

Hooded Parrots

By Lyrae Perry
Photos by Mark Moore

The Hooded parrot (*Psephotus chrysopterygius dissimilis*), is one of the most beautiful of the small Australian parrots. This little bird is actually a subspecies of the Golden Shouldered parrot (*Psephotus chrysopterygius*).

The adult male is iridescent turquoise blue over the majority of the body, rump and cheeks. The wing patches are bright yellow. The tail, flight feathers and back are greenish black. Central tail feathers are tipped in white. The vent feathers are orange-red. The males have a distinctive black "hood" which extends down the nape and blends into the back. The beak is a silvery gray, and the legs are a soft gray.

The adult female birds have a soft blue-green feathering over most of the body. Only the wings and tail feathers are olive green. The central tail feathers are tipped in white, and the vent feathers are a light orange-red to salmon colored. The young birds resemble the females in coloration.

Hooded parrots are more commonly bred in captivity in Australia than in the USA. Aviculturists are required to have a license to keep them. Dr. Stephen Garnett and Gabriel Crowley wrote in The Action Plan of Australian Birds for Birds Australia under contract to Environment Australia in June of 2000:

"Another bird many people think is threatened is the Hooded Parrot of the top end of the Northern Territory. In fact, surveys of the remote Arnhem Land habitat in which it thrives have found it relatively common. Its range may have contracted but it cannot be listed as threatened." (Published in Parrot Society of Australia News Jul/Aug 2000).

The Hooded parrots demonstrate a great desire to nest and reproduce. They make excellent aviary subjects as they are fairly quiet and do not have the

large space requirements of many other types of parrots. They are also not big chewers, so wood aviaries are an option. Hoodeds are also one of the most beautiful bird species in the world. This is one bird that desperately needs the close attention of captive breeding to increase its numbers. It is hoped that more aviculturists will take up the challenge of breeding this special little bird to insure its survival in captivity. While breeding these birds is not quite as simple as raising budgies or cockatiels, captive breeding is no longer out of reach for the aviculturist.

Hooded parrots have a reputation for being delicate and difficult to breed in captivity. This is true to an extent. They do have specific limits on tolerance for cold weather conditions, and need special housing to compensate. Breeding and survival rate of the chicks can be greatly improved by following some tried and true methods of management.

Birds always seem to do the best when they can be kept in as natural an environment as possible. They feather better and they seem to respond better to breeding stimuli. There are fewer disease problems too. Hoodeds are quite cold sensitive and do best in warm or temperate climates. If you are not living in a warm climate, you will need to make some adjustments to protect the birds during the winter months.

Obviously, keeping them in aviaries outdoors is not a year-round option for people who live in climates where it freezes and snows during the winter. There are a few breeders I know who have some success breeding them in large indoor facilities. However, if the birds can be flighted outside during the summer, they will do much better during the breeding season when brought inside.

Aviaries and Cages

Many breeders of Australian parrots prefer to house the Hoodeds in aviaries on the ground. The reason

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for this is that many of the small parrots spend a lot of time on the ground foraging and feeding as part of their natural behavior. They may be finding and eating gravel, minerals, insects or plant materials, which are beneficial. Other breeders prefer to house the birds in suspended cages specifically to prevent



Female Hooded Parrot

ingestion of parasites, harmful bacteria, molds or viruses, pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers to name a few. The area where you live makes a difference in what may be beneficial or harmful on the ground. Talk to other breeders and take the time to investigate the potential problems you may face on your property before exposing the birds. It has always been my personal preference to house Australian parrots, particularly the small parakeets, in aviaries with access to the ground. My experience has been that they breed more consistently. However, in Texas for example, this is not a good choice since Fire Ants are such a huge problem.

The typical wood framed or metal-framed aviary for these birds would measure 3' wide, 6' high and 10' long. Welded wire in 1/2" x 1" or 1/2" x 3" is the standard for most aviaries. You can also use 1/2" x 1/2" wire as the birds are not inclined to chew out of this light-weight mesh; however, it is not strong enough to be used for a suspended cage set-up.

