in America. This is exciting! Maybe if this continues and is increased we will still have caiques and Moluccans and more in the Year 2020.

Rosemary Low

I must reinforce everything that Dale has stated. Especially with regards to the Moluccan Cockatoo. I, too, have asked many people whether they have had a handfed male Moluccan produce young. And I know of just one single bird, but that bird was never kept as a pet. It was always kept around other Moluccan Cockatoos. I have mentioned this before in the context of Moluccans. I



From the left: Dale R. Thompson, Laney Rickman, Rosemary Low, and Eb Cravens, all experts in the art of getting parrots to raise their own babies. They presented their views then took questions from the audience.

know it is very difficult to have parent-raised young for many reasons. But what I have done with Moluccans is to have an older male bird. I call him the guardian, and he accompanies the young that are being handreared from the age of about seven weeks. I have found this eliminates the crying behavior that you get in so many handraised Moluccan Cockatoos. They grow up with so much more natural behavior which they are learning from a very early age from this guardian male.

Over the years I have raised about 100 species of parrots. I have also had about the same number, not necessarily the same species, but about 100 species parent-raised in my care. By parent-raised, I mean to fledging, not just fed for two to three weeks. And, especially in recent years, it has really been watching the behavior of the family groups, of the young on the perches with their parents, which has given me so much pleasure.

I know that there are many aviculturists who have never had this experience. They really don't know what they are missing out on. They should try it! I also think that we owe it to our birds to let them raise some young, not all the time but, as Dale suggests, perhaps just the second clutch of the season.

Because they are highly intelligent and sensitive birds and they need the

stimulation and diversion (and dare I say the emotional satisfaction) that they get from raising their own young.

If we go back to basics, we can ask, "Why do we handraise young?" Of course, one of the principle reasons is to produce young that are suitable for pets. But we seem to have lost sight of the fact that many parent-raised parrots are not only as good in every way for the purpose of a pet as a handraised bird, but ultimately they can be *better* because handraised young are extremely demanding and they go through a stage where they are very difficult to deal with—especially if they don't get enough attention from their owners. Then we see real behavioral problems or screaming or plucking.

Parent-raised birds are nowhere near as demanding and are very unlikely to exhibit these behavioral problems. Admittedly, initially you may not have a tame bird, but there is a challenge in having this bird respond to you which I think is far more satisfying than starting off with a tame bird that will go to anyone.

The other reason why handrearing is almost standard procedure is the financial aspect. But really, we need not lose any income at all by allowing our birds to raise their second clutch. Especially with birds such as Amazons which are not going to have more than two clutches anyway. If one takes into

account all the expenses involved in handraising including labor, electricity, and equipment, you are not gaining financially at all, especially with the less expensive birds.

One of the most important aspects that should be considered is that now that we don't have the wide range of imported birds as breeders, we need to be producing parent-raised young and they will be fulfilling the role of the wild-caught birds which are diminishing so rapidly in collections it is really quite incredible. We've got to prepare ourselves now for the time when very few wild-caught birds remain, by producing parent-raised young. And as Dale suggests, these birds are going to be commanding just as much money as the handraised birds.

We cannot pretend that parent-rearing is without its problems. It's not—just as handraising is not. *We* have to learn as well as birds. We make mistakes and we cannot blame the birds for these mistakes when they are attempting to rear their young. Sometimes it's just the first time and it is inexperience on their part and then they go on to get it right!

But sometimes parent-rearing fails because we have done things wrong. Especially in aspects of diet or in pairing up birds that are not 100% healthy. Then they can be passing on bacteria or virus to their young. Anyone who

aims to have parent-raised young should first of all make sure that they have got healthy stock.

One final point is that alongside the commercial species we keep, we should pick up a species such as a hanging parrot, a Vasa Parrot or one of the *Tanygnathus* species which is definitely not one of those which is popular in the pet trade, and is in danger of dying out in American aviculture. To ensure that a good diversity of parrot species continues to exist in American aviculture, everyone should have at least one non-commercial species. This will greatly contribute to the future of parrot aviculture in this country.

Laney Rickman

Earlier in the program, Laurella Desborough discussed the need to maintain the ability of future generations to breed. Bob Berry also emphasized the need for purebred pedigreed breeding stock for the breeder market. My sincere hope is that you breeders here will seriously think about these points and what contributions you can make to the future of aviculture.

