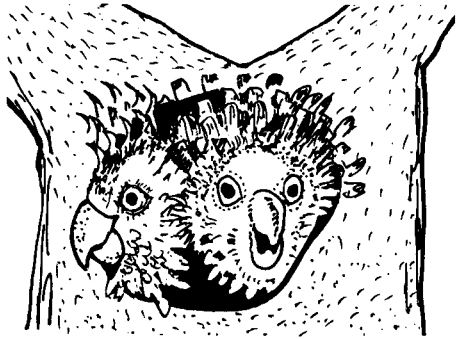


The Natural Choice



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Fine Tuning the Psittacine Aviary

One esteemed international speaker at a recent AFA national convention shocked and inspired me when he described the parrot enclosures in the U.S. breeding facilities he had visited: "The birds are kept in cages — I will not call them aviaries."

Shocked me because I, too, was often guilty of neglecting the finer points of my psittacines' habitats; and inspired me to improve my aviaries and urge others to do the same.

American psittaculture, in its tremendous forward progress, has brought us to a point where each avicultural subtlety and minute observation is now exceedingly important. In this respect, each of us who owns exotic parrot species has the opportunity to be a "mini-researcher." Seventy percent of successful research is astute observation.

Talking with this international speaker, I learned that the European style of aviculture is much less geared toward mass produced parrot offspring for the pet market. Many noted German, English or Swiss breeders prefer to duplicate a natural living space for their psittacine pairs — then

sit back and watch the fascinating life which goes on in front of their windows. This means establishing an aviary where ground, rocks, water, nest site and greenery combine to form a correct environment.

Increasingly across America I meet parrot owners who wish to follow the same natural pathway to birdkeeping.

Creating a natural habitat for your pet or breeders has many advantages. The obvious first is the bird's contentment or well-being. Instinctually wild, the hookbills we own are quick to feel at home in an area of organic materials and beauty. Moreover, we find that plants, ground, logs, palms, small pools, etc., do much to spread the droppings and mess which seem unsightly and concentrated in a sterile cage situation. In short, I clean my aviaries less often than my smaller pet cages.

Many novice pet owners are overly paranoid about germs when their parrots come in contact with natural materials. We find, however, with proper nutrition and exercise, hookbills are amazingly resistant to disease in such an aviary. Ten years of plants and soils, chewing greens and forest wood, we have not suffered one sickness!

We only worm our Australian parakeets once a year as a precaution recommended by experts.

(Author's note: several months ago in this column we mentioned "old flower arrangements" as a potential way of bringing greenery to parrots in captivity. It was noted by several readers that greenhouse flowers are often grown with strong fertilizers and bloom preservatives that can be detrimental to pets. Since we grow our own garden flowers, this was an oversight and serves as an excellent warning.)

So what does fine tuning an aviary really mean? It means giving serious thought/study to a species' native environment and attempting to duplicate it when housing these parrots in captivity.

It means offering a water dish large enough for both parrots of a pair to bathe simultaneously as in the wild — instead of bickering over who gets the full, fresh dish first. It means providing two feeding bowls so our male Amazons, macaws or female eclectus do not always consume the choice pieces of fruit, nuts or goodies. Such factors

can cause stress between our breeding pairs.

It means pondering the importance of flight . . .

Flight not only from one fixed perch to another fixed perch; but flight in a cage where it is possible for a parrot to turn around in mid air and keep going. A sun conure aviary, for example, would have to be a minimum of 4-1/2 to 6 feet wide to allow such turnarounds.

Flight to perches that are angled up at 30 degrees, down at 60 degrees and vary in thickness from 1/2 inch to 6 inches teaches our birds grip and muscle control. Parrots taught to land on vertical barky logs can fly across a room and land on an upright broom handle or two by four with their foot strength!

It's a bit like "birdy yoga." Flight to springy sapling branches or rope perches teaches our pets and breeders about landing and perching on wobbly surfaces and, more importantly, taking off from sites which give beneath their weight. It augments skill and muscle coordination. I further believe it benefits a parrot's inner organs.

Fine tuning an aviary means building nestboxes out of thick 2 x 10 lumber or seeking out hollow log material for the dense security and silence it offers our breeding pairs. I never cease to wonder at the noisy, thin, plywood nestboxes with metal wire ladders we offer parrots — forcing them to put up with intense echoing noise each time they ascend from or descend to the clutch. No wonder so many psittaculturists report nervous, jumpy pairs. As to PVC and metal nestsites, they need not be considered in a natural discussion as they are designed for owners' convenience, not for the parrots.

Among the subtleties used by U.S. breeders to perfect their aviaries are smaller gauge wire floors in suspended cages to catch molted feathers and make them readily available to hens instinctually accustomed to "feathering the nest's egg depression." When cleaning boxes, it may be a good idea to replace some clean feathers with box shavings.

Outdoor aviaries in cold weather climes may include especially wide log perches so that parrots settling for the night may have spots where feet rest totally on top and are covered and

warmed by lower abdomen feathers during sleep.