If you plan to house your birds in a suspended cage, choose a wire gauge size heavier than 16. This will insure that the cage will not collapse under its own

weight. The cage can be hung from chains with mounts in the ceiling beams of a building or from a free-standing frame. Cages can also be fitted with legs that serve as a frame to hold the wire securely in all four corners. Generally, galvanized pipe is chosen as it is more durable than wood, and can be easily sterilized.

There are many styles of frames. Some are attached to each individual cage, and some frames are merely two parallel bars, with a row of cages placed over the top of the two bars. Your specific needs should help make the decision as to what style you prefer to use.

Whether you choose suspended cages or standard aviaries to house your Hoodeds, you will need to provide cover for the feeding stations and the area around the nestbox. If the birds are outside, this protects the food and the nest from exposure to harmful weather conditions. The birds should have a perch in the covered area for protection and privacy, as well as one in the open area of the cage, where they can sun themselves when the weather permits. If your birds are housed in a building, you may only need to cover the area around the nest box for privacy.

It's a good idea to double wire adjoining cages or aviaries. This will prevent Hooded parrots from attacking other birds, or being attacked through the cage wire. Hoodeds are quite territorial and will defend their aviary and cage space vehemently all year long. It's not unusual for the males to attack and chew toes of other male Hoodeds if within reach.

Nestboxes

The preferred nest box for Hoodeds is a grandfather clock style and is quite small. The boxes measure approximately 6" x 6" x 18" deep. The boxes are made out of wood and hang on the outside of the cages or inside for a walk-in aviary. The inspection hole should be placed at the back for a box hung on the outside of a cage. The inspection hole should be placed on the side of the box for one to be hung in an aviary.

Breeding and Nesting

With proper care and handling, a pair of Hooded parrots should be able to produce from four to six babies per clutch, two to three times per year. You will of course have to pull babies in for handfeeding or foster eggs to achieve these kinds of numbers.

In California and Texas, Hoodeds go to nest around October or November, with the babies hatching in December and January...when it's the coldest.

There are three major problems associated with nesting during the colder seasons that have to be overcome:

- 1.) Preventing egg-binding in the hens when it's cold.
- 2.) Avoiding the problem of parents killing the chicks when you check the nest box.
- 3.) Keeping the chicks warm enough to stay alive while they are in the nest.

Preventing Egg-Binding

Egg-binding is not merely caused by the cold. It can also be an indicator of poor nutrition. In particular, deficiencies in vitamin A, E, D-3 and calcium can lead to egg-binding. However, even when good nutrition has been supplied to the birds, egg-binding in cold weather is often still a problem for Hooded parrots. The only way to prevent the condition is to make sure the birds have adequate heat and exceptional nutrition during the laying periods. Continuous supplementation with cuttlebone is also recommended. Providing greens, sprouted seed and high quality dry seed and spray millet will be appreciated as well.

Checking the Nest box

Monitoring the chicks in the nest is a necessary activity for aviculturists. Some species tolerate nest checks better than others. It's been the experience of this author that Hooded parrots don't tolerate nest checks very well. The parents tend to destroy the eggs or kill the chicks and pitch them out of the box. Your own experience with nest management, knowledge of specific pair(s), coupled with your powers of observation are about the only tools you have to help you with this problem. The typical Hooded parents will tolerate only minimal inspection of the eggs, and only if you do not drive them off the nest to accomplish this task.

Take the time to watch when the birds come out to feed and carefully make your nest inspection at that time. If one or both of the birds fly back to the box, close it quickly and carefully and move away. You may have to make more than one attempt to check the box. It also helps if there is a wall or a blind on the side of the nest box, so your presence is not as noticeable.

The best plan is to be prepared for the nesting ahead of time. Get a calendar and have it at hand to record important information. Ideally, you will have enough notes to help you estimate when the last egg will hatch. If you are going to handfeed the chicks, you want to plan to pull them in when the last chick to hatch is about ten days old. If you make a mistake in your calculations and the chicks appear to be younger than you expected, you will need to bring them in anyway. The parents may kill the chicks, or they may not. It's best to not take the chance. The good news is that it is possible to handfeed them, if parent started, from five days old with good success.

