



PSITTACULA SIGHTINGS

Bits 'n Pieces

by Fred & Lyrae Perry, Norco, CA

Summer and early fall is the time of year when *Psittaculids* are not actively engaged in procreation. It is an excellent time to review breeding records, expectations, and set new goals for future pairings. Now is the time to clean and repair nest boxes, aviaries and replace perches. Disinfect and test incubation and brooding equipment and repair or replace as needed. Most importantly, it is the time to acquire new birds and begin the process of pairing your breeders for the coming season.

In this issue we've included some of our aviary management practices and other miscellaneous information to help the next breeding season get off to a good start.

Breeding Season—Cycle

Asian parakeets are complex creatures with a specific pairing and breeding cycle that has been quite successful for thousands of years. In captivity, most species breed only in the spring. The pairing process begins sometime in August or September depending on where you live in the U.S.A.. Climate changes, rainfall, barometric pressure, health, maturity and all the other factors known only to the birds dictate the exact timing. Male birds begin courting and pair bonds are formed over a course of several weeks. Once

the bonds have been formed, the pairs stake out territory (their aviary) and begin working the nest box. The pair bond will last for the current breeding season only. It ends shortly after the babies are weaned by the parents, or when the last babies have been pulled in for handfeeding. The bond is completely broken when the annual molt begins. Compatible pairs can be left together for the balance of the year with no problem. If you wish to pair your birds differently for the next season, the time to make the changes is right after the molt.

Proper Pairing of Asian Parakeets

The frantic phone calls begin in January and continue through February and sometimes as late as March... "I need a mature three year old male for my hen" or "My hen just died and I need a mature one for this season." If the caller is lucky enough to find a mature bird at the last minute, the bird is usually thrown into an aviary with no regard to compatibility, often with disastrous results.

For example, it's extremely foolhardy to put a replacement male into an aviary with a hen who has lost her mate suddenly during the breeding season. The new male is regarded as an intruder, not a fill-in mate. Even though her original mate is gone, the

hen will continue to defend the territory until the season ends. The hen may tear the new male apart—literally. If he isn't killed, he may starve to death because she won't let him near the food.

As with all strangers, proper introductions can go a long way toward promoting romance. Putting new pairs together is best done during the summer giving them ample time to become acquainted. The proper introduction period is about two to three months prior to the start of breeding season. Shorter introduction periods can work, but it depends on the individual birds. Several pairs of the same species can be placed in a large aviary for the annual pairing process. Ideally, each bird will be able to choose its own mate from a group. When they get to choose, success is nearly always guaranteed.

Eight Indian Ring-necked sized birds will be comfortable in an aviary that measures four feet wide, eight feet high, and ten feet long. Four Alexandrines or Derbys can fit in the same space. Mixing species in flights is not recommended, ever. As the breeding season draws near, you'll see birds begin to pair off. They'll sit close to each other, drive away other birds, and males may begin feeding the hens.

Watch to see which birds have bonded. Pull those birds out and place them in their own breeding aviary which has already been prepared, nest box hung etc. Pull out and set up the remaining pairs in this same manner. The birds paired in this manner, (the ones allowed to choose their own mates), usually begin nesting activities immediately. Birds that don't appear to have chosen a mate and bonded out of the same group, may be set up with any birds left. These hold-outs may form pair bonds and work just as well as any of the other pairs, or they may not. It's definitely worth a try.

Moving Birds During the Annual Molt

Moving birds during the molt may be risky because the birds are quite stressed during this time. During the annual molt the beautiful smooth feathers of Asian parakeets appear to be melting and streaking. The birds are

uncomfortable, grouchy and look like they are going to drop dead off the perch. If the birds are moved and there are lots of environmental changes (location, water, weather etc.), the molt could come to a halt mid-way through its course due to the stress. The birds will look unfinished until the next annual molt. The best time to move birds from one aviary to another is prior to the molt, or when the molt has been completed.

Tips on Buying Asian Parakeets

Be a good consumer. Ask a lot of questions before you buy. Satisfy yourself that the breeder is reputable. Buy from people who can give you references, and by all means, call those references. Some buyers want health certificates and/or guarantees. Certain states require health certificates for birds that are shipped in. If needed, determine the cost for health certificates (vet supplied), and whether buyer or seller is responsible for the cost.

Health Guarantees. Asian parakeets in general, and Indian Ring-necked Parakeets especially, are extremely healthy and handle changes better than most other species we've encountered. However, there are occasionally some problems.

We all live with an incredible amount of potentially dangerous disease in the form of bacteria, viruses and fungi. The immune system fights this stuff pretty well in a healthy and stable environment, but when a bird is stressed, its ability to fight off disease is lessened. Birds are stressed when they are moved. Most birds don't have any significant problems, but there are occasionally a few that will.

Talk to your vet about quarantine procedures, testing and treatment if appropriate for all new arrivals. It may be impossible to determine if the illness came in with the new bird, or is something that is inherent in the new environment. In any case, as a buyer, you must be prepared to deal with potential illness in any new stock.

Most breeders will guarantee the health of the bird until it leaves their hands—their control. Certain unforeseen health problems and genetic defects are things that reputable breed-

ers will always guarantee. The breeder will ask for some proof of defect, a veterinary report, and proof that it was in fact the bird they sold you before replacement. Be sure to discuss the procedure up front, too.

Parentage. It's always a good idea to ask about the parent birds. Are the birds you want to buy related? Even if the answer is no, you probably should pair the birds with additional, unrelated stock. Locally purchased birds are often more closely related than you might guess because there may be only one or two breeders producing all the available stock in a particular area. Concentrate on pairing your birds with completely unrelated or the most distantly related stock you can find. There are no more imports of most species and our gene pool is shrinking. It's more important than ever to be vigilant about keeping the gene pool viable in order to maintain health, size and fertility.

Ask about the production record of the parent birds. Were they good parents? Offspring usually act very much like the parent birds. If the parents are excellent breeders, chances are quite good that their offspring will be also. Buy your stock from the best producing birds you can find. How many babies per clutch? Do the parents double clutch? What kind of nest box and nesting material was used?

Best Time to Purchase. The best time to buy Asian parakeets is in the summer and early fall. Selection will be at it's peak, and prices will be the lowest for the year. This is because Asian parakeets are spring breeders. All the birds hatched in the current year are completely weaned, old enough to be sexed and moved into new aviaries. There are some really good deals with color mutations and splits if you are willing to buy young birds. For those who need a bird of a particular sex, you stand the best chance of finding it this time of year.

Young pet birds will only be available in the spring, so make arrangements early (December or January) to reserve a baby. Buy the chick out of the nest at about 14 days old and handfeed it yourself. If you're not experienced at handfeeding, buy a weaned baby from another handfeeder. ➔

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- On page 43 of the March/April 1997 *Watchbird* the photo captions are switched. The bird on the left is the Kea and the bird on the right is the Kakapo.

- On page 41 of the May/June 1997 *Watchbird* the bird identified as a Palawan Peacock Pheasant is actually a Grey Peacock Pheasant.

- On page 4 of the May/June 1997 *Watchbird* the Cape Parrot in the photo is in the *Poicephalus* genus, not the same genus as the African Grey.