

Fledging Baby Parrots

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Photos courtesy of Author

Seventeen years ago I fledged and weaned the first baby bird that I hand-raised. It was a challenging undertaking and a confusing time. I only had one person to call upon for advice and he was not helpful. I did not know how to go from two hand-feedings a day to one. Taking the baby from one hand-feeding a day to complete independence seemed nearly impossible. I also had a baby bird buzzing around my house crashing into lamps, windows and pictures and bumping her head on the ceiling. Neither the bird nor I knew what we were doing. The chick looked to me for guidance that I could not provide. Yet, we both survived and despite my inadequacies as a mother hen and to her credit, the baby turned out to be a delightful companion. Today I still face these challenges with every baby that I raise. However, experience has made me calmer and each baby has taught me how to be better at raising chicks. I now understand when to reduce hand-feedings and when to stop that last hand-feeding altogether. I am no longer frantic about baby birds taking their first flight; in fact I look forward to experiencing fledging with each new chick. I have devised methods to teach baby birds how to fly and land and, to a lesser extent, avoid windows.

Weaning

Baby birds can be offered solid food when they begin picking up things with their beaks. Many will begin to eat some solid food weeks before they fledge. However, I prefer to offer them solid food only after they have taken short flights that can be better described as large jumps. In the co-parenting

studies that I have done, I learned that macaw chicks left with their parents do not consume solid foods until they have fledged or are very close to fledging. I have never seen an adult parrot offer a piece of solid food to a chick at any stage of development. Fledging is the time that nature intended for the chicks to begin the process of independence from their parents. Chicks that are offered solid food once they have begun flying begin consuming significant quantities of solid food quicker than chicks that have been offered solid food at a younger age.

During the co-parenting studies I discovered that macaw parents had many of the same troubles feeding and fledging chicks that I had encountered. When the babies were refusing food the parents would chase them around, regurgitating food into the babies' beaks. The babies finally accepted food from the parents and then lowered their heads and allowed the food to pour out of their beaks or slung the food, while violently shaking their heads. The desire to provide the babies with enough nutrition was as strong in the parents as it is in hand-feeders, who worry that chicks will lose too much weight. Yet, weight loss is inevitable, natural and a requirement for flight. Keeping good weight records and knowing what percent weight loss is normal for a particular species can relieve tension and the desire to force feed babies which are progressing normally. My macaw chicks lost a greater percentage of their weight than my African Grey chicks. I have found that

regardless of species, bigger chicks and fat chicks will lose a larger percentage of their weight than thin, small, or undersized chicks.

When I raised my first baby I was told that the chick should get a certain number of feedings at set ages, which led to a great deal of confusion. Baby birds should be fed when empty; until the day comes that they begin refusing food. This normally occurs when the chicks are being fed three times a day. One day they are no longer interested in one of the hand-feedings. They would rather play with toys, other babies or flap their wings fiercely to build muscle, confidence, and shed fat so that they can take flight.

Take cues from the chicks and never try to force them to eat when they are uninterested in eating. When babies are forced to eat they may aspirate, lose self confidence and you will miss the natural window for full independence and the chick will take much longer to wean. I am not advocating premature or forced weaning; chicks should be fed when they are hungry. Weaning chicks display a paradoxical behavior, they will not eat solid food when they are hungry. However, once hand fed to satisfaction they will consume solid food, often immediately after being hand fed.

Competition for food among baby birds is a strong motivator towards independence. Single babies take longer to wean than babies that are kept with their clutch mates. Babies that are weaned onto a diet of various foods wean quicker than birds that are weaned onto one or two foods. Foods that are different in shape, size, color, texture and flavor inspire curiosity. The babies are more inclined to pick up and

play with foods that are interesting in appearance. As they discover that these items may be moist, dry, rough, or smooth in their mouths they are encouraged to try more new foods. Over the years I have observed that many breeders seem to force the babies to wean too early, while the individual who purchases an unweaned bird for a personal companion, hand-feeds the baby far too long. Neither premature weaning nor delayed weaning is emotionally healthy for the chick.

As chicks mature they eat more and more food on their own and they begin to eat less and less hand-feeding formula at each hand feeding.

Eventually they will accept only one hand feeding a day. At this stage they are psychologically dependent on the hand feeding,



"Sapphire" — For a bird to be beautiful and healthy, it must eat well.



Proper weaning and fledging is an important part of raising healthy, well adjusted companion birds. The author and two well adjusted companion birds she raised.

yet are able to sustain themselves on their own. When a chick is unable to break away from this psychological need it is due to fear and a need for attention. It is possible to sooth this fear by offering the baby solid foods by hand and giving the baby more attention. However, if babies are well past the age of independence and still appear to have a need for hand-feeding they should be examined by an avian veterinarian; these chicks often have a mild infection that prevents them from becoming completely food independent. Baby birds are fully weaned when they are no longer begging for hand feeding formula and they are maintaining a healthy weight for their age and species.

Fledging

Weaning and fledging have such a strong relationship to each other that one subject cannot be discussed without introducing the other. If babies are to wean in a timely fashion without suffering psychological trauma or become physically weakened, then chicks must be allowed to fledge. If a chick's wings are clipped before fledging, the baby bird will refuse to eat and will continue

to lose weight until he is bone thin. Instinct tells the anorexic chick that flight is vital to survival and if attempts at flying are unsuccessful it must be due to being overweight.