Keeping the Chicks Warm in the Nest

Hooded parrot babies are naked for a much longer period than most parrots by comparison. This is a major factor in the deaths of many chicks because the parents do not spend lots of time keeping the babies warm. This is because in the wild, Hooded parrots nest in termite mounds which keep the nest evenly warm and draft free. Hoodeds continue to breed and nest based on their normal breeding season for Northern Australia...and NOT the Northern hemisphere, i.e. the USA. Even in the Mediterranean climate of Southern California the winters are too cold for the naked babies. Breeders in the USA are not alone in dealing with this problem, and successful Australian aviculturists artificially heat the nest logs too. There are other workable solutions to providing a warm nest for the chicks. For example, you can breed the birds indoors in a controlled environment or you can heat the nest boxes...or both depending on your set-up.

Keeping and breeding outdoors during the winter is possible in temperate climates if the boxes are heated. Heat can be provided for the birds quite simply by placing a heat lamp in close proximity to the nest box. If using a red heat lamp, be sure the fixture is rated for the wattage. Heat lamps get very hot, and can be a dangerous fire hazard if used in a cheap fixture meant for regular light bulbs. In addition, heat lamps will cook the birds in the box or overheat them in the cage if placed too close. Monitor the heat and adjust the distance between the lamp and the box to make sure it's not too hot. Make sure the birds can get away from the heat entirely if they want to. Heat should not be placed close to food or water. Heat should not be placed so close that the birds can touch the hot fixture, lamp or bulb, and

certainly the cords need to be out of reach so as not to be chewed. Regular bulbs and the appropriately rated fixtures can be purchased from most hardware stores. They work also, and may provide enough heat to do the job. Although, you may need more than one to heat the box enough and still keep the fixture out of the birds' reach.

How hot should the box be? The inside of the wood nest box should be just slightly warm to the touch. Ideally, the heat provided to the outside of the box will be aimed at the bottom. Heat rises, and the warmth will radiate upward in the box and keep the babies warm. When you do check them, if they are panting and look too hot, back the heat source away from the box a little bit and recheck in 15 minutes. Adjust as needed until the birds look comfortable. Placing the light below and to one side of the nest box, instead of squarely underneath the box may offer more control with heating.

The colder it is, the more difficult it will be to maintain an even temperature in the nest box. Ambient temperature changes between night and day will require monitoring and adjustment of the heat source as well. You may need one lamp during the day and two at night, or perhaps none during the day and one at night. Again, experimentation and monitoring will be necessary.

Several breeders of the small Australian species have used small resistor-type heaters to great success on outside cages and in aviaries. These tiny heaters are attached to the bottom on the outside of the nest box. The trick is to make sure the box stays warm, but doesn't get overheated. Monitor the heat in the boxes before hand, and make necessary adjustments before the heated box is accessible by the birds.

One more thought - make sure the lumber used for your nest boxes are made of wood that does not contain chemicals that will cause toxic poisoning if heated. Some particle board and plywood is made with glue containing formaldehyde, although there is plywood available that does not contain harmful chemicals. Ask if in doubt. If you have a choice, used solid plank wood instead of particle board or laminated lumber for heated boxes.

Fostering

Fostering is another option to think about when raising birds. There are many compatible species to

foster Hoodeds under. However, few of these species are nesting at the same time of year as Hooded parrots. Since Scarlet Chested parakeets nest almost year 'round, they can be used for fostering. If you have the option of fostering, take it. Let the Scarlet Chested parakeets raise and fledge the Hooded babies.

Brooding

Brooding the chicks and handfeeding them is an option in case the parents don't take care of the chicks, or if you are unable to foster the chicks under another pair. Brooding Hoodeds can be tricky if you are not using a high quality machine. It can be done, but is so much easier with one of the newer Plexiglas style brooders. You can check on your chicks often by just looking at them through the Plexiglas, and you can easily monitor temperature with a thermometer placed inside.

It is vital to keep the temperature at a constant warm value for brooding. Any big dips and the digestion stops. If the babies are too cold they will let you know by shivering. Too warm and you will see them panting or breathing rapidly. It's a good idea to have the brooder set up in advance. Check the temperature at various locations within the brooder. Find the most stable spot and place your tiny babies in that area. It has been the experience of this author that the Hooded babies do much better if brooded in the dark. They are active little birds and if allowed enough light to see the interior of the "nest", they spend a lot of time running every microgram of weight off! A dark towel over the top of a brooder box or window will do very nicely. Do not block fresh air intake with the towel or let it rest over the heating area or fan on the brooder.

