

# Beginning With Billy Bird...

by Tani Smida, Atascadero, CA

**B**illy Bird is a Double Yellow-headed Amazon. He hatched, under his mother, on the third of September, 1982 and by so doing created a vortex of new and different experiences that "sucked" me right in; I was changed forever! Because of that 15 gram, altricial ball of down, today every aspect of my existence is "colored" by birds. It's difficult to imagine anything so small having such a profound impact on one's life but I promise you, it's true. He was the first of over 1000 parrots who have hatched for or been hatched by me since that fateful day.

The hatching of my first baby Amazon revealed a terrible truth; I knew next to nothing about parrots and was desperate to become educated. There was a dearth of printed material available so I asked innumerable questions of anyone who expressed the least knowledge of birds. Countless hours on the phone to kind strangers eventually paid off. I discovered the names of some of the upper echelon aviculturists and began directing my queries to them. Of course, I wanted to emulate those who were successful. Since childhood, I have always been surrounded by a myriad of animals. The possibility of "doing birds full time" was immensely appealing to me.

Incubation of psittacine eggs seemed to be "fashionable" in the early 1980s but the only book available to me was one on poultry, *The Incubation Book* by Dr. A. F. Anderson Brown. Nevertheless, I read it from cover to cover, several times over. John Stoodley was soon to be published and his "Parrot Production" better suited my needs. He talked about such wonders as "fostering" chicks under congenial hens, hand feeding from day one and even how to build your own incubator. WOW!

Lacking his mechanical skill, I bought a TurnX and called myself an

aviculturist. Fifteen years later, (in the words of an old cigarette commercial), I can truly say, "I've come a long way, Baby!"

Raising domestically hatched, baby parrots is an honor, a lot of work and a HUGE responsibility. If you have occasion to raise chicks from day one you should be prepared to do for them what their parents would do under the most perfect of circumstances. Tiny babies need more than food, heat and clean bedding; they need nurturing and individual attention.

Look at a baby Amazon in the nest; note how meticulously preened the baby is, just a few hours after hatch. The fluffy down that looks so pretty is also a thermo-regulator so if there is no hen available, brushing and fluffing becomes my job.

Mother Nature has given baby psittacines a signal whereby they can tell their parents to feed them. They bob up and down vigorously and emit a characteristic cry which their parents respond to by regurgitating food into/over them and cleaning up the mess. Feeding time is also a time for attention and nurturing. If your feeding method is one that doesn't require much time spent with individual birds then you need to dawdle. Stop and spend some time with each baby as you encourage them to solicit food. A

natural behavior and powerfully stimulating, it behooves a hand feeder to elicit this response. The motion of bobbing and the vocalizing encourages vigor, gives the full crop time to expand, stimulates the whole gastrointestinal tract and promotes elimination. Of equal importance is the apparent fact that the babies seem to like it.

I brood new hatches, one to a container, so I am the only living creature that they see. I keep chicks on paper napkins for the first three or four weeks; they don't have "friends" to snuggle with until I put them on shavings. They need and deserve my companionship. I truly believe that they will be happier, better adjusted pets or breeders for my early efforts.

If you don't already know, birds won't be sweet if all you do in the way of handling is to feed them and change their bins/cages. When I had a few babies, playing with them all was never a problem. Fortunately, by the time I was routinely feeding 30 or 40 chicks at a time, I was also able to hire help. Ideally, my helper feeds the outside breeder birds which leaves me free to feed and nurture babies. (I must wash my hands 100 times a day.) When feeding neonates I make it a point to caress and speak to each individual chick, stimulating them to give me a feeding response and complimenting them on their beauty and vigor. I really fill up my babies and I want to be sure that all passages are clear before I move on to the next parrot chick.

Psittacines lack the musculature to cough but energetic vocalizing assures the handfeeder that the trachea is free of formula. Calling to be fed and the

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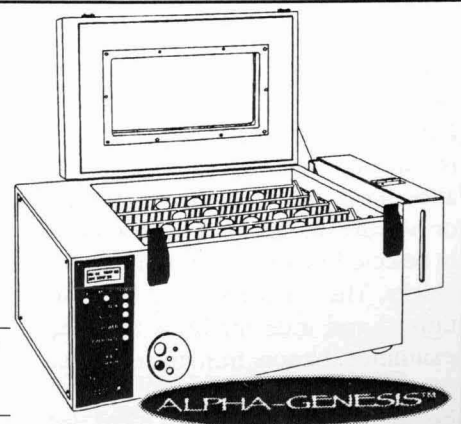


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pumping motion of soliciting for food is a natural form of exercise, it simultaneously stimulates and satisfies young birds who depend on their caretaker for literally everything.

