

Rewards of Caring for Special Needs Birds

by Sybil Erden, Phoenix, AZ
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Those of us who love our birds try to give them long, healthy and happy lives.

But the sad truth is that some birds, be they domestically raised "companion" birds or imported "breeders," do not spend their lives in one stable and nurturing environment. Quite often they are bought and sold, moved and transplanted several times during their lives. As a result, some end up confused and emotionally or physically damaged by their experiences.

Other birds are hatched with problems—physical abnormalities which, in the wild, would be an automatic death sentence but which in captivity can be overcome and gain the bird a full and contented life. It just takes a little extra consideration from its human caregiver.

Still, at some point in its life, another bird may have an accident which requires its removal from the flock or from its mate. And it may need special attention from its keeper.

Here at the Oasis Aviary and Sanctuary I have taken in a number of birds with special needs or problems. When I agree to give them a home, in my heart I have to accept them exactly the way they are when I first see them. And I know every step of progress will be a miracle and bonus.

Rainbow; behavior problems

Rainbow is a male Scarlet Macaw who arrived here at 16 months of age. At first impression, he might appear to have come from an ideal home. His owner was a middle-aged professional woman of considerable means who had several other birds. He was healthy, well fed and groomed, but rather than being lavished with time and attention, he was cared for by a series of the owner's relatives and hirelings. He was shuffled between his home, that of a relative and even to that of a renter. When I met Rainbow, he had never known stability nor had he learned to bond.

As a result, Rainbow was nippy,

aggressively defensive and frightened. I found myself black and blue from fingertip to shoulders the first few weeks he lived here. Every interaction was a test, a challenge to my authority. He never broke skin, but would give nasty pinches and he'd eye me with flaring pupils. His only vocabulary consisted of "Hellooooo, step up?" And a long, loud "Ouuutttt." His previous owner had told me how she would slap Rainbow when he nipped.

I began a program of nurturing dominance, taking him out on my hand, doing the downward shifting, unbalancing movement I call "the earthquake" when he would nip. If this didn't work, I'd put him back into the cage for 10 to 20 minute "time out" periods. In the cage he would cry "Ouuuutttt!!" which I would force myself to ignore. But when I let him out again, he would resume his nippy behaviors. In frustration, I called Bob Diaz, the head trainer at Parrot Jungle in Florida. I explained all to Diaz and he recommended that I allow Rainbow only water, pellets and veggies in his cage and that I reserve nuts and seeds as treats to be hand fed when his behavior was good.

This seemed to have an effect. In less than a month, Rainbow had stopped his constant nipping and challenging and began to bond with me. He allowed me to touch him all over his body, even stroking under his wings. I was able to touch the skin on his face and massage his feet. Soon he began to trust me enough to step off his perch and allow me to catch him. He would lie on his back and let me tickle his belly, and he learned to laugh an endearing chuckle. I gave him more and more time out of his cage and no longer heard his loud cries. Instead, he would call "Hiiii" to anyone in the house.

Rainbow was still terribly frightened and therefore aggressive around strangers. After about two months of living with us, my husband Jerry (who is still intimidated by a bird of

Rainbow's size) began to help me desensitize Rainbow to strangers. Jerry would go into Rainbow's room (my studio) every day, at least once, and offer Rainbow a treat from his hand just as I had. Gradually Rainbow began to accept the treats and at this point Jerry could come into the room while I was handling Rainbow without a danger to me.

Today, eight months after Rainbow arrived, he is still very cautious around strangers but is far less aggressive so long as strangers keep what Rainbow feels is an adequate distance. I allow for this but am ready to desensitize him further, using bird-savvy friends as Bob Diaz suggested. I hope Rainbow will gradually lose his fear of unknown people.

By accepting Rainbow and attempting to understand his problems, and not punishing him for what his previous situation made him, he has become a loving addition to my flock.

Sassy; physically challenged

Sassy is a young female Moluccan Cockatoo who was hatched with extremely crippled feet and legs. The breeder (an AFA member) decided to try extensive (and costly) surgery to correct the problem. As soon as she weaned, both of Sassy's legs were reconstructed to the point that she could walk on her hocks. One foot can grasp, but to the side, and the other foot has only one working, moveable toe.

Although I had never expected to have a cockatoo as a companion, when Sassy and I met, about a month after her surgery, she and I immediately fell in love with one another. Within a month of our meeting, the breeder and I had become friends and when she offered Sassy to me I leapt at the opportunity to share my life with the little pink bundle of energy.

Several special physical accommodations had to be made for Sassy. She was beginning to develop pressure sores on her hocks, so I padded every-

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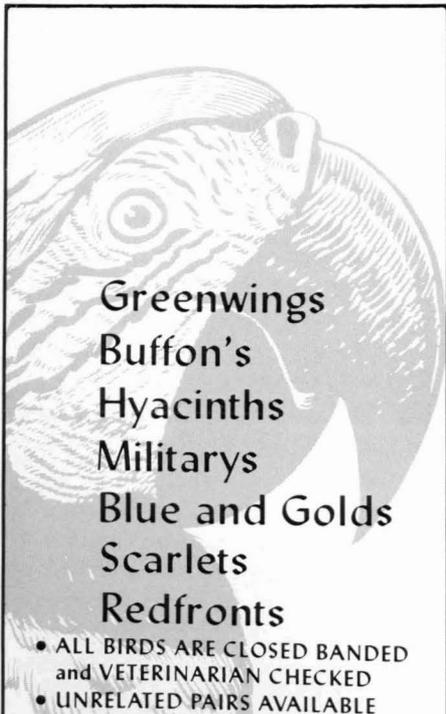
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thing her feet came into contact with. I removed the grate from her cage and padded the bottom with heavy towels which are washed daily. Since she couldn't perch to sleep, I bought specially designed metal shelves for the large Cal-Cage I had purchased for her. She learned to climb up, but needed help getting down so I hung thick cotton ropes for her to swing down from her shelf-perches. I carpeted the floor of her bird-proof room. Since, unlike most birds, she spends most of her time on the floor, her room is oriented with toys and diversions at floor level.