Brooding materials should be as simple as possible. It is recommended that the birds be placed on paper towels to begin with and then on tightly woven terry towels or velvet towels as they grow. The Hooded parrot babies tend to want to eat anything they stand on and their crops can become impacted easily. Don't place them on substrate that can be swallowed, like shavings or re-manufactured newspaper.

The chicks will need to have the heat turned down in small increments as they grow. Again, observe the birds for shivering or panting and adjust your heat accordingly. Weaning off of heat is a slower process for Hoodeds than it is for most other birds.

Handfeeding Hooded Parrots

Hand feeding Hoodeds should not be attempted by anyone who is not experienced. These are not easy babies to hand feed. They are very tiny babies and need to be fed every 45 minutes to an hour for the first week after hatch. They will not thrive if you don't get up in the middle of the night to feed them as well. When they have grown some, the interval between feedings will increase to a couple of hours, and continue increasing if there are no health issues. The chicks take a longer time to feather than most other birds, and need to be brooded carefully and consistently to maintain digestion. Hooded chicks may face digestive crises if the formula consistency isn't proper or if they acquire a bacterial infection and digestion stops. You have to be able to identify the problem and solve it by the next feeding or two, or risk losing the chicks. It is a good idea to meet with your veterinarian ahead of time and prepare a 'first-aid kit' for you to use at home, in the event you have a problem and can't get the bird into the vet in a timely manner.

Additionally, the temptation to play with the babies should be completely discouraged. The handfed babies that get handled and played with have a tendency to become too tame to want to breed in the future. Resist the urge! Keep the chicks with other Hoodeds, and do not isolate the chicks while you are hand feeding. They learn to eat and get along in a flock by growing up with others.

The hand feeding formula you choose should be appropriate for the species. The formula for these birds should not be too high in fat or protein, but not too low, either. Choose a formula that comes with a recommendation by someone who has fed these birds successfully. If you are able, go look at some babies to see how well they are doing on a particular formula, and look at the fledged birds fed on that formula. Other than food in the feathers, look at the quality and shape of the feathers coming in. Look at the texture and quality of the skin on the chicks. How do the chicks look and act? Do they look well-fed and comfortable? If you have the opportunity, look at another breeder's babies and compare results.

Many handfeeding formulas can be utilized to raise Hooded parrots, however, a greater success has been achieved by thinning a normal liquid formula with one-third to one-half more water. Hooded parrots digestive systems draw the water content out of the formula (while in the crop) at a much faster rate than the solids pass through. The higher solids content in a formula doesn't digest completely, leaving a hard, dry ball in the bottom of the crop. This will have to be carefully worked through with more liquids. Too much or too strenuous manipulation will damage the crop and you may lose the chick. So plan to avoid this problem.



Male Hooded Parrot

When the solids content is lowered by adding more water, the chick's crop will tend to enlarge. If the crop is filled completely, it becomes pendulous and drops lower than the opening to the proventriculus. Muscle action slows and eventually stops. Food in the crop will sour because it is no longer moving through the digestive tract. It is for these reasons that it is NOT recommended to feed thin formula to any babies. Feeding watered down formula generally increases the chance that the bird will end up with digestive problems and may die. Hoodeds do indeed follow this pattern when fed thin formula, but are equally in danger of critical digestive problems with thicker formula. Feeding a thinner formula is the lesser of two evils. Successfully raising the chicks on thin formula is a matter of brinksmanship in monitoring and adjusting

volume of food delivered at each feeding. The crop will be stretching as the chick grows and overfeeding must be avoided. In order to compensate for less food delivered per feeding, you will need to increase the number of feedings per day. It is not an easy handfeeding process, but it can be successful if done with vigilance and care.

Before feeding a chick, always check to be sure digestion is proceeding properly. If the crop is empty or nearly so, go ahead and feed. If the digestion is slowing or stopped, you will need to act quickly to determine the problem and correct it. For example, it may be that your brooder is not at the correct temperature and you need to turn it up a degree or two, or you may have fed too much at the last feeding. If you suspect bacterial infection, you will have to get the birds to a qualified veterinarian for diagnosis and treatment.