My focus is parent-rearing. I specialize in endangered species of macaws that I raise to be breeders. I sell them only to other breeders who are serious about working with these species.

It was a mysterious coincidence that this sort of thing happened to me. I used to travel a lot in Latin America. By going to various countries and seeing these magnificent birds, I became enthralled with them. So I didn't get into aviculture the normal way that most people do—by purchasing a pet bird.

My concern about the birds' plight in the wild led me to start learning more about how they are doing in aviculture. I decided to focus primarily on Blue-throated and Buffon's Macaws.

There are so many questions about the breeding potential of the young we are raising. Does it matter if they have been fed by their parents or not? Can incubator hatched babies be socialized enough to compensate for the lack of parent-instilled wild instincts?

While anecdotal information abounds, there is no definitive body of

work on the question. These questions and other may never be completely answered. And if they are, it may be years from now.

So with the question in my mind, "Does it Matter?", we decided to take the opposite approach of what seems to be the norm in aviculture in this country. We emphasize as much parent-rearing as possible, although there have been the inevitable departures.

Cage bird parent-rearing is a partnership effort, pairing the keeper with the parent birds. I cannot emphasize enough how important the role is we play in the success of our birds. If you consider that they have no choice about the diet or the environment, it is entirely up to us to analyze the situation. Some of our decisions may need to be intuitive, based on trial and error, or whatever it takes.

Believe me, there have been many times that I felt like I could understand why people pull the eggs to artificially incubate. It is more control! It's not as scary. You don't worry about "Will they break the eggs? Will they feed the chicks?"

But to me the most gratifying experience has been the challenge of working with the birds, learning to trust that they know how, and gradually giving them more responsibility. If they go just so far one time, great! Next time take it a step further. I can't tell you how absolutely fabulous it was the first time that I saw a baby Blue-throated Macaw stick its head out the nest box and look at me with those little black eyes! I'll never forget that feeling. And from that point on I have gotten more and more into parent-rearing.

It is something you have to try. You have to experience it to decide if you are comfortable with it. I would encourage anyone who hasn't done it to just try it at least once in a while. For me, it has been a very rewarding experience.

I do believe that there is a market for breeders for the future. So I opted not to deal with the pet trade at all. I raise strictly future breeding stock. I am very encouraged because I have received a lot of positive feedback from people who want to acquire this kind of breeder bird for their future breeding stock.

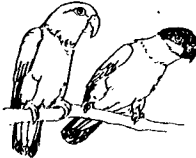
I am interested in talking to anyone out there who wants to share information about parent-rearing experiences with macaws. It is a learning process.

EB Cravens

I have been brought up in aviculture through working in the pet trade. I have spent 15 years working with and training parrots and raising parrots in my own small hobby operation of roughly 12 pairs very dear to me. I have five general points to make about how raising parrots for the pet trade relates to parent-raised parrots and a strong future breeding stock in aviculture.

- First, I have found that leaving chicks with their parents until they are 28 days of age, regardless of species, still produces exquisite pets for the market that I am selling into. This method is producing chicks that are lively. I don't take a chick out of the nest before its eyes are open because I want it to know its parents and to see that bright circular dab of light which is the opening of the nest box from inside.

In some cases I leave babies with their parents as long as five weeks. I think you can save yourself a tremendous amount of work. And when you do take the babies out, provided you have trained the parents correctly, they are in wonderful shape with antibodies their parents have given them through feeding.



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• Second, I think it is very important if you are breeding for the pet trade to take the extra time to train the babies while you are feeding them in the handfeeding tubs in the nursery. Do the little bit of extra that it takes in order to get a bird that is not necessarily totally imprinted on humans.

For example, you need to fledge your babies. When they go into a weaning situation they need to be flying as they are learning to eat for themselves. The two go hand in hand and if you take away their wings you are going to have trouble weaning them. You are going to get criers and birds that are not burning off the energy because the diet is too rich for what is going on in their lives. Flight is important.

