

## Passing the Test: Becoming a Breeder Bird in the Future Breeder Program

by Steven P. Hartman, Sunbury, OH

**A**t Hartman Aviary we have approximately 100 pairs of varied species of psitticines set up for breeding at any one time. Of these, approximately 20% are domestically raised birds. Often we have as many as 50 additional individuals in our future breeders program. This group consists of many species of all ages that are in the process of getting their education, maturing and developing a bond with their future breeding partner.

My primary objective with aviculture is to selectively breed a better pet bird (keeping in mind that I also would like to make some money at the same time). To this end we tend to be choosy about the individuals that make it into our breeder program. We avoid prospects that have developed neurotic tendencies like plucking, screaming and biting, and we steer toward birds who have had pet experience through adolescence and still remain an acceptable pet.

When a pet owner calls and tells me they have a wonderful bird who they can't stand anymore because of the screaming, biting and his indecent exposure I counsel them on rehabilitation or steer them to another breeder. The exception to this agenda is when the subject is a rare bird who needs to be bred to maintain the gene pool.

### Feeding, Weaning and Socialization

All of our birds produced for future breeding stock are parent reared, when possible, until about three weeks of age and then removed for weaning by humans. I am not opposed to parent weaned birds for breeding stock but feel there is little to be gained by this practice and much to lose through decreased production by

the parents. Leaving young birds with their parents also necessitates a larger cage space to wean and allow socialization of the offspring for up to one year. This practice would also deprive young birds from interacting with other adults and chicks of their own age. While we often romanticize the positive benefits of the parent-chick relationship, I feel that most of the benefits have a genetic predisposition at their roots. For instance, I believe the weaning and early nurturing behaviors often cited as benefits can be encouraged almost as well by humans because of the genetic imperative of these traits.

### Introduction to Society

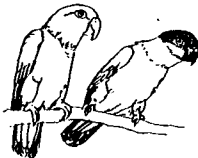
All parrots at Hartman Aviary are integrated into a flock after they have passed through the quarantine process. This flocking occurs in our future breeding zone. The purpose of this program is three fold:

Our first goal is to physically condition the birds until we know they are in excellent condition. Many of the birds used for production in the United States have had a previous life as a pet. We find many instances where these birds were not properly cared for, mentally and physically, by very well intentioned owners. This condition also occurs in commercial aviaries through out the world.

The second reason for flocking is for the birds to learn to communicate with each other. Birds raised as pets, housed in breeding facilities, or raised only by their parents have had limited exposure to other parrots. Parrots communicate primarily through body language and humans typically override their natural instinct to read body language with second guessing thoughts. This causes a great deal of confusion

in a baby parrot. Parrots are just like humans in that we need more than just our families to learn to communicate in the real world. Since our birds are forced to choose a mate in somewhat abnormal circumstance, even in the best of domestic scenarios, I take this challenge very seriously. Our parrots are housed in groups of 20 or more parrots of several different species, large and small. Depending upon the past history of an individual it may stay in the flock for a minimum of six months up to years. During this time individuals learn how to behave and hopefully develop the desire to become over achievers.

The third reason for flocking is for each individual and each pair to comprehend flock etiquette. From a bird's standpoint, not only is this important to survive being locked in a cage with another bird all your life, but you need to know what is on the minds of the couples housed around you. When you have a very dominate male across the aisle constantly staring you down, does it mean that he hates you or just doesn't want you coming into his territory.? Should you be feeling intimidated or be sticking your tongue out at him? In a flock situation an individual and or a pair can find out what it is all about to come too close to another's mate or to wander into an area claimed as home territory by another pair.



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### Mate Selection

While in quarantine we casually observe new birds and develop a feeling of how well each bird accepts the new environment and husbandry we have to offer. In two or three months we have a pretty good idea what a bird's reaction will be to the flock. Some birds are moved directly into the flock and others are placed in individual cages to acclimate slowly. Once a scared bird becomes acclimated to the room it will get a roommate we know to be friendly, non-aggressive and capable of defending itself. From here we can add more birds to the cage, move them into a small flocking cage with only a half dozen birds of similar size, and eventually into the big flock.