The psychological impact of never flying is serious. The weaning time increases, the babies become nervous, fearful, and clingy. They may not learn to entertain themselves, since they have no confidence. They are scared that a predator will kill them if they relax long enough to play. These birds develop many unwanted behaviors that make them poor companion birds. They will bite and scream excessively out of fear and may develop other equally disturbing neurotic habits. Flighted birds are confident, coordinated, and in better health than clipped birds. Flying is the best exercise for birds. It develops a strong cardiovascular system and muscles. Birds that flap their wings while hanging on to a perch may get a workout, yet it is not as complete as flying. Birds with clipped wings do not encounter as much resistance while flapping their wings as fully feathered birds. Flying works many muscles as the bird climbs through the air, banks or attempts to land.

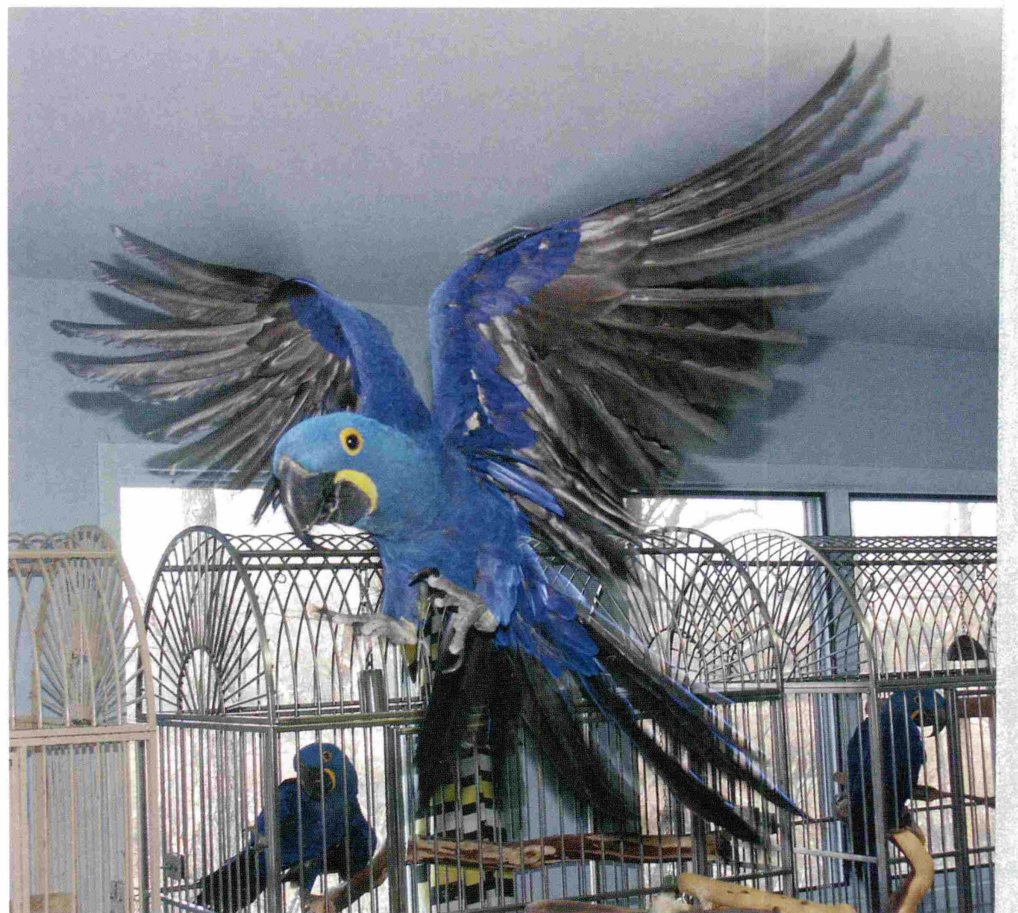
When babies take their first flight they may be able to ascend without much difficulty. However anything beyond flying in a straight line or ascending is beyond their abilities. Descending and landings are terrifying. When captive raised birds that are inexperienced in flying escape, they will fly to a high point and not know how to get down. When they attempt to return home they keep flying to higher and higher points, screaming for someone to come get them.

Flight Training

Once babies are nearly feathered, drop them a short distance onto a soft surface like a bed or a pillow. This teaches them to start thinking about what muscle to use to land and begins to alleviate the fear of falling. Most hand-raised babies will begin to fly by taking big hops, encourage them to hop



These shy Hyacinth chicks are just old enough to begin getting curious about the world around them.



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on to your arm. This is easier to do if the babies have been taught the up command. When the baby takes his first real flight, chances are good that he will head for a window. By providing a place for the bird to land you will lessen the chance that the chick will fly into the glass. Branches placed in front of the window or a gym in front of the window can be a big help. Inspect branches frequently. Birds often chew the ends of branches into sharp points and you do not want your birds impaling themselves on the branches. I always take the babies around the room and knock on solid objects, including the windows, walls and ceiling while repeating the word, "solid." Yet, the babies take a very long time to understand that they cannot fly through the glass. Sheer curtains and heavy curtains that can be open to reveal only a small section of the windows help to prevent head on collisions with the glass.

Wing Clipping

If babies are to be clipped before going to their new home, clipping should be done gradually. So that the babies learn that they can no longer fly, without having them crash to the floor. Each time a few feathers are clipped the baby is dropped on to a soft surface. However, I feel that birds who never have their wings clipped are healthier both emotionally and physically. Whenever a baby is going to a new home with someone who has the expertise and the environment to handle a flighted bird, I do not clip the babies' wings. ❖