Also, when we take our babies out of the baby tubs and move them into small holding cages the first thing we do is to provide a brown cardboard shoebox with a hole cut out at one end. The babies rush into that shoebox at night. Once again they are learning sleep in their box and see the round opening of light which is the entrance hole. They also see the black, round nest box entrance when it is time to go back in at night.

When it reaches maturity and you put it in a breeding aviary, a bird thus trained will be in the nest box the first night. He will check it out. It is not scary. That is an extremely important training point for the future breeding bird. Something we can easily do. It takes only two weeks and a lot of cardboard boxes.

• Third, I think we need to train the birds to get along with others. The idea that you separate babies in baby tubs—one Eclectus here and his brother over there—is a fallacy in aviculture. These birds need to be near each other. They need to brace their necks on each other when they are starting to feed. You want to see them beaking and preening and getting along with birds, preferably their own species.

If you do not have their own species, there are options. We have raised mini macaws with Goffin's Cockatoos, Umbrellas with Moluccans, Scarlets with Blue and Gold Macaws, lorries with Eclectus. Get another bird in that tub. It makes it realize that it is

not alone.

Birds reared alone, in my experience, have 10 times the problems. And it is because, even at the best, when we pull birds away from their parents, they are not going to get 100% of the love, affection and the touching they need. Give the babies a brother or a sister or someone else to lean upon.

• The fourth point is in regard to breeding your pets. When they come of age and the male starts masturbating on the perch or the female wants to snuggle under you and be petted, it is a misconception in aviculture to think that if you breed them you are going to lose them as fond pets in your life.

Certainly with the species that are seasonal breeders like conures, Amazons and macaws. There is a breeding season when they go to nest and you give them their privacy. When it is not breeding season, I can guarantee that the little female who was your pet for seven years is going to be back on your shoulder watching TV. Her mate may be a little shyer.

I know of Double Yellow-headed Amazons being raised in living rooms and conures that have 14 babies in the house during their breeding season and when that season is over, they will eat at the picnic table with their owners.

The reason people lose their pets when they breed them is because they send them out to the back yard. I recently met some folks in Hawaii who have two Yellow-naped Amazons. The female they raised nine years ago and a recently-bought 5-year-old male that was a very good pet. These birds were wonderful together.

The owners asked me, "Should we build them a cage out in the backyard and breed these birds?" I said, "Breed them in your living room or in your bedroom. Don't break the relationship that you have with them. It will change. You're not going to be number one in their lives because they are essentially getting married. But you'll find that you are still a member of the flock."

Every one of my breeding pairs is a 2nd or 3rd generation captive-raised bird. I do not like dealing with wild-caught birds because if they get out of their cages, they are gone. I have had

a lot of escapees down through the years and if you are breeding birds that were originally your pets or they were handraised, usually it's not a problem to get them back unless they get lost.


With captive-reared birds it is a joy to be in your own aviary because they are calling you by name and they want their heads scratched and such. So don't worry about breeding your pets. It's *how* you do it, not *that* you do it.

• My last point is that it is my responsibility as a breeder of birds to the pet market not to sell an endangered or threatened species into the pet trade unless absolutely necessary.

This holds true also with the species that we are having trouble keeping in aviculture—whether endangered or not—Fischer's lovebirds, the *Protogeris* family and Slaty-headed Parakeets, for example. To get such a bird to the weaning stage and sell it into the pet trade is not acting responsibly.

It is my responsibility now to go one step further and say, "I'm going to make my judgements on the basis of the future of aviculture" so if my kids want to breed birds these species are still going to be around for them.

I feel obligated to look at the long term relationship between me and my clients who buy handfed birds. A Hawk-headed or a Cape Parrot should not be sold to the pet trade. Or if you do, at least sell them to a shop like the ones I work with, where the owner knows exactly what the bird means to aviculture. When the bird is resold, the new owner is told of his obligation to eventually get a mate for the bird and five years down the road to make the choice to hobby breed that bird at home.

Aviculture's future is only a question of education. We have come so far, so fast in aviculture that some of the things I believed only two or three years ago have changed in response to new information. We are learning new things. We should not get stuck in our ruts. We should change our values a little bit as we learn new things. If we do so, what we will be doing in aviculture is going to be extremely solid in the 2020. No doubt about it. 

The question and answer segment of the roundtable will appear in the next issue of Watchbird.