

Handfeeding Lovebirds

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If you are thinking of purchasing a lovebird as a pet, here are a few helpful tips before taking the plunge.

When choosing your lovebird, there are three species (out of eight) which are commonly kept as pets. These are the Peach-faced, Masked and Fischer's. There are many different color mutations of each — my personal favorites are the normal Peach-faced and Dutch blue Peach-faced as I find they may be slightly calmer and more easy going as pets. There are many good books in pet stores or the library to explain about other available types.

I have found the best time to purchase handfed lovebirds is before they are weaned, between four and six weeks of age, the earlier the better. Lovebirds wean about seven weeks of age. I find them so easy to wean that they often begin to wean before you are ready to stop mothering them!

We note that baby lovebirds are one of the easiest baby parrots to feed, even for a first time beginner. One easy lesson from the breeder or pet shop personnel in spoon feeding, formula preparation and baby care will start you off on a wonderful experience.

Depending upon the age you get your bundle of joy, at four weeks you will be feeding about four times per day, at five to six weeks about three times per day; night feedings should not be necessary as long as you make sure the baby is full before putting it to bed.

I notice that, for the beginner, syringe feeding may be more difficult and often messier. I prefer handfeeding baby lovebirds with a special handfeeding spoon. One can be made by taking a 1/4-teaspoon measuring spoon and bending the sides up to form a trough. Baby lovebirds hold quite tightly to a feeding spoon while bobbing to take formula, thus keeping the mess to a minimum (unlike cockatiels, for example).

Obtaining your lovebird at this early age gives you and the baby that special time of bonding which takes place during the feeding and weaning pro-

cess. For families of more than one, it is advantageous for other owners to take turns feeding the baby so it will not bond to only one person.

After you get the baby home, one of the first things you should do is run to the closet and gather up all your shirts with large pockets — you are going to need them because baby lovebirds love to snuggle in *pockets*. They like being close to you, and listening to your voice gives them security like being in the nest with mommy. Around our house there never seem to be enough pockets to go around!

When we are busy, we put the baby in a small cardboard box lined with pine shavings and padded with paper towels to be changed after feedings to keep the baby clean and dry. (Remember, a clean baby is a happy baby.) We also cover the box with a soft towel free of loose threads. This will help keep your bundle of joy snug, warm and dark.

As the lovebird grows older, we place the sleeping-box in a weaning cage. Cutting a hole in one end will allow him freedom to leave the box and explore his new home and return when tired.

Around six weeks of age we begin offering soft foods and spray millet. We provide peas, corn, apples, greens and cooked brown rice. Ask your breeder for advice on foods which are healthy and those which you should avoid. Soft foods should be removed after several hours to avoid spoilage or bacterial growth.

Both male and female lovebirds can make excellent pets no matter the species or color. Females seem to have a harder time going through puberty, which can start any time between three and six months of age. This means females can be a little more nippy than males, a little more protective of their sleeping box, cage and even their favorite person.

Everyone has his or her own way of telling male from female — it is not that easy. A rule I follow is to note reaction when reaching a hand into the sleeping box to feed; the female is usually the one that fluffs up and lunges at you. They may start doing this at age six weeks.

Both males and females love to tear up paper. Females have a tendency to tear it into strips and stuff it behind their rump or under their wings. At this stage of development, both males

and females need a firm hand and lots of patience, love and understanding.

Here are a few tips I hope will help you through what I call the "teenage stage." One of the first things, and most important, is setting the rules. For nipping and chewing on objects you can use words such as "no," "ouch" and "be nice" in a firm voice. Sometimes we blow quickly in their faces to grab their attention while using a voice command. Hang in there. Lovebirds can have strong minds of their own and once you get through this stage the results are well worth it. You will be glad you chose a lovable lovebird for your pet.

Around a year of age, your pet will want to chew up your favorite novel, homework or pencil erasers. A lovebird's curiosity never diminishes, so you may be saying "no" a lot. I know some very loving two and four-year-old male and female pets who will probably never change.

Lovebirds are little busy-bodies! They love toys or anything you have in your hand at the time. Some owners like giving their birds flight, but I always say weigh the risks before choosing flight versus wing-clip. I normally use a partial clip — the first two to four feathers on each wing — which allows the birds to get around yet limits their trouble making.

Lovebirds are not noisy if you keep only one, but their high pitched squeals can offend if you have several as pets. I have heard of lovebirds learning a few words and had one that said in his little, gruff voice, "low" for hello.

Most lovebirds enjoy taking a shower. I use the kitchen sink, turning the faucet down to a dribble and cupping my hands. Sometimes it takes a few times before they feel comfortable enough to try.

I try to discourage people from purchasing two or more lovebirds at a time. You and your single bird can bond whereas if you purchase two babies they will tend to bond to each other. If you must have two, think about getting one, then another baby a year later.

Something to consider before choosing a lovebird is they are *very active* and on the go all the time, so take a look at your lifestyle and see if you have the energy and attention to keep this little bundle of dynamite happy. ●