Fortunately, by ten days old, the chicks are old enough to sleep through the night without being fed. Space feedings out evenly between 6:00AM and 11:00 PM. As the babies grow, there will be a continual, but small increase in the amount of formula you will give them at each feeding and you will notice that it may take longer for the crop to empty. This is your cue to adjust the feeding schedule by eliminating one feeding, again, spacing feedings evenly throughout the day. Continue this process until weaned.

Begin introducing soft foods when the babies go into the first weaning cage. You will begin reducing the number of feedings as they eat more and more on their own. Patience is the key to survivability at this point – don't rush the process of weaning. These little guys look and act like they are more mature than they really are. Experience has taught that the extra effort of stretching out the period of handfeeding has made all the difference in terms of successfully getting the birds on the perch in a healthy condition.

The soft foods offered to the Hooded babies in the first cage are the same as what would be offered to a Cockatiel. The mixture contains cooked brown rice, ground dog food (high quality protein type), frozen, thawed corn and peas, French cut green beans, sprouts such as hard winter wheat, cooked or sprouted lentils and grated carrot. This mix can be prepared ahead of time and refrigerated for a few days. Feed approximately one teaspoon per bird per day. Toasted "O" cereal is a good starter weaning food as well. The birds love to crunch them and it's good practice for

seed cracking. When the birds are ready to go into the next larger cage, you can begin offering them a good parakeet seed mix. As they begin eating the seed, take the toasted "O" cereal away.

Do not offer water in a dish to weaning birds until they no longer require heat. They love the water and can get chilled if wet from a bath. Use tube-type drinkers to begin with.

Weaning Birds

When the chicks are ready to come out of the brooders, they are moved into small cages and the weaning process begins. Since feathering is so slow in Hooded parrots, and since they do not have protective down feathering, the babies will need to remain on heat even after the fledging age. A clamp-light can be placed over the cage to provide some heat. Check to be sure the heat is warm enough and not so intense that the chicks are panting all the time. As with any electrical appliance, the birds should not be able to touch the lamp, fixture or chew the cord. Make sure these are out of reach. If the weather is warm enough, begin turning the lamp off during the day and leaving it on during the night. Carefully wean the young birds off the heat lamp.

When initially placed in the first weaning cage the babies will be skittish. It is helpful to put a light towel over the cage for the first day or two. Put a tightly woven washcloth on the floor of the cage for the first several days. This will give the babies a chance to get used to gripping wire, and toughen up the feet. The babies will still need to be handfed about four to five times per day at this stage. When the chicks begin picking feathers on each other or appear to really "mean it" when they fight, it's time to move them into a larger cage. They may still need heat and feeding; you are only giving them more room.

When the Hooded babies are fully eating on their own and heat is no longer necessary, they can be moved to a small aviary or a larger suspended cage. A cage measuring 2' x 6' x 6' is a perfect choice. They will likely be quite skittish and fly about wildly for a few days to a few weeks, but will eventually settle down. Be sure to monitor food and water intake. Observe the birds frequently to be sure they are okay. If any of them appear to be lethargic or fluffed up, you may want to move them back into a small weaning cage for perhaps another week. Move them back into the larger weaning cage when you feel they are

ready and watch to see that all is going well. Many young birds that have been recently moved from a weaning cage to a larger outside aviary or cage will go off food for a day or so. If the birds are not eating by the second day, you should move them back and supplement feed one time in the morning. That usually gets the appetite going and they will do better the next day. Some breeders will give one feeding in the morning while the young birds are in the new aviary. This works too; it just depends on the condition of the birds.

Fledged Hoodeds

If your Hoodeds are parent raised or foster parent raised you may not need to provide heat in the cage areas for them when the chicks fledge for very long, if at all. It depends on your set-up. When fully fledged and eating on their own, separate the young Hoodeds from their Scarlet Chested foster parents and house them with other young Hoodeds if possible. Watch ages here. If you have young Hoodeds from a previous season, they are probably already coloring up and the males may be scrapping with each other. This is normal behavior for Hooded parrots. If you mix age groups in one cage, the older birds may also decide to pick on the very young birds and not let them eat. Try to keep birds of the same age together and watch them closely to be sure all get a chance to eat. Moving young birds away from the parents and into a new cage is stressful for the birds. Make every effort to have multiple feed dishes available and multiple perches at various heights. It is also advisable to throw in several millet sprays. The birds are very attracted to these and it has made a big difference in survival to have that little extra food available for the young ones.

