



To Breed or Not to Breed – Coping With Your Pet Parrot's Puberty

One of the most significant decisions a psittacine owner can be faced with is whether or not to procure a mate for a pet parrot and give him or her a chance to raise a family.

In an era when pet aviculture is beginning to join hands with the entire psittacine conservation movement (i.e., thousands of handfed birds maturing, stopped importation, limited gene pools, hobby breeding, private ownership of endangered species, etc.), the responsibilities engendered by this decision confront the pet owner on levels emotional, ethical and commercial.

Making the step from pet owner to breeding pet owner is not difficult *per se*; yet it demands a certain level of professionalism not required of those owning single birds.

This paper will consider many of the pros and cons of "pairing" your pet parrot, and discuss various ways to go about it.

Naming a business "The Perfect Parrot" represents for me a lifetime search for just such a psittacine. At present, I have not the experience to name a single species, so when persons ask of me which hookbill is the most perfect one, I tend to reply "the baby par-

rot." Indeed, all the joys, heartaches, life lessons and love I can envision are wrapped up in these tiny creatures entrusted to our care – and if one is lucky enough to own the parents and watch the process unfold, well . . . 'nuff said!

Yes, choosing to breed one's pet parrot offers supreme rewards; it also is more work. So what should be the determining factor? The happiness and welfare of the parrot, of course.

Just a few of our "do nots" when considering this question include:

- Do not enter the breeding arena with profit as your primary motive. Be willing to sustain a loss. Be willing to keep offspring. Be willing to experience exclusion from your pet's private life.
- Never force two reluctant birds to pair. In the case of cockatoos, king parrots, lorries, some hawkheads, lovebirds, Amazons, etc., this can result in zero production at least, competition, mate abuse or death.
- Never mix species or hybridize. (Many professionals will avoid even the cross of subspecies.) Learn to recognize pure birds – a near impossibility where one-eighth and one-sixteenth hybrids abound – or deal only with knowledgeable experts

who have references. U.S. aviculture is full of breeders selling impure strains of Nanday Conures, Green-winged Macaws, Grand Eclectus, and more!

- Do not consider breeding your pet as a way to wash your hands of a bird no longer a favorite. Many imprinted hookbills need human interaction, and placing them with a mate out in the backyard does not absolve the owner from all ties to the bird. As the years pass some of my paired pets distance themselves from me, but that is THEIR choice.

On a more personal note, buying an unrelated, sexed companion for your bird is exciting for you and it; and can be problem solving, too. When puberty arrives, it can bring with it a host of changes within the single parrot household. Most of these difficulties can be coped with by making adjustments in the household routine. Some can be waited out; as breeding season passes or the pet ages a few years past puberty, a new equilibrium is reached and the home becomes stable once again. In some cases "behavior modification" may be undertaken with the aid of counselors. The Natural Choice makes a practice of spending as little effort as possible in modifying instinctual behavior in our psittacine pets or breeders. To do so can cause a chain reaction which only creates another unsavory mannerism down the line.

Common puberty changes are increased chewing and destruction, the seeking of darkness and nesting sites, aggression against strangers or closely bonded humans and birds, masturbations, screaming, feather plucking, despondency, change in appetite, and egg-laying.

The need for professionalism becomes apparent when the pet owner tries to balance cause and cures in an effective manner. For example, a change in eating habits may necessitate higher protein or greater amounts of greens and buds in a bird's diet; but providing such may also increase the nesting impulse. Or giving a cardboard playbox to your single pet bird may satisfy chewing and nest-seeking urges, but might increase territorial behavior in males or lead to a clutch of eggs in females.

To be sure, natural decisions dictate that male territorial behavior during breeding season is quite alright in our pets; this is a time they need to let

their hormones go, and we as owners must give them their space. Egg-laying and sitting in a box is also allowable and natural for a hen. But a responsible owner must see to it that this phase does not become a habitual string of laying cycles which deplete a hen's calcium and risks egg-binding hazards.

