

Creative Considerations of Aviculture

by Mark Moore, Dripping Springs, TX

In my 20 years of bird keeping, I have found that there are no guarantees. That which is gospel, does not always apply. And that which works for the fellow down the road may not work for me. What satisfies one pair of birds may displease another pair. So is the case of adequate nesting sites for psittacines.

Do you feel that you have a "bad" pair of birds? Do they eat eggs, toss eggs from the nest box, drop eggs from the perch, lay eggs in the food bowl, or even mutilate babies? These challenging problems can be addressed and possibly alleviated.

There are as many designs for nest boxes as there are creative minds. We have seen everything from standard

"Grandfather" box designs to elaborate boxes shaped like letters of the alphabet. And, we all have our favorites for each species. But, remember, if you have one pair that is not nesting or has bad nesting habits, change the nest site provided and even offer more than one design at a time. This may help diminish some of these discouraging problems.

Some aviculturists fashion nest sites out of beer kegs or steel drums. Many use PVC tubes and others even use mailboxes. Again, there is no limit as to how creative we can be. And, if it works, that is the deciding factor. But, when the current situation is not producing results, what do we do?

My preferred choice for box build-

ing material is wood. It is easily available and cuts to the various shapes and angles needed to build all the styles of boxes that we require. Wooden boxes are repairable and offer the birds chewing material.

The indestructible, once-in-a-lifetime box may never need replacing but it also may fail to get the routine inspection that should be done. We need to be aware of bug infestations in nest boxes, waterlogged nesting material, and secure fasteners to support the box as well as other undesirable conditions, which may arise.

If alternative construction materials are used, the keepers must not be overconfident and become lax in their awareness of the nesting areas. Some metals can be destroyed by the stronger parrots and sharp barbs can protrude into the entrance and become harmful to the birds and their owners. Also, metal fragments can be ingested and become fatal. Metal fatigue can also cause a break around the hanging brackets resulting in a disastrous crash to the floor. Not all metal boxes have tight seams and may allow unwanted light and water to invade the cavity. Also, the metal conducts cold and heat. A dark cavity which radiates heat invites wasps and other undesirable house guests.

Should a pair of birds excavate the nesting material and lay their eggs on the hot or cold metal surface, the viability of the eggs can be greatly reduced. Wooden boxes have a tendency to be heavier and also quieter. This extra weight helps to keep the box steady and furnishes a calmer environment as opposed to some metal boxes springing violently or vibrating due to the active birds.

How deep are your boxes? Speaking from experience, "nothing" is too deep. I can recite a tale regarding a pair of Goffin's Cockatoos that lived in their nest box for five years and never laid an egg during their entire invisible existence. Finally, out of desperation and by hearing that they may want something different, their owner built a nest box over five feet deep. This "exaggerated" effort proved to be fruitful. The new box went from the top of the suspended cage all the way to the floor. Fertile eggs were laid



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In another case, a pair of Scarlet-chested Parakeets acted normally and worked their nest box, but continually laid their eggs in the seed cup. This was quickly corrected by changing the nest box design. The standard parakeet box was exchanged with a long, narrow, vertical entrance down to a dark narrow chamber. This exaggerated "L" design proved to be prosperous. This pair never laid outside the box again and proceeded to raise several clutches successfully.

Just because you see a pair going in and out of a nest box, do not assume that they are content. If breeding seasons come and go and you have no success, try something different.

I have currently redesigned a nest box over six feet deep for a pair of rare cockatoos who chose to lay on the floor for the second season. Each year the male aggressively prepared the nest site, but not to his mate's satisfaction. Hopefully, this new season will prove more rewarding with this new design. If an attempt at change is not made, then how can we expect different results?

Many species are stimulated by the natural activity of excavating their own nest. Offering a smaller entrance and allowing the birds to chew at the front of the nest box easily simulates this. Even nailing a piece of plywood with a tiny hole over the already cut entrance will give way to that extra chewing activity. Many Amazons and some Macaws, as well as others, can benefit from having this opportunity.

The position of the nest box can also play a very important role in the success of producing offspring. If at all possible, avoid having the entrance face the sunlight. The sunshine reflects down the light surface of the wood and can completely illuminate the inside of the box. We want to be sure that a dark cavity is offered to optimize the sense of security in the nest. When the position of the box is not negotiable, then one may need to be a little more creative. I have personally had wooden nest boxes lined with flat-black Formica. Talk about a dark box... Also, one can stain the inside of the wooden box with non-toxic black ink. This will also cut down on

the luminescence of the wood. Again, sometimes we need to reach into the obscure, inventive side of aviculture to resolve some of our difficulties.

Our nest openings should also be protected from the other elements such as rain and wind. There are numerous buffers that can be used to divert the climate changes we encounter. Whether it is a simple windbreak or an innovative entrance design, the more stability we can provide for the nesting environment, the more trustworthy the birds will be of it.

Another consideration when contemplating the nest box design is the position of the entrance. Most psittacines will utilize a nest entrance located on the vertical side of the nest box. But, there are those who prefer a drop styled entrance at the top of the nest box leading straight down. These top style entrances require more ingenuity, as they are much harder to adapt to the average elevated cage. Creative nest boxes may require a more innovative cage design. The top entrance style also optimizes the problem for the need to protect the nest cavity

from the elements. Some cockatoos, in particular, desire this type of design. The extra challenge is more than worth the reward.

So remember, dark, secure environments may be the missing key to successful breeding. If one feels that this is already provided, then change the shapes, styles, or location offered.

Sometimes, change is the only missing stimulus. ✈

Baltimore Firsts

AFA Convention '98, July 29-August 2

1784 First hot air balloon ascension - by Edward Warren in the vicinity of the area now called Mount Vernon Place.

1800 First investment banking house - founded by Alexander Brown.

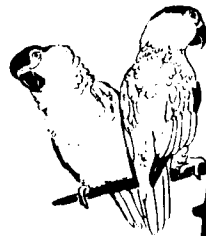
1808 First U.S. Army horse artillery - formed at Fort McHenry.

1817 First street to be lighted with gas.

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