

# Eclectus Parrots

by Constance Bacon, Marshalltown, IA

The strikingly beautiful Eclectus hails from the South Pacific. Depending upon which authority you believe, there are nine or 10 subspecies, but I am aware of only six presently available in the United States: Grand, Vosmaeri, Red-sided, Soloman Island, Biaki, and McGillivray. The first three listed are considered common, and the Soloman Island is becoming more easily available. Only 15 Biaki were brought into the United States a few years ago by some returning missionaries and I know of only two pairs that are producing at this time. And those pairs' offspring (which we purchased two years ago) are presently laying. I heard that a very small shipment of McGillivray arrived a few years ago, but some people refute that claim.

I have been told that when Eclectus were first introduced into the United States, many of the subspecies were hybridized and, unfortunately, that practice still exists at some facilities.

When considering the purchase of an Eclectus, it would be wise to obtain a photograph and arrange a consultation with an authority on Eclectus to determine whether or not the bird is a hybrid.

The color of the Eclectus varies somewhat in the different subspecies, mostly in the female. Known as the most color-dimorphic parrot in the world, the males and females were not too long ago thought to be two separate species.

The males are generally all translucent green with red underwings, but more red appears on the smaller subspecies. The Vosmarie male has a lemon yellow band on the end of his tail. All males have yellow to orange beaks which resemble pieces of candy corn.

The females are generally red, mauve and yellow, or red with a royal violet blue belly and underwings, with deep maroon wings. The beak is black.

Adding to the species' unique appearance, the plumage has the appearance of hair rather than feathers. Scattered gold strands give the translucent appearance.

When housing Eclectus, one must consider their large wingspan and accommodate them in the largest cage possible. Most of our cages are 3 ft. x 4 ft. x 5 ft., but we consider this to be on the small side. Most of our birds spend at least an hour a day exercise time outside the cage.

## Diet

My Eclectus diet consists mostly of vegetables, fruits, legumes and pellets. Since Eclectus don't eat many seeds in the wild, and since seeds are deficient in many nutrients, we feel they are more crunch than lunch so they are the exception rather than the rule at our house.

The Eclectus requires a diet high in beta carotene and vegetable protein. Its digestive tract is longer than that of most parrot species, having a larger proventriculus and longer intestines.

Fat intake must be limited to prevent fatty tumors. Some fat, however, is

needed especially by youngsters who are very active, and to store the fat-soluble vitamins A, E, and D.

I use No-Oil Roudybush Maintenance Pellets for Hookbills. Too much oil in the diet can cause black feathers on both the male and female. These are easily distinguished from black stress marks or black liver disease marks because the pattern is different. Some pelleted diets are high in sugar which can cause kidney problems or hyperactivity. Some are also high in artificial colors and flavors which can add to toxicity problems. There are some pelleted diets on the market which are organic but their lack of preservatives permits the growth of unwelcome yeast and bacteria if left in the cage for more than one hour.

One customer told me he thought his Eclectus was a hybrid—half Eclectus and half pig. It's true. I stay out of their way when they are eating. Our Eclectus are definitely not picky eaters. And they grow until they are about two years old.

## Behavior

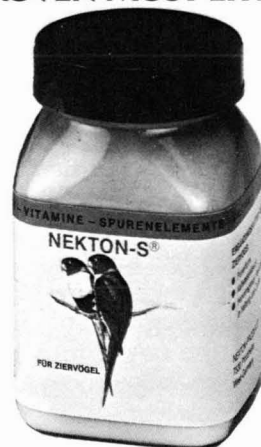
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have excellent talking abilities. They also love to mimic their favorite sounds such as microwave ovens, laughter, opera and sneezing. Our Eclectus sing, watch television and love to listen to the radio. They are adventuresome and love to explore new places and people. Ours understand many commands such as kiss, eagle, there's a birdie, inside, fly, jump, come here, no, up and naughty.

The speaking ability of the Eclectus will depend upon the individual bird, its bond with its human, how much time is spent speaking directly to the bird, its health, status, age and a number of other circumstances. I found that playing repeating tapes did not help or improve the speaking ability of my birds.

Many bird owners do not allow their birds to sit on their shoulder, thinking that the bird's eye level should not be higher than that of the master lest the bird attempt to dominate. I might believe this if we're speaking about a wild bird being tamed. However, if an Eclectus is purchased while still an infant and "pecking order" is established at a very young age, I see no reason to banish your bird from your shoulder. In fact, your shoulder will probably become one of its favorite places to be.

