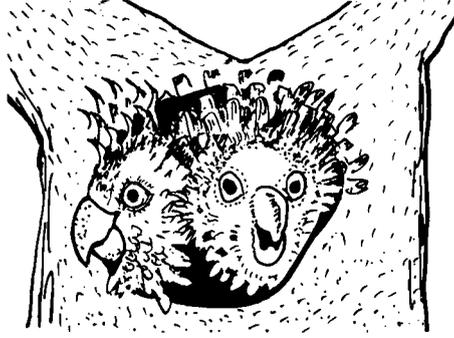


The Natural Choice



by Eb Cravens
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The Decisions Are Ours

Where will all the lovebirds presently being hatched in captivity find suitable homes? What about the hundreds of pairs of Nanday Conures producing babies across the U.S. — remnants of thousands of imported Nandays during the '70s and '80s? Who will take care of all the Mitreds, the Cherry-headed, the imported Blue-fronted, and disgruntled Blue and Golds? As hobby and small breeder production rises dramatically across America, as our aviculture matures and our health practices improve, we must look to where and how we are going to keep the thousands of captive-bred baby psittacines we successfully raise. What species make the best long term pets? What species are most in demand? These questions are forcing themselves to the forefront of the parrot breeder/pet store coalition.

Hundreds of wild-caught, escaped and excess parrots end up living in the American wilds. Certainly Florida, California and Hawaii can boast significant numbers of feral psittacines living in remote areas and backyards, scavaging off of fruits, flowers, seeds and greenery. But what about Illinois, Tennessee, New York, Louisiana, Oregon? As aviculturists and parrot lovers, we must begin to sort out our feelings about wild flocks of parrots living in our areas. It is inevitable, with the hundreds of thousands of imported hookbills, that some would escape and begin breeding. It is also inevitable that local, state and federal agencies will get involved in this situation. We must think ahead and be ready with imaginative ideas, beliefs

and policies.

Others of these surplus parrots are cheaply offered for sale and may be shuffled from one hapless pet owner to another as dysfunctional, terrorized, even mean birds. City newspapers are teeming with ads for untrained or untrainable Goffin's Cockatoos, African Grays, Orange-winged Amazons and assorted conures. Many customers call us begging to find a good home for these unwanted psittacines. But with the handfed market expanding, there are few good homes. Some of these species end up as cheap added breeders in lackluster aviaries with little natural environment. Unfortunately, I see many parrots given quality of care relative to their value and cost price.

Picture this: a small-time New Mexico breeder puts together several hundred dollars to purchase a six-bird group of scruffy, wild-caught, traumatized Great-billed Parrots from a dubious import station. Unable to adequately provide for the nervous group of parrots, the breeder leaves them in a temporary holding flight the first winter hoping to discover their bonding. All six birds freeze their feet on the metal pipe perches and are lost. This is a crime. It also demonstrates the side to American aviculture against which we are all fighting.

The rule is this; if we are not able to give state-of-the-art, humane, conscientious care to the living creatures we presume to keep and breed, we do not deserve to own them.

What we are talking about here is the natural choice. The choice to do more than build cages with a perch, a

nestbox, a food and water dish. The choice to make our psittacine environments more than clean and sterile — to offer more to our pets and breeders than a sameness of food, the boredom of routine, the wire of a cage too small to allow flight, or the trimmed wings of a baby fledgling never taught to land, hover, or flap and hop.

So, as we obviously cannot all bring our parrots out into nature, the logical alternative is to bring nature to our parrots. In some cases this is incredibly easy — like introducing rocks, stumps, logs, greenery and flowers into the birds' cages. In other cases the simplest of necessities present a problem. Take sunlight for instance. I would no sooner keep a valuable psittacine away from daily sunlight than I would myself. Admittedly in southern states this is not a big difficulty, but hundreds of indoor aviaries across the U.S. house psittacines that seldom, if ever, feel a direct ray of sunshine upon their feathers. Skylights or removable roof panels should be a first consideration in any aviary. I have been using indoor lighting with parrots for over eight years; I still do not believe it incites hookbills to the kind of activity that true sunlight does.

