



PSITTACULA SIGHTINGS

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Those Fabulous Derbyans

Derbyans are one of the larger members of the *Psittacula* genus, and are indigenous to the People's Republic of China. They inhabit the coniferous forests in the foothills of the Himalayas and tolerate the cold better than most of the other members of the genus. Until fairly recent times, Derbyans were rare in captivity. Only a handful of aviculturists and zoos worldwide were fortunate enough to keep and breed this fantastic bird.

During President Nixon's term of office, diplomatic relations and trade agreements were begun between the People's Republic of China and the United States. Several pairs of Derbyan Parakeets were presented to the United States as part of the cultural exchange. And during the early 1980s many birds were imported through quarantine.

We purchased our first pair of Derbyans in 1979. They were placed in a rather small aviary measuring four feet wide, six feet high and eight feet long. The birds were given a wooden nestbox, grandfather clock style, that measured 12 in. x 12 in. and 24 in. deep. Although this pair was mature and in full adult plumage when we purchased them, it was still three long years before our pair finally decided to nest.

That year our hen laid three eggs in the first clutch and hatched them all. The chicks were brought in for hand-feeding when the youngest was 10

days old. These chicks seemed weak from the beginning. The eldest of the three survived for 10 days, but the other two died on the fifth and sixth days after bringing them in. Cultures and necropsies failed to answer any of our questions about the decline of health and subsequent death of these chicks.

The second clutch was quite different in appearance than the first. The chicks were considerably larger and more robust. The three chicks were also brought in for handfeeding when the eldest was 14 days old.

Newly hatched Derbyans are covered with a soft, wispy off-white colored down. This is lost almost immediately, leaving the babies naked for a time. A sparse, hair-like down grows in quickly to a length of about one to one and one-half inches. Although fine, this white down is somewhat like the "hair" on the Old Man cactus, dry and surprisingly coarse to the touch.

The Derbyan chicks grow quickly and at about 10 days they are quite plump. Their otherwise pink skin is speckled with black dots — the beginnings of the next stage of down feathers. The heavier permanent down grows in much more slowly and is light gray. With the emergence of these thick, soft down feathers, the chicks take on a sweet and spicy odor reminiscent of macaws. The white hair-like down falls out slowly and continuously, but can still be found on the chicks even after the pinfeathers are open. As far as we know, the Derbyan is the only member of the *Psittacula* genus to have three different types of down feather growth.

Derbyan chicks are a joy to hand-feed. We usually bring them in when the oldest chick is between 10 and 14 days of age. They adapt to formula and handfeeding immediately.

At this age they need to be fed five times per day, and possibly six times, depending on the age of the youngest chick. The volume of formula taken by the chicks increases daily.

By the time the chicks are three and four weeks old, they are consuming between 25 to 35 cc of formula, and are fed four times per day. Increase in formula taken by a chick is continuous over the next few weeks, up to as

much as 45 cc per baby per feeding. The chicks are individuals and the volume of formula taken at each feeding should be gauged accordingly. Don't underfeed or overfeed the chicks based on numbers alone.

It is difficult to clearly explain just how to tell when a baby bird has been fed to capacity because each type of bird is slightly different. Sometimes down feathers conceal the neck and crop adding to the difficulty. Experience is still the best teacher and if you don't have it yourself, seek out other handfeeders and ask to observe them feeding their chicks. Take a good look (and feel if possible) at how the filled crop is shaped, and how turgid it is. The formula should be completely contained within the crop and there should be no bulge of formula going up the neck on the chick's right side.

Because of their rarity in captivity and the shortage of breeding stock, handfed Derbyans were not usually released to the pet trade. Aviculturists wanted to be able to firmly establish these birds in captivity. Derbyans have proven to be hardy and are highly successful breeders in captive situations. While they raise their own chicks easily, handfed Derbyans make wonderful pets.

Surprisingly, the hens are as friendly and talkative as the males. The voice is clear and sounds very much like that of a Yellow-naped Amazon Parrot. Those who say that the Derbyan is nothing more than an overgrown Moustache Parakeet have never had the pleasure of really knowing them. They are, in fact, nothing short of fabulous.

Currently our flights measure four feet wide, ten feet high and twelve feet long. The extra flight space keeps them in better condition for breeding. Derbyans need to be housed in nothing less than 1/2 in. x 1 in. welded wire. We also recommend metal framing. Our nestboxes are made of 1 in. x 12 in. planks. The plank boxes insulate for noise, heat, and cold better than the plywood boxes. They are a little more expensive, but we feel that even if the boxes are replaced each year (and they usually are) the little bit of extra cost was minimal in terms of the rewards. ➤