

Aviculture at the Crossroads

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Forty or 50 years from now, when most of the breeding pairs of large macaws currently in the U.S. are no longer living or, at best, no longer capable of reproduction (wild-caught birds will almost certainly not have been available for decades), how many macaws will be producing young in the U.S.? Unless breeders stop taking eggs from pairs as soon as they have been laid, and allow those macaws to rear some young, then retain these young for breeding, the answer could be NONE!

Is this an exaggeration? How many aviculturists who breed Hyacinth Macaws (or any other macaw species, for that matter) have held back any of their young and retained them for the sole purpose of future breeding stock? Also, how many of their young have been sold to other breeders for the purpose of breeding and, to their knowledge, how many of these offspring have now produced young? Even if they have not reproduced, it would be interesting to know just how many of these birds have even had the *opportunity* to produce young.

I am not suggesting that hand reared parrots are useless for breeding, for countless hundreds have produced young. What I am suggesting is that many parrots in the U.S. are being hand reared from the eggs primarily for the pet trade, and, in many cases, kept for years without the companionship of their own species. Some of these birds, after a few years, will find their way into breeding aviaries but because they have never learned the natural behavior of their species, they may be useless for producing that vital next generation.

Most aviculturists currently involved in reproducing parrots of species which do not have a long history of "domestication" (i.e., most species other than the Australians, Cockatiels

and lovebirds) seem to be unaware of the grave responsibilities they hold in their hands. Future generations of aviculturists will (unless we mend our ways) look back with incredulity and even scorn at the breeders of the 1980's and 1990's whose motive will appear to have been financial gain.

We, the parrot breeders of today, hold more power and responsibility in our hands than any others in avicultural history. We are at the crossroads. Behind us is a huge highway down which have traveled not just thousands, but millions of parrots in the past decade. For example, from 1982 to 1986, 1.4 million parrots were exported from the neotropics alone (mainly from Argentina, Bolivia, Peru, Uruguay, Guyana, Suriname and Honduras).

Today (being the following 10 years or so), we are at a crossroads, a signal point in the history of aviculture, because tomorrow there will be no more wild caught parrots from which to breed. Two paths lie directly before us. We can travel down the one marked "financial gain and avicultural ruin" or we can choose the one marked "avicultural conscience and satisfaction."

If we keep parrots only to make as much money as we can in the shortest time possible, we will have no hesitation in choosing the road signposted "financial gain." We will then continue to pull all eggs the moment they are laid, and to sell the resulting young as pets, usually well before they are weaned. Weaning is hard, time consuming work, but it is easy for sellers to persuade potential buyers that they need to wean their pet themselves if that special rapport every pet owner craves is to be achieved. In fact, an equally satisfying rapport can be gained with most parent reared birds.

Commercial breeders do not consider the young they breed as the pre-

cious genetic material the birds really are. Breeders do not care that most of the pet birds will be unable to pass on their genes to form that vital next generation in aviculture. Inbreeding as a result of a small genetic base may cause serious problems for aviculturists two or more decades from now. For example, a study of Scarlet Macaws in Europe, mostly in zoos, showed that at the end of 1989, only 42 of 119 "potential founders" (wild caught birds or those of unknown origin) had produced young.

Those who choose the way marked "avicultural conscience" will also hand rear some young and sell them as pets. They almost certainly will have to. Keeping parrots is an expensive operation and must be self-financing for the majority of breeders. However, they will allow their pairs to rear *some* young to independence each year. They will sell these young to others who wish to use them for breeding or who will sell them to other enlightened aviculturists.

Some of these breeders know very well that they can keep two young birds together as pets for a short while and derive much enjoyment from them. But, with the large macaws, for example, by the time they are 18 months old their personalities will be changing. They will be exerting their "authority" over their owners. They may no longer be the cuddly, totally captivating babies they once were. Captive bred birds mature earlier than those that are wild caught. They can lay at three years and perhaps produce their first young at four years.

For the first time in the history of aviculture we can have our young birds sexed using a choice of methods, even non-invasive methods. We can even cooperate with another breeder working with the same species. Each breeder can have his own young sexed even before they are independent, and can exchange one or more youngsters to form unrelated pairs. Then the process starts all over again, with the pleasure that a couple of young birds as pets can give for a few years. They grow up together, their sex not in doubt, and a compatible pair is more likely to be formed than when two birds are placed together as adults. Such adults may previously have been paired and it may be a couple of years before they are willing to totally accept another partner. Or they may never do so.



We need more parent-reared parrots. These Blue and Yellow macaws were raised at Palmitos Park. The young bird is on the left.



Hyacinth Macaw at Palmitos Park

Many of the birds in our care are not replaceable. Aviculturists may never again have the opportunity to obtain parrots from certain Indonesian islands, for example. We should treat as priceless jewels the cockatoos and lorries from these small islands which are rapidly being deforested. Some will soon be extinct in the wild, although some species (Moluccan Cockatoos and Blue-streaked Lorries, for example) are still so common in aviculture that owners find it hard to view them in this light. Our attitudes toward these birds, toward Hyacinth Macaws, Tucuman Amazons, Green-cheeked Amazons and a host of other species, *must change* if aviculturists are to deserve the image of responsible people whose priorities are based on something other than profit. We *must* develop an avicultural conscience because soon, very soon, it will be too late.

How many people are prepared to give a lifetime commitment to the pairs in their care? When the female is "burned out" from producing countless clutches year after year, she can always be sold to some unsuspecting breeder. I actually know some one who admitted to doing this. What kind of commitment is this to the bird *or* to aviculture?

If a female can produce only so many eggs in her lifetime, we need not try to convince ourselves that we are doing aviculture a favor by squeezing the maximum number of young out of her in a short period of time. We would be providing a far more valuable service by producing the same number of young over a longer period of time.

With rare species of parrots and other birds in aviculture, there are a number of instances of a single pair almost flooding the gene pool. I know of instances in small countries like Denmark where *all* the aviary bred young of certain species have actually come from one pair and no outcrosses can be found. This problem originates from a lack of successful breeders—those who had the species when it was available but failed to breed it.

All of us who breed parrots must question our motives and look inside our consciences. Whether parrots provide us with a living or just with enjoyment (and sometimes pain), we owe them more than just food and water. We owe them a future in aviculture. *And that future will be decided by us!* ➤