Once they are "off heat," I take a bin full of babies with me and make time for petting and preening during phone calls, watching a video, even reading, (all these pastimes leave at least one hand free). A few moments here and there throughout the day will go a long way towards satisfying a baby bird's need for affection. Hearing you talk, watching you work is reassuring to young parrots. If you were feeding 30 chicks you would need 10 hours each day to give each one of them 20 minutes of individual attention. Most of us don't have this kind of time but a "piece-meal" approach to socializing can be very effective.

Holding back a bird that you have raised to become a future breeder is the supreme act of conservation. With gene pools growing ever smaller, each individual parrot that hatches today will play some part in the destiny of psittacines throughout the world.

In reviewing my records I see that slightly more than ten percent of Birdlady's Babes have been utilized as breeders in the last 15 years. I'm happy with that ratio and I know that many aviculturists in America have similar accomplishments to be proud of. I hear a lot of dire predictions about the future of parrots in captivity, especially from the English faction of aviculture, but my own observations indicate that responsible breeders are holding back stock in appropriate numbers: Good for us!

A novice breeder who has experienced a modicum of success might ask herself, "I've set up all the pairs that I can manage, now what do I do with babies that hatch in the future?" Most of the chicks that hatch at Birdlady's Babes are sold into the pet trade. This is necessary in order to fund my operation and has nothing to do with greed or heartlessness. I have a few, carefully selected buyers, to whom I will sell chicks. These people have been scrutinized and their methods thoroughly examined. I know from the experience of others that an unethical buyer can be the cause of death and heart break,

not to mention a black mark against aviculture.

If you are going to sell your precious baby birds to a "middle person," it is imperative that you investigate that individual's selling practices. Do they sell unweaned chicks to inexperienced, wanna-be hand feeders? Do they keep their facility and the babes in their care in a sanitary manner? Do they really *like* birds or is the selling of parrots just another way to make a buck? My best advice is "Sell only to loving people who are clean and informed about the care and feeding of baby parrots."

The babes that I sell are given the same considerations as the ones I keep with one exception—future breeders are kept with birds of like species and handled less as they mature. Some folks tell me that they teach all their breeders the "Up" command and that makes them easier to handle. Perhaps so, but the only "breeder" that I have who steps up willingly has not seen fit to give me so much as one chick in nine years. I don't know that there's any correlation but my personal experience says this may not be the best idea. Besides, they really don't need to know the "up" command if I can just reach in the cage and pick them up by covering their wings with my hand and gently lifting them off the wire. (I am describing the actions of domestic breeding stock, NOT wild caught breeders.)

I won't raise parrots that don't appeal to me and the majority of my breeding stock are Amazons. When neophyte parrot buyers ask me to describe the personalities of various birds, I tell them that if Amazons were humans they would be cab drivers, bartenders and stevedores. I adore that rowdy Amazon personality with a talking ability that is often amazing. Given a few toys and a secure place to play with them, these colorful clowns will keep you laughing with their acrobatics and power of mimicry. In my opinion, Amazons' ability to be funny and entertaining is not surpassed by that of any other parrot.

Their strong personality will help them to entertain themselves while you're away at work but it will also cause them to try their moves and

challenge you to see who sits highest on the roost. Caretakers are challenged and a lack of harmony results. Many wild caught Amazon parrots have been integrated into my aviary because they were the source of friction in their previous homes and their caretakers had given up on them ever interacting with the family in an acceptable way. These birds often make great breeders but it saddens me that their human family didn't try harder to circumvent the "problem." Fortunately, in this day and age we have a host of behaviorists who can lead us down the sometimes stony path to parrot/family equilibrium.

Over the years I've "honed" my skill, continually seeking a "better way." Most of what I've learned is the product of someone else's experience, shared with and adopted by "yours truly." Information is always in the process of "unfolding," ergo, what I'm doing now is an extrapolation of wisdom I gleaned "way back when." The weight of avicultural knowledge continues to accumulate: there is much to share. As aviculturists we must cultivate open minds and act on the needs and discoveries of our milieu if we are to rise to the challenges of bird keeping in the Twenty-first century. Every flock is different and what works for one person may not necessarily work for another. Still, aviculture is in its infancy and there is much to discover.

Today, I'm a small, commercial breeder of 26 species involving five Genera: *Amazona*, *Cacatua*, *Ara*, *Psittacus* and *Poicephalus*. I have about 77 pairs of adult birds with a bird kitchen and nursery for the neonates. I incubate as seldom as possible, preferring to let dependable hens hatch and feed their youngsters for the first three or four weeks. All my breeder birds are housed outside, under a canopy of oak branches in suspended cages.

I still have Billy Bird. After being my companion for six years he took himself a wife and moved outside. He's on his fourth wife, no babies yet but he'll "step up" at a moments notice and still talks to me with flashing eyes.

I've learned many things since I first fancied myself an aviculturist, not the least of which is patience. Amen!! 