

# Eclectus as Companions

by Susie Christian, Morro Bay, CA

**G**od bless Cockatiels! Didn't most of us start out with them? If it weren't for them, I wouldn't have 11 Eclectus Parrots today. Over 20 years ago, my Cockatiels raised babies in the back yard and one pair had the freedom of the house with a nest box on the kitchen counter. I progressed to lovebirds, rosellas, a lory and a Pionus.

In 1990, however, I decided I wanted an Eclectus Parrot. I had never actually *seen* one, but had seen many pho-

tos and had read many articles about them. Of course, I wanted a hen and decided that I liked the look of the Vosmaeri better. I called just about every ad for baby Eclectus I could find in all of my magazines. I obtained much information during this search. One woman wanted to be sure that I wasn't buying an Eclectus just to decorate my living room. I was a bit insulted at the time, but looking back now, I'd likely ask the same question of a potential buyer. I was quoted prices from \$800 to \$1600, and I have to admit that it was price I went for.

The breeder met me half way between our home towns. He showed me the contents of a plastic tub which he said contained my baby Eclectus. But it looked instead like a squeaking, moving lump, a form of a vacuum cleaner bag. I began to handfeed this baby when it was age six weeks. Many folks warned me that Eclectus were the hardest of all parrots to handfeed. I learned my first lesson here—find out for yourself. I'd handfed lots of Cockatiels and I'm the brave sort, so I believed the breeder's encouraging words, "Handfeeding Eclectus is a piece of cake."

All the way home I worried about her. If she was too still, I just knew my little dirt lump was dead. Was she too hot, too cold? Eclectus seem to be less sensitive to temperature change than other parrot babies are. They have a down that serves as insulation. Her "crib" was a cardboard box placed on a heating pad *outside* of the box. The size of her cradle grew larger about every seven days. I used towels under her and changed them as soon as they were soiled. Kind of reminded me of washing diapers.

Sure enough, she was easy to feed. She just liked to eat slowly. From the very start, the Eclectus personality was compatible with mine. Very calm and laid back, she leisurely took her feedings, determined not to be rushed. We humans live in such a hurried world. Now this little bird enters my life and says slow down to *my* speed. So many treasured moments were spent handfeeding, stroking those emerging porcupine quill looking feathers, rolling lumps of handfeeding formula off her chin, and quietly bonding. Eclectus raised this way, I guarantee, will be excellent companions for a lifetime.

Because the new baby was on four feedings a day, she went to work with me. I took her box, heating pad, a "diaper bag" full of clean towels, a plastic bag for the soiled ones, formula, thermometer, etc. right along to work. In this way, she became used to traveling right from the start, and had plenty of contact with different people.

I recommend that prospective pet Eclectus owners take possession of their birds at an early age—the one or two feedings a day stage. I value the memories of my early weeks with my Eclectus (captured on film) as well as the memories in my heart's album. What a delight, watching a baby grow up. Lots of dos and don'ts to learn. Not much can actually go wrong, but if I had any question I called an Eclectus breeder. Six years later, I have a network of "Eclectus people" that I call regularly with *new* questions. I also subscribe to *Eclectus World* newsletter written exclusively for us.

My first wonderful female Eclectus grew up to be an amazing pet. Over a year later I got a call from a woman who had a Vosmaeri male. Did I want it at a reasonable price, she asked, because he was picking his feathers from the stress of being teased by her husband? I promptly began making payments. My first two Eclectus became buddies, happily sharing a cage together, but they never seemed interested in mating. They are very bonded as great pals.

My first female Eclectus comes into the house at night, eats dinner with me and lies on my chest while I watch TV or read. She is happy to settle down on her blanket on my chest and go to sleep. She instinctively finds the center area of my chest, a bit to the left, directly over my heart. She scratches eight or nine times as if to rearrange

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her nest. Then she grits her beak contentedly, drifting off to sleep with her head resting on a fold of the blanket. I would not advise this for everyone, but she actually sleeps in bed with me most nights. I have a king-sized bed and am not a restless sleeper. Her blanket is on top of the covers and she makes a valley in it. She will sleep up to eight hours this way, not moving. She has never pooped in bed either. In fact, at bedtime I hold her over some newspapers and, on command, she goes. Occasionally she will scratch and wake me up because she has to go in the middle of the night. Eclectus are easily potty trained.

Most of my Eclectus that spend time on my shoulder try to hold their droppings as long as they can. If we travel in the car, I give them opportunities to void when we get to our destination and at least every 10 minutes thereafter. They are so eager to please; they really want to do the right thing. I think my males, however, are better at being potty trained than are the females.

My first male Eclectus is a real clown. He is very tuned-in to me, with constant eye contact. His vocabulary is incredible. He has learned everything I could think of to teach him, and more. He even cusses. His timing and appropriate use of words is uncanny. When the other birds are noisy, he yells, "Quiet!" at them—and they mind. When the phone rings, he says hello before I can lift the receiver. If I talk on the phone, he says, "Uh-huh, yeah, OK," laughs and gives the usual responses when one is the listener in a one-sided conversation. Another male snores like I do. Evident, he watched me napping and snoring on the sofa so now every time I even sit on the sofa, he starts to snore.