As the young males begin to mature, they become aggressive toward each other, and you should plan on housing them separately. The male parent may also be very aggressive toward the young males if the parents are allowed to raise their babies. Watch closely for any signs of ruffled or torn feathers, and separate the birds promptly.

Leg Bands & Microchips

The use of legbands for identification on Hooded parrots is not recommended. Even if you find a band that fits perfectly, often the edges are thin and sharp enough to cut the skin and sever the legs. Hooded parrots have very little tissue and circulation is mini-

mal in the tiny legs. Any damage is slow to heal at best. Even when the damaged leg appears to have healed sufficiently, it may turn black with gangrene and fall off. If the bird should survive this calamity, it will be useless as a breeder. Hooded parrots are far too rare to take chances with leg banding.

Micro-chipping is an option, and microchips have been successfully implanted into finches. Micro-chipping is still an invasive procedure, and should be carefully considered before initiating with these birds.

Preventive Maintenance

As with most other living things, the best insurance is preventive maintenance. Keep all feed and water dishes clean and free of bacteria and molds. Do not allow uneaten food to remain in dishes to spoil. Wet or damp seed is a wonderful medium for growing all sorts of nasty things. Keep seed dry by placing it as far away from water dishes as you can and never place seed under a perch.

Infant mortality rate for the chicks, whether parent raised or handfed will go down if the parents are treated annually for bacterial infections and worms. This is done approximately one to three months before the breeding season is due to begin. Most avian veterinarians will be happy to provide you with proper medications and dosages based on test results.

Moving Birds

It is advisable not to move Hooded parrots when they are molting. The stress is enormous and they may die shortly after being moved. Unless there is an emergency, wait until the molt is complete before changing cages and location of the birds.

Color Mutations

There are no color mutations known to the author for this species in captivity in the US. According to Dr. Terry Martin, BVSc in his book *A Guide to Color Mutations & Genetics in Parrots*, there are five mutation colors. They are: Seagreen or par blue, commonly referred to as 'blue'; Bronze fallow, commonly called 'cinnamon'; Black-eyed Clear, commonly called 'dominant pied'; Recessive Pied, commonly called 'pied'; and a mutation with an uncertain designation that is commonly referred to as 'olive'.

Another Australian breeder, Andrew Desyllas, wrote

an article describing his breeding of the 'blue' Hooded parrot. The photos show the bird has cream-colored wing patches and vent, but the top of the head is a grayish color and the body is a different color of blue than in the wild type. Since the color shift is not consistent with what we would normally see in a blue bird, it is logical to assume that this mutation is in fact a par blue or something similar to what is called turquoise in the US. Regardless of what the mutation is called, it's a beautiful mutation.

Endangered Species Act (ESA) Regulation

Both the Golden-shouldered parakeet and the subspecies Hooded parakeet are now listed under the United States Endangered Species Act (USES). Listings of foreign species such as this require that a Captive-bred Wildlife Registration (CBW) be on file with the USFWS for any "commerce" between two breeders or owners in different States. In other words, any sale, barter, or uneven trade between breeders or holders that takes place over a State line requires that both parties be registered for this species with the USFWS and be in possession of a CBW Permit that lists this species as an approved species. Note that transactions where no profit or money is being exchanged do not require this CBW permit. This includes breeder loans (even if young are returned), but a contract will need to be signed between the two parties, or gifts or donations of birds from one State to another. Proper documentation of the transaction is necessary to prove that it was not a transaction for profit or gain.

There is a "one time only" permit available for sales or barter taking place over State lines (from one State to another) called an Interstate Commerce Permit. The USFWS can issue this permit when a benefit to the species as a whole is demonstrated and supported by the transaction.

Interestingly, there is no permit required for "In State" transactions that do not extend into another State. Both parties must have a legal address within the State of the transaction to exempt permit requirements. This particular "glitch" in the Code of Federal Regulations is often the subject of much debate as it encourages "inbreeding" by making in State transactions much easier than Interstate movements. ■

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