What about rain? Here we can supply sprinkler systems and give our birds regular showers. Good enough. Yet the natural rain experience for a parrot is when low pressure moves in, skies gray, wind whips and the drops begin. To be alert to this means turning on sprinklers when the day is cloudy, overcast or raining outside. Better yet, allow aviaries portions of screened roof where parrots may have

access to true outside weather.

Many of my parrots sit patiently in the rain with fluffed feathers, then flap vigorously through wetted greenery to bathe themselves after the shower has stopped. A relaxing dry in the sun. A half-hour preen. Aaaaah.....

Regular showers inspire a parrot to preen. We use frequent warm baths in therapy for feather-plucking psittacines who seldom preen. Many times these parrots do not bite off wet feathers. Self-picking thus stops for at least a short period each day. Moreover, cautious regular wetting helps encourage a bird's system to produce fluffy down feathers for body warmth.

The natural choice for our parrots involves lots of greenery. Hookbills love to roll in, hide amidst, chew up and hang from branches with leaves, blossoms, buds and vines. When taking care of someone else's aviaries, I can always detect the ones where natural greenery is not a part of the parrots' cage life. Not only do these macaws, Amazons, conures and cockatiels show fear of the organic materials I offer, but they at first show little inclination to chew upon it — so far are they removed from nature. Usually by the second or third offering, the same birds rush over and begin their chewing and play. Lush greenery can be found many places. A patient search will reveal pruning refuse, weeds in vacant lots, scrub brush, grass clippings, even wilted flower arrangements. Don't pull up your old tomato vines and cornstalks for the landfill — offer them to your psittacines (be sure to wash off any pesticide). Throw excess birdseed into the garden each summer and you will find sprouting millet, sunflower, buckwheat and flax plants growing a few weeks later. Give them at any stage of growth. Cultivate vines and creepers with fast growing cycles to provide your parrots with greenery. One very famous northern California breeder gives rose clippings to his parrots who love them. Others use eucalyptus branches to spur cockatoos to nesting. In Santa Fe, our staple chew tree in the prolific Chinese elm. Our favorite is crabapple boughs with green fruit.

We try to think of foods which require effort of our psittacines. Pea and bean pods, uncut fruits, whole nuts — these require intelligence and persistence of a parrot hoping to feed upon them. It is amazing how many

parrots, down to small conures, can dissect a whole walnut or almond if one end is cracked open slightly. Don't give up when your birds give up. Try a different way of showing them there is food inside. Make feeding time a training time. Lazy feeders may become lazy breeders. Smarter birds will pay off in the long run.

The natural choice sometimes means a sacrifice. It means shutting

down the incubator and letting your Sun Conures or Moluccan Cockatoos keep trying to raise their own babies the final clutch of the season (no matter how many years they fail to get it right) so you can experience the joy of teaching them to fledge their own young. Or leaving your handfed baby's wings unclipped just one week longer to give it confidence and a sharper experience of speed and landing.



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A man at a bird club meeting last year approached me about a problem concerning his macaw aviary. Years ago he had purchased a Scarlet Green-winged pair and had successfully bred ruby hybrid macaws. But consciously he no longer wished to mix two such pure beautiful parrots. The market for such babies was also weakening. Yet the two birds loved each other and he hesitated to split them up.

Looking for an imaginative solution, I told him the most natural choice would be to seek out a female Scarlet and a male Green-winged Macaw of breeding age. Separate the hybrid pair and in the off season introduce all four birds into a large neutral holding cage. Then observe what happens. Unlikely as we would think, there is always the possibility that the birds would prefer a mate of their own species. I told him such an experiment would deserve national attention should the results prove surprising. Another solution would be to purchase fertile non-hybrid macaw eggs and replace the "ruby" eggs so the parents raise only pure species!

These are the kind of experiments I believe will first be undertaken by devoted hobbyists wishing to stretch the parameters of American aviculture. After all, it is not the number of pairs I acquire which makes me an innovative breeder. We all have so much to learn. No one can do it all by himself.