My first male knows how to hoist an 18 inch chain with a bucket on the end of it. He hauls it up, beak over toe, until he wraps his toe over the bucket handle and reaches into the bucket for his reward—a nut. The trick is to start with a small bucket (from a hobby store) fixed to the top of the perch so the bird will get used to reaching into it for a nut. Then fasten a small chain on the bucket handle and lower it an inch or so each day, until the bird becomes used to hauling it up an inch or two. Gradually lower the bucket to six inches, then a foot or more. It is an easy and cute trick for a bird to learn.

These first two birds I've spoken of,

like all the rest of my Eclectus, spend their days in an outdoor cage where they have a *choice* of sun or shade. Usually they hang out in the darker part of the cage observing their feathered neighbors, the wild birds or just watching the clouds go by. I bring these two in at night because I love the Eclectus energy in the house with me. All my other birds stay outside all the time.

My third bird was a Grand Eclectus male purchased on impulse from a bird mart. He was so full of vigorous and electric energy. Every fiber of his fluorescent being screamed, "I want to go home with *you*." He still lacks a mate but he fills a very important niche as guardian to the others in the flock. His personality is so intense that when I hold him he vibrates with excitement. He places his face against mine, first one cheek then the other. Later, when watching my other Eclectus mating, I realized that this is part of the ritual. Now I thank him for the nice compliment, and appreciate all his romantic thoughts.

The rest of the additions to my collection were planned. I purchased a

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pair of Biaki Eclectus, then another pair of Vosmaeri, and on...until I now have 11 Eclectus Parrots. I really enjoy observing the differences in the personalities and habits among the different subspecies. The Vosmaeri are more laid back, perhaps closer to the nature of a cockatoo, while the Baikis are in constant motion, more like a lory.

For me, a very hard part of the weaning process is putting the young birds outdoors for good—not bringing them back inside each night. At one point last year, I was bringing seven of them into the house at dusk. I feared that they wouldn't remain tame and relate to me as pets when I put them into breeder cages. Was I ever wrong! The minute I go into the yard, they all hang on the side of their cages and try to get my attention. When I open a cage door, it is all about who can beat who out of the cage and on to my shoulder.

I take each pair out of their cage and spend time sitting in the garden with them. Eclectus are masters at spending quiet time with me. They are content to sit on my knee, shoulder, or cuddled against my chest. All of my

Eclectus love to be held, facing me, up close, hugged gently, as well as being rocked just like a baby. Some of them feel relaxed enough to lie upside down comfortably. They appreciate stroking, from their heads down to their tails, and most of them enjoy having their beaks rubbed.

I especially love the fact that they are not demanding of my attention, but will meet me half way. They are most content to just "be" with me and blend with my personality. Inner serenity radiates from every magnificent feather. Eclectus are most certainly the avian version of Mona Lisa, with both sexes possessing that sweet, enigmatic smile. They go for your mouth immediately, and thrive on kisses—as many as you will give them.

Eclectus are not too small, not too large and there is no long tail to contend with. They are beautiful, not noisy, and do not scream just to hear their own voices. They don't chew furniture or your ears (although they do preen my face, eyelashes, ears and hair, but ever so gently). Occasionally, one of them will regurgitate in a gesture of affection but I decline politely,

thank them, and tell them I prefer not to have "leftovers."

An Eclectus will sometimes growl like a dog when it is annoyed. To disturb an Eclectus at breakfast or at night when it's asleep brings growls of warning for the intrusion. I do not pay much attention to the growls and certainly am not frightened.

Like most parrots, Eclectus feel a compulsion to rejoice vocally as the sun rises and to repeat the performance at dusk. For some reason, even all the noise the Eclectus make all together does not bother me. I have neighbors very close by and they love the Eclectus chatter. The range of bird sounds Eclectus make (in addition to human words) includes squeals, coos, mmmms, pleasant whistles, konks, and bell-like gong tones very pleasing to the human ear.

When startled, Eclectus have a warning call that is, er, startling, and both sexes use it. The males sometimes accompany the squawk by flipping over and hanging upside down on their perches like a bat. This alarm call in the wild is probably a hawk or other predator warning. The male, who spends most of his time in the trees (as opposed to the female who spends much time hidden in the nest) swings under the branch to lessen his chances of being nailed by the hawk.

The outdoor cage for each pair is 3 ft. x 4 ft. x 6 ft. long and is filled with a variety of perches from 2x4's to eucalyptus branches of varying sizes. Manzanita is too slippery for Eclectus who don't seem to grip as strongly as other parrots. Eclectus toenails seem never to need trimming.

My birds love toys of leather, rope, and unbleached muslin or old sheets torn into 2 in. strips then fastened to a ring and braided then knotted. The males regurgitate and feed these toys by the hour and also use them for practice—to show their hens just how it is done when their turn comes.

My birds are fed a small amount of cooked beans, brown rice and vegetables, prepared ahead and frozen in baggies. To that, I add a large assortment of fresh fruit and vegetables daily. The birds love sweet potatoes, grapes, pomegranates, and all kinds of berries. I use no vitamin supplements and all of my birds look and act healthy.

There is no aspect of the Eclectus personality that I find fault with. For

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