Sassy cannot hold food in her claws as most large birds do, so I feed her smaller seeds and cut her fresh foods into small pieces she can more easily eat.

It became apparent very quickly that nothing is going to stop Sassy from becoming a *real* bird. She has learned to climb her cage, in fact, she can climb everything. She uses her beak and one foot to navigate the dresser by using the drawer pulls. Eventually, she learned to balance on the play perch on top of her cage. I have left her fully flighted to ease her mobility and have trained her to a harness and lead when not in "her" room. Since she has no idea that there is anything wrong with her, and has learned to compensate for her physical disabilities, Sassy is a constant source of amazement to me.

Andreas; mature, neglected, wild-caught

Andreas was given to me four months ago by a young woman with whom he had lived four and a half years. Although she "loved" him, she knew dangerously little about the physical, nutritional and emotional requirements of a mature imported Moluccan Cockatoo. Andreas had gone through quarantine about seven years ago and was purchased by a pet store where he lived a year or two. The young woman worked at the pet store and, ultimately, brought the bird home.

Shortly thereafter, she married and began to raise a family. When I acquired Andreas, the woman was pregnant with her third child and had not had time for the bird for several years. His care was less than optimum.

Shortly after his arrival at my place, he came down with a gram negative

bacterial infection which nearly cost him his life. When he was well and came out of his most recent quarantine, he moved into my office within earshot of my other birds. I would talk to him, and he allowed me to clean his cage, but did not allow me to handle him at all. I began to bring Sassy into the room and play on the floor with her. Andreas immediately recognized her as one of his species and called to

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her. She hid in terror. But Andreas was very curious about the affection between us.

Gradually, as I was introducing him to a better diet, he began to accept some fresh foods from my hands. When I would reach into his cage, Andreas began preening my head. I would stand very still a few minutes and allow him the contact without attempting a response. After several weeks of this, Andreas lowered his head one day and I slowly reached out and touched him. I began rubbing his jaw and his neck and even reached under his chest and scratched under his wings. Andreas seemed to go into a trance with the contact...then suddenly realized what was happening and jumped backwards with a hiss. I left him alone and it was several weeks before we had any intimate contact again.

With Andreas, the key has been allowing him to initiate contact. We now are at a point of mutual respect where I can pick him up if and when necessary. He is still terribly afraid of being handled but has made no attempt to bite when I do handle him. When he doesn't want scratching, he takes my finger in his mouth and pushes me away. When he does his "joy of life" calling, I occasionally join in, which I think he enjoys. Andreas likes me to put my face near his while I stroke him, and he will occasionally press the side of his face next to mine, gently, with his eyes half closed.

Andreas has come a long way in a

few months. His behavior, his diet, his health and his ability to play have all improved. He seems happy these days, unlike the lonely, sick bird I first met.

**Squeakie-No-Beakie;
no upper beak, spinal injuries**

Squeakie was hatched here, the offspring of an extraordinarily prolific pair of Budgies who found places to have babies even when no nest box was available. Unfortunately, a competitor killed several of the babies and severely injured the remaining two at an early age. I handfed Squeakie and the other survivor but I didn't realize how serious the damage to Squeakie's spine had been and that he would not be able to ever properly control his flight. As a result, when attempting to fledge, he flew into a wall and broke his entire top beak off right at the cere.

Needless to say, I felt awful guilty and worried. The veterinarian was not hopeful about the ability of the beak to regenerate since there was extensive tissue damage. But Squeakie had been a handfed baby so I figured it would be easy to keep him alive and give him a decent life.

Squeak now lives in my bedroom. He has a large cage with ladders and perches and hanging toys. I have tried various methods of coaxing him to eat on his own, and he has tried to drink a little water, but he cannot maintain himself. I feed him three times a day. He is on a syringe formula of my own design—Exact (a commercial hand-feeding formula) cut 50%-50% with human baby food veggies and cereals. I do this to cut the level of fat and protein in the Exact to an acceptable level for an adult bird. He eats between 6 and 10 cc per feeding. It has been six months since the accident and Squeakie has been holding his weight. Emotionally and physically, he seems to be flourishing.

Other than the disadvantage inherent in having to feed a bird three times a day... for, perhaps (and hopefully) 18 years, the other concession I had to make is bathing and grooming him. Since Squeak cannot preen his feathers, the sheaths don't come off. So every couple of weeks Squeakie gets a bath (which he is really not too thrilled about) and then I spend half an hour preening his feathers (which he likes).

While this may appear to be a lot of work for so small a bird, there has been a delightful and unexpected bonus. Squeakie shares the bedroom with Shanti, our Congo Grey. And now *everything* that Shanti says or sings, Squeakie says and sings...in a funny little helium voice.

Every bird deserves a good home. And every so often we hear of those

which have problems, and those that could use a new home. If you have ever considered taking in a bird with a difficulty, and have shied away, fearful of the extra work, let me reassure you. Although there is an increase in work, the rewards vastly outweigh the time spent. There is no greater gift than a sick bird made well, a sad and lonely bird made joyous and playful. No greater gift at all. ➤

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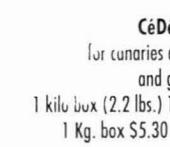
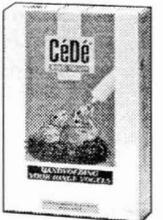
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