

Those Loveable Lovebirds

by Judie Casey
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If lovebirds are your choice, you'll find that breeding and keeping them is easy, fun and rewarding. Youngsters can be tamed and handfed babies make wonderful, loveable pets. They can sometimes learn a few words, but are not known to be talkers.

Lovebirds are natives of Africa and some of the offshore islands. There are eight species of lovebirds: Peach-faced, Masked, Fischer's, Red-faced, Black-cheeked, Madagascar, Abyssinian and Swindern's. We will be discussing the Peach-faced species which makes up the majority of our breeding stock.

First on the list is the type and color of lovebird you want. Some of the common color mutations of the Peach-faced species are: blue and green pideds, creams, lutinos, American cinnamon, mauve and olive. There are many variations of blues and greens which all have names, but it is very confusing to recognize each one when you begin. I'm still not sure of all of them.

The best way to decide which birds you want is to just choose birds you like. The only way to really learn about them is to be able to observe them and their habits.

Getting a *true* pair is next and that is not always easy. We have read about and been told so many ways to visually sex lovebirds but we gave up after too many wrong *guesses*. The only *sure* way we know is by DNA sexing or surgical sexing. This can be expensive, so there aren't many sexed lovebirds available for sale. Usually a reputable breeder can be very helpful in choosing a pair.

The following items are some of the basics from our breeding program. These have been very successful for us and we are happy to pass them on and hope they work for you.

We like to set our birds up with one pair to a cage. We put them together as youngsters and let them mature together. Our breeding cages are 2' x 3'

x 3' and have PVC legs that are easy to wash and make the cage light weight to handle. We use 1/2 x 1" 16 gauge wire that is put together with "J" clips. The cage is a "boot" style which has a safety front with a door to access food and water and another door in the upper front positioned just a little to the right. This is for catching birds when necessary. The PVC legs are cut in five foot lengths and attached with washers and screws. They are positioned on the sides of the cage front and back so the bottom is about 36" from the floor, making the cage stand about six feet high.

Nest boxes are hung with wire hooks on the outside left front. The cage wire is cut just enough for the birds to enter through the 2-1/2" hole in the box. There are various styles and sizes for lovebird boxes. We use

a regular reverse that is 7" wide x 8-1/2" high x 9" long.

We put our boxes on the cages when we put the birds in. Most lovebirds like to sleep in a box. This is also the reason we do not remove boxes except for cleaning. Our birds take a rest from breeding even if the box is left up, and seem to do so two or three times a year. I'm sure there are those who will disagree but this has worked for us and the birds seem to be doing fine.

At breeding time, we give the birds palm leaves which they will shred. Hens will tuck pieces in their rump feathers and carry them to the nest where they weave them into a nest. Some birds get quite elaborate with small tunnels.

Clutches usually consist of four to six eggs, but some young hens only lay three and we have some older hens that will lay as many as eight. Eggs are laid one every other day and hens will begin to sit seriously after the second egg is laid. Hens do all the incubating and usually only come out to eat or drink. Males will also feed the hen while she sits. Eggs take 20 to 23 days to hatch and we have noticed

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isn't the *only* thing we talk about.

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the males will sometimes join the hen in the box when the first egg is ready to hatch. This is probably to keep the hatching egg as warm as possible.

After the first egg is hatched, the male stays busy feeding Mama and the babies, going to and from nest and feed bowl a good part of the day. Our birds have been spoiled with healthy treats and males with babies in the nest will run to the front of the cage when they see us coming, looking for any goodies we may have for them.

Babies to be pulled for handfeeding should not be taken, unless necessary, until they reach three weeks or more. The time spent with parents feeding the chicks is important to give them a good start.

Parent-raised babies usually leave the nest between five and six weeks. The parents will continue to feed the babies until they learn to eat on their own. This usually takes two weeks but we like to leave babies with their parents for at least three weeks to be sure they are eating enough. Then they are removed and put into a cage, sometimes with other young birds, to grow up or until they are sexed and

put into their own breeding cage. Our youngsters' cages also have nest boxes to sleep in. Sometimes three or four will pile into the same box to sleep so you don't need too many boxes for them.

Our feeding program consists of a fancy cockatiel mix with extra sunflower mixed in and a bowl of crumbles. There are a lot of crumble or pellet diets on the market. Choose one that has a good protein percentage as most birds will feed a lot of this to babies. Make sure that cuttlebone and mineral block are available at all times. This is very important, especially at breeding time. The calcium in cuttlebone helps form strong shells so eggs are not accidentally broken in the nest.

We give our birds a healthy treat each day. These treats are given in the morning and usually only one from the following list: spray millet, hard boiled egg, broccoli, spinach, corn, melon and squash. Vegetables are fresh, uncooked and washed. When fresh foods are not available, I cook dried beans, corn and brown rice in a crock pot. Also, frozen vegetables can be used.