We have found through flocking that when parrots have a choice they will most often choose a mate of similar age. We know this since we have many domestic breeding pairs and young individuals. We assume this also carries over to the older wild caught parrots. In addition to this, we have found through flocking that the birds can tell who is of the opposite sex and that if a mate of their same species is not available they will normally bond with the opposite sex of another species. When two or more of the same species and same sex are present they will generally develop a flocking type of bond among their own species. We have had one instance where two dominate male Green-winged Macaws developed a very strong homosexual bond.

It is important to note that even when there are several individuals of the same species housed in a mixed flock, we often have nonsimilar species forming familiar bonds. This is how we initially came across our three pairs of hybrid macaws.

We produce only three hybrids. These are all macaws and are produced because there is a market for them. I do not agree with the indiscriminate production of hybrids. The reason for production of hybrids has to be greater than your lack of resources to provide the mate you would choose if you had a magic wand. The three pairs of macaws we hybridize are also pairs

that selected their mates while being maintained in a large free flight aviary where they had several other choices of their own species to choose from. All three pairs are prolific breeders.

### Problems

Our biggest problem is incompatible individuals. Sometimes these are just individuals who have had limited socialization due to past owners who did not introduce their baby to lots of people, birds or other animals. Many birds who have lived most of their lives in one room will become very scared and neurotic when moved to an aviary. Turning these individuals into gregarious, fun loving parrots is often impossible. The neuro-pathways that dictate this behavior are established during the first year of life and several years of reinforcement may doom these babies to a life of uncomfortable paranoia.

My approach to eliminate this anti-social behavior and to enhance the instinctive genetic plan is to slowly force the bird to accept the gregarious flock mentality. When I find a bird who continues to resist the change I avoid breeding this individual. We feel that if the bird is not malleable enough to accept the changes involved in moving from one owner to another, there may be a genetic basis for this. Even if the problem is solely based with the bird's past owner we are not willing to take the chance on producing more babies that may be predestined to live a miserable life of 50 years.

The smaller the species the more problems we are apt to encounter. Small birds tend to have a much more aggressively protected pecking order. Conures in general fall into this category. Another problem type are the cockatoos that are known for picking on their mates. Small and medium size cockatoos like Sulfur-crested, Goffin's and Red-vented fall into this group. In general, any species that tend to develop the same dysfunctional relationship traits common to *homo sapiens* are closely watched.

We do ultimately find that approximately 25% of our students are not suitable for our future producers program. These birds available as pets. ➔

## Introduction to the CITES Supplement

*(Editor's Note: The following five articles will be broken out and printed in a separate supplement to be distributed to the Delegates at the CITES Convention in Zimbabwe, Africa. The DNA article by Dr. Benny Gallaway (found in the Jan/Feb 1997 Watchbird) will be included to occupy CITES pages 5-8. That article is not repeated in this issue.*

*The CITES supplement will open with the following introduction to the AFA.)*

The American Federation of Aviculture (AFA) is an organization for aviculturists, people who keep and raise exotic birds (non-native species), from finches to parrots, doves and soft-billed birds. The AFA consists of individual members and a nationwide network of affiliated bird clubs with their members.

The AFA was formed in March 1974 in southern California and now is a national organization with a Board of Directors composed of five principal officers and additional regional directors. The AFA is a non-profit, 501(c)3, service organization which produces a bi-monthly journal, the *AFA Watchbird*. Also, the AFA hosts an annual four day convention which presents speakers on avicultural, veterinary and conservation topics.

The primary mission of the AFA is to promote the advancement of aviculture: the keeping and breeding of avian species. The AFA supports conservation projects involving avian species, supports research on avian nutrition and diseases and monitors local, state and federal laws and regulations dealing with avian species.

The business office is located at 3118 W. Thomas Road, Suite 713, Phoenix, Arizona 85017-5308. Individual membership is \$30 U.S. a year. For information contact:

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