Our Eclectus are very playful and enjoy hanging upside down in their cages and flapping their wings, playing with toys, and engaging in interaction with us and with other birds. They are very tidy and can easily be potty trained. Also, they do not throw their food around.

Many experts have written that the small Solomon Island Eclectus is the most calm and docile of the Eclectus subspecies, and I must agree. They are generally quiet, non-chewers and non-screamers. And since they live in colonies in the wild, they tend to bond to a whole human family rather than to just one person.

Eclectus produce no feather dust because they have an oil gland rather than a dust gland for preening. Because of this, one should never see dust on the beak of a healthy Eclectus Parrot. Instead, its beak should be clean and shiny.

Eclectus are very intelligent and focus their eyes on their owner to observe every movement. They show interest not only in their owner but in everyone and everything around them.

They love to explore and usually show little or no fear.

But an Eclectus will display the normal fear response which is referred to as "flight or fight." If something frightens them, they will let out a scream and fly quickly in any direction. If this happens, the best solution is to speak quietly and slowly to the bird until it is calmed down.

We have noticed that our Eclectus are sensitive to any loud noises such as thunder, fireworks, alarms, etc. I have read that hens may trample their eggs or chicks during these disturbances, but we have not had the problem.

It is very common to see a young bird with broken tail feathers. This usually happens because of the high activity level among infants, and is not normally related to nutrition. Some breeders pull the broken feathers out with pliers, but we opt to let the feathers molt out and grow back normally.

The female of the Eclectus species is dominant and many people find that when the infant female reaches puberty she becomes aggressive. This is simply those hormones talking and the female needs her space during these mood swings. This is strictly an instinctive behavior and not meanness. The male is very subservient and probably makes the least moody pet. The tameness of any pet parrot depends on the amount of direct attention, play time, handling, and interaction with its handler and other birds as an infant. Even the moody female will eventually mellow out as she matures.

### **Neonate Eclectus**

Generations of aviculturists can tell us about those two obvious growing stages all youngsters experience. The first one is generally known as the "terrible twos." It is basically a stage when the bird will learn about pecking order. He may lunge or nip at his owner, but this is all very normal. Our baby Eclectus experience this growing stage at between three and five months of age. For the owner to maintain the alpha position, he must keep the upper hand. For example, if the new owner wants the bird to step up onto his hand but the baby does not appear interested, the owner must physically force the bird to step onto his hand. If the owner fails to maintain dominance, the bird may gain the alpha position in the pecking order and the owner will find, as the bird matures, that it is not

a well socialized pet.

The second growing stage is what we call "puberty." It occurs in Eclectus between nine and 18 to 24 months. What we see in this stage is an attempt to find an outlet for those newly discovered hormones. We may see fast, undirected movements, quick, unexplained mood changes, occasional screaming, shadow boxing and masturbation along with the expected courting activities. These stages usually pass and the Eclectus mellows out by the age of two or three years.

Many Eclectus owners tell me that their birds dislike being touched, scream, feather pluck, and are generally unfriendly. Where do they find these "birds from hell?" I believe that an Eclectus that has not been properly socialized as an infant will fit this category. To properly socialize an infant, the caretaker must hold the baby as much as possible and touch it all over its body, including underneath the wings and feet. The caretaker should talk or sing to the baby as much as possible to familiarize it with the human voice. I spend most of my days in the nursery so my babies become accustomed to the company of a human. Unless it is necessary, we do not separate our infants in the brooders. This way they become used to sharing their owner's attention with other pets or persons.

Our adults feed their babies for the first few weeks before they are pulled for handfeeding. We feed with a syringe or spoon. The brooders are washed and the aspen bedding or the paper towels are changed with each feeding. Brooders are disinfected daily to avoid bacterial or fungus growth.

As a novice several years ago, I took some good advice from Jim Petrie, who told me to expose the infant to as much stress as possible. Stress is the number one killer of birds, either directly or indirectly, and if the baby is going to become ill, we want it to happen while it is still in our care rather than after it arrives at its new home.

### **Handfeeding**

One of the first Eclectus books published instructs the handfeeder to burp the infant after each feeding because Eclectus do not have the pumping motion most neonates use to release excess air. To burp my babies, I hold each one just as I would hold a human infant after a feeding. They usually

"burp" two or three times. Some breeders release the excess swallowed air by pushing it out the esophagus with a thumb while holding the commissures with the other thumb and index finger.

Eclectus are known as being a difficult neonate to handfeed, and I must admit that after they reach the age of about six weeks to weaning, that statement holds great truth.