Many species of parrots love to dig, burrow and frequent the ground. We feel it is unnatural to deny such birds access to the ground or simulated ground in an elevated aviary. Large greenhouse flats planted with grass, sprouted seeds, etc., can be moved in and out of cages as they become soiled or are chewed off. Many psittacines love to bathe in these flats when they are wetted. Some of our birds which love the ground and digging are Patagonian Conures, Princess of Wales Parakeets, rainbow and larger lorries, cockatoos, many large macaws, cockatiels, grass parakeets and occasionally caiques and hawkheads (these latter two may be exceptions).

We believe in providing small sprinklings of sand or health grit for our birds once or twice a month as we have observed parrots allowed access to the ground will crunch up bits of gravel. Such small amounts leave no danger of overeating grit or impacted crops.

John Stoodley, author and expert psittacine breeder in England, recommends offering green wood branches or twigs to some parrots at mealtime; chewing hookbills may utilize enzymes in the material to aid digestion.

Many of our pet psittacines show a penchant for eating clay when in our pottery studio — so we have introduced small lumps of clean health clay to our aviaries sparingly. Once or twice a month is enough when venturing into such new psittacultural territory. Observe well your bird's response.

Fine tuning an aviary includes varying our foodstuff diet with the season of year. Our spring feedings include more greens, buds, soaked and unripe seeds, branches and leaf sprouts — even sprinkled bee pollen for prospective breeders.

Summer means normal ripe fruits and vegetables, beans, corn, soaked grains and a higher carbohydrate content. When fall and winter arrive, our psittacines are offered slightly more seed, nuts, weekly cheese cubes and a greater fat content to build up their bodies for colder temperatures and reduced sunlight. This also increases body weight — especially in the hen — prior to the beginning of the spring nesting cycle.

Such changes are an attempt to

bring our aviaries into harmony with the conditions among wild parrots. Southern areas with minimal temperature change may wish to substitute wet season/dry season diet variations in their aviaries.

How many times have you heard a friend remark when you mention how your birds love cranberries, papaya, kiwi, banana peels, pistaccios, pine nuts, chard or wildflower buds, "Oh, my birds won't touch that?" It takes training and patience to teach our psittacines about exotic and whole foods. These are often skills learned when young parrots are housed together in fledging groups. One bird teaches the other the joy of eating a new food, just as a breeding pair of parrots tend to copy each other's talking words.

It follows that all our domestic hookbills should be provided at least some opportunity to interact with other parrots so that learned skills and tolerant sharing habits may be acquired. To me, nothing is more pleasant than watching a full family of psittacines living together in the weeks after babies leave the nestbox. This is the more European way — parent raising.

In cases where babies are pulled for handrearing, the closest substitute is to keep clutches together in the nursery or place mixed species in twos or threes prior to fledging. Of course, strict rules of hygiene within a nursery must be followed; but normal disease-free facilities will experience no trouble mixing babies of equivalent age and feeding schedule. Common sense and knowing well your "flock" are essential.

Paying attention to detail in the aviary includes awareness of our parrots' need for diversion and play. Once we were made to believe that toys in a breeding enclosure could be detrimental to chick production. Recent experience among innovative breeders does not substantiate this belief. Bonnie Zimmerman of Simi Valley, California, reports using toys and play objects in her breeder cages (species include conures, grays, Amazons) for years with no ill effects. To the contrary, we believe such diversions provide outlets for chewing needs, play and aggression among our psittacines. Fresh organic greenery such as tree limbs can do the same.

For years, to protect our right to own

imported parrots, we breeders and pet owners have espoused the belief that "Aviculture is Conservation, Too" — the logic that keeping psittacine species alive in this time of disappearing habitat may ultimately depend upon captive breeding success. Fellow AFA members, we are in the midst of realizing that success. We who breed domestic psittacines have learned to reproduce myriads of healthy, bouncy U.S.-born babies — tens of thousands of them every season to the delight and profit of many.

The question is, should we stand upon our performance and feel satisfied, or are we going to stretch our knowledge and accomplishment to the fullest realms of this word "conservation" we so readily adopt?

I believe that producing healthy baby birds is only the first step in our evolving role as American psittaculturists.

What we do with these babies, how we raise and keep them, what kind of domesticated hookbills they become, and what we ultimately learn through our association with our parrots — these are the parameters of our next step in psittaculture.

If we truly believe our captive-raised hookbills are important to world parrot conservation, we must work ceaselessly to ensure that these psittacines retain as much of their wild instinctual behavior as possible. We must try at every point to expand or maintain the gene pool which already exists in the U.S. We must give extra attention to training the baby muscles and the alert minds of our pets and future breeders so we do not deplete the wild characteristics so valuable to any conservation effort.

These are the same characteristics we parrot owners love so well!

Make no mistake my friends, if we are only satisfied in *producing* baby psittacines generation by generation, these same psittacines will become so stodgy and overweight, so complacent and without alertness, so imprinted and dependent, that it will be literally impossible to reintroduce them into the wild — even should safe wilderness become available. Fine tuning the natural aviary is an integral part of the effort to maintain this instinctual behavior in our domestic parrots.

The choice is ours in psittaculture, and the choice is now. ●