Pet birds will usually eat most things you do, and this is okay as long as their basic diet is a good one. Also stay away from too many sweet things or highly seasoned foods. We find that birds with a good healthy diet, which always includes cuttlebone and mineral block, do not need extra vitamin or mineral supplements.

If you wish to handfeed a baby, there are several handfeeding formulas on the market. We add some baby food to the formula. This is more for the taste than nutrition. Most commercial formulas have good nutritional value, but we like to give babies the taste of what parents might be feeding them such as creamed corn, applesauce, mixed vegetables, creamed spinach, etc.

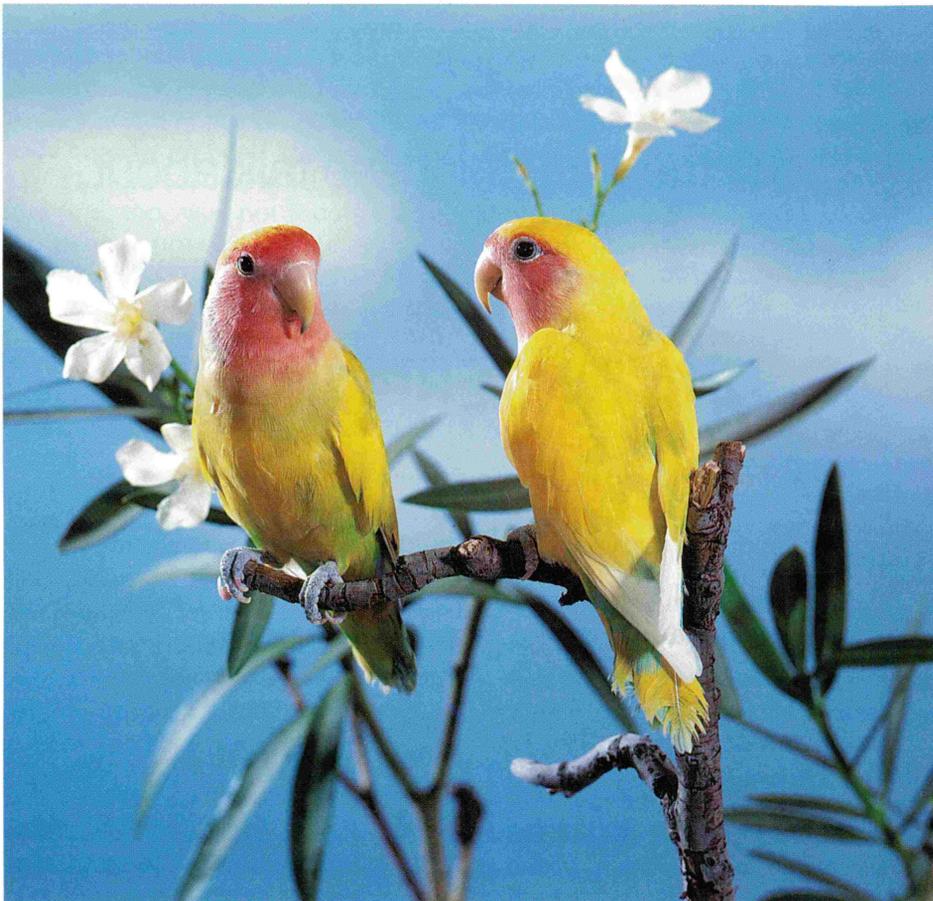
We start feeding babies a fairly liquid formula with a pipette three times a day and as they get older the formula gets thicker and a small plastic measuring spoon is used. At this time, I give them a piece of spray millet and feedings go to twice a day. They like to play with the millet and will start chewing on it. This will lead to cracking seed and weaning. They will start refusing the formula and playing instead of eating. Once they are eating a good amount of seed, the formula can be given once a day until they refuse it altogether.

Handfed babies will wean about the same age as parent-raised birds, although I've had some that wean sooner. Some babies will go from two feedings a day to cracking seed and just quit the formula. There is no absolute on weaning from handfeeding, each bird is different. Just be sure if your bird is refusing formula that he is eating plenty of seed and soft food. If you are not sure your bird is eating enough food on his own, and he is refusing formula, check the breast along the sides of the breast bone. He should feel fleshy, not hollow. He should also be very active. If he is just sitting and sleeping all the time, you need to feed him a little longer.

We have many different kinds of birds, but a favorite has always been a pet lovebird. Whether parent-raised or handfed, they are fun to watch and make a loving, attentive pal. We are sure you will enjoy your experience with them.

We are often asked by beginners which bird they should choose. Without hesitation, lovebirds! ●

Photo by George D. Dodge/Dale R. Thompson



These two mutations are the colorful Pied Peach-faced Lovebirds.