Goals here are not to shut off instinctual behavior, but to channel them in directions acceptable in the home pet situation. Inexperienced owners should observe well their bird's activities, take notes, mark down dates, etc. and be prepared to seek advice if behavior turns incomprehensible. Most puberty problems do not occur overnight. The pet keeper may be at fault for waiting until things progress to a point where they have to seek help! For example, it was fun to pet your umbrella cockatoo "down under" until she began screaming for such attention, stopped eating well, started to bite, or plucked the feathers raw beneath her wings.

The first female Amazon I kept as a pet coerced me into stroking her cloacal area in bed in the mornings. As I learned this was non-productive for her welfare and would likely produce a sexually dysfunctional bird, such activity ceased. We no longer recommend any such petting for captive psittacines. It accelerates the human/parrot relationship toward a dead end and makes it difficult to ascertain how sexually active the pet actually is. Masturbation by a parrot in its own cage with perch or toys is normal and serves as a sign that changes are in store.

Many times the puberty phase of a pet bird can be focused into a newer, more interesting environment. It was for maturing pets that we first began building outdoor play cages in the backyard. These 4x4 ft. enclosures on legs are packed with rotting logs, branches, gravel flats, seeded grasses and flowers. Rain is allowed to wet greenery or an early morning sprinkling was provided. Our single parrots love to be put outside during the day to play "wild bird" - they come into the house for the evening. We see grown Amazons fluffing and posturing threats at the sparrows eating spilled seed on the grass beneath the cage!

A rule of thumb for owners with pets in the midst of parrot puberty is: do not panic, go slowly, and try the simplest changes first. The challenges of puberty provide a period of training for owner and bird alike. We believe too

many young captive raised psittacines are being placed in hard core breeding situations before their young organs are ready for the strain. No one publishes accounts of how long these "teen-age" birds produce babies before burning out or collapsing with nutrient deficiency. Furthermore, breeders in a hurry observe the inability of the young pair to sit eggs to term, or hatch and feed chicks; then promptly label the pair "poor parents", buy an incubator, and go merrily on their way pulling eggs and handfeeding from day one. I no longer consider

this imaginative aviculture.

From a keeper's viewpoint, we hear two main reservations about pairing one's pet bird for companionship and potential breeding. The first is, "I will lose my pet's affections," and the second, "What will I do with the babies?"

The 1990s have witnessed a huge growth of avicultural hobby breeders, those parrot owners with fewer than a dozen pairs, for example, who do not depend upon the babies for financial security. Many of these hobbyists began breeding by pairing a longtime pet

Complete Bird Care from Hatchling to Maturity!

FREE
Full-Color
Catalog!



Outstanding, 48-page, color bird supply catalog offering thousands of items at affordable prices!

Give your bird quality products at unbelievable savings by shopping at home with **Pet Warehouse**. We also offer **FREE** catalogs for dogs/cats/small animals and fish/reptiles, too. So, please specify what type of pet(s) you own with your request. Call or write today!

PET WAREHOUSE • 1 (800) 443-1160

Dept. AF-34 • P.O. Box 310 • Xenia, OH 45385

who simply would not take “no” for an answer. My own modest collection consists entirely of second and third generation captive-raised parrots now coming of age to breed. It was the smartest decision I ever made. I have a personal relationship with each and every bird in my aviary, especially the ones I handfed myself. I am part of the family – not the mate or one imprinted upon (thankfully!) but family nonetheless. Sometimes a former pet offers less affection, but I really earn the affection I do receive and it means so much because it is given freely.

There is no reason you need lose your parrot’s affection when you pair him or her. One secret is to pair your bird with a handfed, preferably a baby which you finish the last two weeks feeding and with which you establish friendship. We know conures breeding in the living room, African Greys in the kitchen, Double Yellowheads in the den with a TV, cockatoos in the living room, eclectus in the bedroom, macaws in the family room burrowed into an old couch! In no case are these birds totally mean or nasty to their owners, even when on eggs. In this area, we American pet owners are setting the new limits...

What to do with offspring? For starters, do not worry about it. More than likely the first ones you will not be able to part with. There is a long list of persons who will accept and offer loving home to free parrot babies – and I know some hobbyists (God protect them) who choose to distribute their offspring this way! Beyond that, if hobbyists are willing to shy away from retail values asked for parrots and enter the wholesale market, normally the local bird store is willing to pay for healthy, social babies. Invariably, we note that psittacines raised in the living room of devoted hobbyists have endearing personalities.