The natural choice means not pushing baby handfed parrots to wean. Most psittacine breeders are aware of the feathering progress of their nursery babies. In the wild, baby birds in pinfeathers would most likely be entirely in the dark of a nesting site. In captivity there is no real need to opt for glass tubs, distracting bright lights and people moving around. Darkness, warmth, a sibling or companion to cuddle up to, regular feedings and sleep are the natural choice. We concentrate on weight gain, health and a peaceful surrounding. There is no need to force fledglings to grow up. All too soon they will begin peering out of their tubs, flapping slender wings and nibbling on morsels of food. This is the natural time to begin introduction to the world outside. Aviculturists who quote to me their weaning schedules for baby handfed psittacine species confuse me. I always let each individual baby set his

own weaning schedule. I have noticed many a baby chick being cuddled and fondled, fawned over in bright light when all they really sought was privacy, sleep and the digestion of their full crops.

The same rules apply when moving young weaned parrots from one environment to another. Where possible, we prepare a parrot to go home with his new owner by setting up his new cage several days ahead of time, placing him in his cage with weaning companion the first night or two, then alone a night or two to get him used to it. When he heads for a new home, the shock is lessened. We try not to send psittacines off to a new home at late afternoon or dusk. The first night in a strange environment can be stressful for a bird. Having all day to get used to owners and surroundings before sunset is less of a shock. Young parrots taught to sleep in cardboard "nest-boxes" for warmth and security do not face the same problem. Their sleeping box goes with them everywhere. These days, a greater number of serious parrot owners are choosing to pair their pets and offer them the chance to breed if they so choose. Introducing fledglings from the feeding tub to a sleeping box is both added peace and safety for your babies and the earliest natural training for later nesting, nesting in your guest bedroom if you wish.

I have two very close friends in the southern California breeding circles. Both are knowledgeable, successful, inventive, and have decades of experience with dozens of psittacine species rare and commonplace. Yet they are as different as night and day.

One of these breeders detests handfed domestic parrots as breeding stock. He quotes episode after episode of frustration and failure with parents that don't copulate, don't sit, break eggs, breed sporadically, become bored easily or constantly seek human interaction to the detriment of his aviary production.

The other of these breeders highly touts the advantages of handfed domestic birds as parents. He praises their calmness, their devotion to nest building and chick feeding, their tolerance of human monitoring of eggs and babies and their ability to overcome trauma or incidents such as earthquakes which shatter aviary routine.

I have come to agree with this second breeder with one condition. Domestic handfed parrots need to be taught the natural way of building nests, copulating, sitting, feeding, and finally fledging their young. Such teachings do not come easily with parrots kept in an insulated home pet environment year after year, devoid of interactions or observations of other psittacines.

If we want our pets to have the opportunity to fulfill their natural sexual instincts, we must establish correct training programs at an early age to replace stimuli-response behavior denied them when they are removed from their parents, nest and siblings.

The accomplishments in parrot/human relationships amongst small hobby breeders mating their pets to produce young right in the home border on phenomenal. Yellow-headed Amazons produce in the living room, psittacine hens on eggs stretch to have their head scratched or to show off their eggs, parrots who demand and get privacy during the breeding season but prefer to hang out on owners' shoulders during the off season.

The old adage of losing your pet parrot when you choose to mate and breed him or her is being disproven by American hobbyists who develop strong relationships with second and third generation U.S. born handfed psittacines before turning them to nest.

Indeed, one of the most blossoming aspects of U.S. aviculture is the move toward owning and raising pet parrots in pairs. I would heartily recommend that anyone who owns several parrots choose his next pet indulgence in twos. It takes the pressure off the owner to be the best friend of a single bird, and encourages natural learned behavior of the parrot pet—for example, mutual preening, sleeping together, interfeeding, beak and claw play, even early sexuality.

We truly hope that the U.S. breeding community will grow together through cooperation and friendship to the point that someone seeking to add parrots to his collection may, with ease, locate and purchase genealogically strong unrelated sexed fledgling pairs.

My dreams include an unrelated pair of Duyvenbode's Lory babies to hand-feed and raise.

What dreams have you? ●