After experimenting with several handfeeding formulas, I have concluded that Pretty Bird Hand Feeding formula works best for my babies. It contains additional digestive enzymes and lactobacillus. Some baby formulas contain yeast, and it seemed that while using those particular formulas, my babies were more susceptible to yeast infections if the heat or humidity rose slightly in the brooder. Some formulas thicken too quickly, and this can cause a slow moving crop. With any handfeeding formula I've tried, however, a slow moving crop could be immediately remedied with the addition of a pinch of pure lactobacillus from the health food store (I use Nature's Brand), and the addition of a small amount of Gerber's Papaya baby food. (Use caution when adding fruit because the sugar attracts yeast.)

With the proper high calorie diet, vitamins, minerals, nutrients and herbs, very little chemical intervention is needed in a growing baby. So, during infancy, and as they grow, the immune system is constantly stimulated and develops quite efficiently so the bird's own body can fight off most minor problems.

If we do encounter a problem in any of our birds, we usually use liquid vitamin B complex or lecithin to increase metabolism which in turn stimulates the immune system. We also use Echinacea and Amino Acids to stimulate the immune system. Medication is the exception rather than the rule at our facility, unless it is a matter of life and death.

### Breeding

In the proper environment and with the correct diet, Eclectus produce all year long. In fact, the only way to stop them is a temporary separation. Removing the nest box does not always stop production in an Eclectus pair because the hen will simply lay the egg from the perch onto the floor of the cage.

Our Eclectus males are such

Cassinovas that copulation can occur anywhere, no matter who is present. I have even observed one pair copulating in the food dish, and while most copulate on a perch, many will copulate on the cage floor. One talented male will even attempt to copulate while the hen is hanging from the side of the cage. Eclectus are not monogamous, so during playtime I may find a male soliciting the female of another pair. I can also switch mates to prevent

tedium and to stimulate interest.

Our pairs start their next fertile clutch 18 to 21 days after babies are pulled from the nest box. A clutch usually consists of two eggs, but I occasionally find three fertile eggs and once I found four eggs in a single clutch with only three being fertile.

Eclectus make wonderful pets, so if you are trying to decide what your next bird will be, please give serious consideration to an Eclectus. ➤

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# Eclectus World

by Kate Crowley Rosenberg, Editor, *Eclectus World*

Any editor can tell you that publishing a newsletter is neither easy nor always fun, but once I became a devoted fan of the Eclectus Parrot, rescuing and maintaining the struggling communications network for the species became a commitment of paramount importance in my life.

When the publisher of *Eclectus World* decided to discontinue the publication, I recognized the importance of maintaining the skeletal structure of this network, requested the mailing list and began to rebuild.

*Eclectus World* is today a hefty 12-16 page periodical which is published every few months as information becomes available. Writers for this newsletter include breeders, veterinarians and pet owners—and we all seem to be able to find ground of common interest. The *Eclectus World* editors include, Laurella Desborough, Constance Bacon and Brian Speer, D.V.M., top names in the Eclectus arena whose help we find ourselves very fortunate to obtain. The staff is volunteer and donations, though infrequent, are cheerily made by a few staunch supporters. The aid is invaluable in maintaining long distance conferences on news topics and responding to queries on health and behavioral problems out in the field.

Occasionally, *Eclectus World* acts as a central information switchboard—such as the time last year when a request was made by a Pennsylvania Humane Society for assistance in locat-

ing the owners of an Eclectus hen found in a Philadelphia back yard. More frequently, however, the telephone calls are requests for the names and phone numbers of breeders in the callers area or for suggestions on handfeeding problems with a particular bird. *Eclectus World* maintains a telephone registry with its subscriber data base to aid in such requests.

*Eclectus World* is a dialogue, not dogma, of current therapy, protocol and information. New and better procedures for behavioral problems and disease treatments are reported as they are experienced or developed. Some of the recent subjects explored in *Eclectus World* include an update on sources of Teflon in the home, environmental poisoning caused by new carpet, food sources and values of vitamin A, a report on mycotoxins in peanuts and grain, a new handfeeding technique tested by a Maryland veterinarian, as well as behavioral issues with pets and breeders. Submissions to *Eclectus World* are welcomed from all proactive sources. On-line submissions may be made to CrowleyInc@AOL.com.

Subscriptions to *Eclectus World* are available for \$15 per year. Back issues are also available. Article submissions, requests for information and subscriptions may be addressed to:

**Eclectus World**  
**Crowley Communications, Inc.**  
**Rt. 1 Box 161**  
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