Choose well the pet store to support. It may be necessary to cultivate more caring habits amongst the owner and staff. We refuse to sell any bird to a mall pet store which keeps handfed parrots away from the public behind glass; these babies *need* human interaction.

So now we come to the heart of this “to breed or not” matter. What about the pet parrots themselves? Many species – parakeets, cockatiels, lovebirds, Australians, and to a certain extent conures, lorries, cockatoos – are flocking birds. They are most content in a sit-

uation where there are other members. In a family or even with one owner who has time, such instincts are satisfied. But should we as keepers, begin a new schedule of working more hours, bring a new spouse or human baby into the home, or merely acquire another pet parrot which will divide our attentions somewhat; the flock, as our pet knows it, is disrupted. Sensitive parrotkeepers do more than “just barge ahead” with their own lives leaving their pets to cope as best they can. They recognize when they can no longer satisfy all their parrot’s needs. It is not the best idea, however, to banish to the breeding cage a pet who is no longer the favorite.

Which species, whether male or female, how it was brought up (around other birds, etc.), and its attitude toward each member of the family should all be considered. Perhaps your hormonally excited hookbill needs longer wings and more space to fly off energy; perhaps he needs to be clipped shorter to keep him dependent upon you.

Female psittacines (except in cases of hen-dominant species such as eclectus) tend to accept a new addition to the flock better than males. We find the easiest situation for pairing pets is to introduce a grown up hen to an unrelated, unweaned male. Age difference, sometimes five years or more, seems to make less difference to bonding in captive-raised psittacines. There are cases where the grown parrot even helped feed its future mate by regurgitation! By the time a fledgling male grows into puberty, the hen has usually accepted him into the household, the bonding process begins. With Cockatiels, conures, Senegals, lorikeets and small parrots this can take a matter of days only. We always specify that a companion parrot be given its own cage when brought into a home. This is no time to scrimp on expenses and force two birds to share a cage. If mature birds are introduced, prepare to take weeks or months before contact is made. Attitude should be one of “here is your companion if you so choose.” The birds will make it clear when one of the cages becomes obsolete (by that time you might keep it around for fledglings!).

Those trying to pair deeply imprinted pet male parrots with new females may discover a Catch 22 with their bird unhappy being alone without gratifying his instincts, but too jealous of his

human owners to even try accepting a female companion. Much dysfunctional behavior results. I have several dear pets who went on loan with other friends during the bonding process because they could not detach from me enough even to experience the joy of having a head preened by another parrot. After successful bonding (sometimes laying), the pets came back to my home and all was fine. They still interact well with me, but I am no longer number one.

Incidentally, it is the joy of being preened by another parrot which we consider paramount to mate acceptance by imprinted pets. In order to facilitate this, we have used many techniques: group games on the floor, eating treats together, shower therapy where both pets are taken in to be wetted at which time aggression normally dissipates, and gently holding one bird head down while the more willing bird is allowed to preen headfeathers. Mutual preening is a critical point in parrot friendship. Birds raised around other birds are way ahead in this flock activity.

Some pet stores allow the introduction of its client’s pets to a prospective companion on the “neutral ground” of the store (after vet exams). In the case of cockatoos, Amazons and macaws the befriending can be apparent in a few days. Reputable bird shops also will guarantee that doves, Budgies, or Cockatiels bought to be paired with a pet at home will prove compatible. Otherwise, exchange is possible for a suitable bird. On no condition do we recommend pairing of two pet birds in the cage territory of one of them (certainly not the dominant or male bird). A neutral site is always best. Upon successful friendship, many problems – screaming, biting, feather plucking – can disappear abruptly.

One alternative to pairing a pet for potential breeding is to purchase a companion bird for your pet outside genus lines. This seems to work best when the parrots are of opposite gender and have ancestors from different continents. Thus color, behavior, noise-making, sexual signals and response are dissimilar. We have successfully matched Goffin’s Cockatoos with Yellow-collared Macaws, African Greys with Blue-fronted Amazons, Brotogeris with Goldie’s Lorikeets and just about anything with Cockatiels and Budgies.

Ah, but that is another story... ➤