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# Questions and Answers

*Edited and Researched  
by Richard Tkachuck, Ph.D.  
Perris, California*

Perhaps the most enjoyable part of this column is to receive letters from individuals offering suggestions, advice and information. It is this type of sharing that makes meeting the deadlines posed by our sadistic editor bearable. So for my own survival, let's hear from you often.

Some old business. A Ms. C.W. writes from Virginia concerning a question in the June/July issue which dealt with the color in the periophthalmic ring in conures. She writes: "I have obtained both sun and jandaya conures from outside aviaries in Florida. [Anyone who likes conures must be a fine person. Ed.] Upon receipt, the ring color was very dark, but after being indoors, the ring has become white. Basically the same diet is fed by me and the Florida breeder. Perhaps this is an environmental difference, not a genetic one."

It may also be a maturational one. I have some nanday conure babies and their feet are black, whereas the adults have pink ones. In looking just now at some sun conures (housed in outside aviaries) that I have, I saw in a pair which is at least four years old, one had a dark ring and the other a white ring. In another surgically sexed pair, both had white rings. In two fledglings from the first pair, both are white. So, until further data are here, I will stick with the genetic theory.

**Question:** *Is there any way to stop a cockatiel from laying eggs? The bird refuses a mate and has been laying 4-6 eggs every other month for 6 months! I've tried three different mates, etc. I just want her to stop. Also, can any health problems arise from laying so many unfertile eggs?*

**Answer:** I wish that I had a bit more information. Are the eggs layed in a nest box? You imply that mates are refused. Is this because you have never seen mating or because the female drives off the males? Do you remove the eggs

from the nest box after you see they are infertile? Some suggestions. If eggs are layed in a nestbox, let them be incubated as long as the hen will sit. Eventually, most birds realize they are sitting on something that is not going to hatch. My personal theory for which there is no proof is that, as the eggs spoil, an odor is given off that is a cue to the bird to depart. Anyway, removing the eggs as soon as they are layed only stimulates more laying. Are you sure it is not your female who has a fertility problem? Is your bird kept outdoors or indoors under artificial light? If under artificial light, it may not be getting the correct seasonal cues regarding when to lay and when not to. Perhaps letting the sun shine on the bird will help get its yearly rhythm better in line. Finally, if the bird is laying eggs with firm shells it is probably not hurting itself too much, but, to be sure, is under some stress. Write again with more details and give me another shot at it.

**Question:** *We have acquired a male cockatiel with a scissorbill. What causes this? If the bird is bred and young result, can he manage to feed them adequately? [Adequate food and care next described. Ed.] Can we eventually straighten out his bill?*

**Answer:** There are two possible causes for the scissorbill. The first is genetic. A number of species of birds in your area (crossbills) have such a condition naturally. If this is the case with your bird, then there is not much you can do except a constant trimming and reshaping. The other cause is that the bill got a bad start when the bird was young. Perhaps the lower bill was broken and the upper bill grew badly. With this situation there is some hope for corrective action. Perhaps your best mode of action is to take the unaffected bill and file it in such a way so that the affected bill is corrected by coming in contact with the unaffected. In other words, create contact points on the two bills that it will drive the affected bill in the opposite direction. The shape of teeth, bills or any renewable living surface is determined by the type of contact it has. And only a small amount of pressure is necessary. My daughter's mouth is being reshaped by some small rubber bands. It does not take much force to change shape, only the correct contact or pressure points. As far as breeding is concerned, unless you are sure that the problem is not genetic, I would not recommend any breeding. If it is the

result of an accident, chances are that the bird will figure out how to feed the babies in spite of the beak problem.

**Question:** *We have blue front amazons and senegal parrots with yellow irises. When they are given food or a new toy the iris expands or contracts rapidly. Is this excitement or focusing?*

**Answer:** This is a common feature in many parrots and is an expression of excitement, interest, fear or sexual arousal.

**Question:** *I have an African grey parrot that is about one and a half years old. I have had her for about six months and the only food she will eat is her seed. She absolutely refuses all other food. Occasionally she will eat apples, thawed frozen corn, and popcorn. Should I take away the seed and force her to eat other fruits and veggies or should I keep putting it in with seed hoping she will at least nibble on it?*

**Answer:** You do not mention how you prepare the food. Do you put a whole apple in the cage? If you do, an inexperienced bird might not know what to do with it. I would recommend that you continue to try and give the bird a varied diet on a daily basis. Familiarity may finally cause some experimentation. The bird may not know it is food that is littering up her seed dish. If your bird is in good health, experiment by providing soft food only once a week. This may drive her to try new things. Prepare the food in small pieces so that she can eat them using foot and mouth much as she would eat seed.

**Question:** *I have an Amazon parrot about two years old. We acquired it about four months ago and it is quite tame. We are diligent in our lessons yet wonder if he is already too old to learn to speak. Any encouraging words about late bloomers? P.S. He loves onions, are they okay for him?*

**Answer:** You do not mention if there are others of the same species within earshot of your bird. If so, training to mimic a human voice will be difficult. I do not think your bird is too old to learn, in fact, increases in vocabulary will take place over a large number of years. Isolation from other bird sounds and exclusive affection are probably the best bet in training your bird. As to the onions, if they are not a major component of the diet, probably no harm will come of eating them. Many commercial seed diets contain chile peppers which surpass onions in potency. ●

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