

# Special Challenges of Breeding the Hawk-headed Parrot

*Deryoptus accipitrinus*

by Angie Pitiriciu, Miami, FL

“Unique” is the one word that best characterizes the Hawk-headed Parrots. Their very distinctive appearance and personality set them apart from all other psittacines. Measuring 14 inches long, this relatively small bird is remarkably beautiful. The first thing that captures your attention is the exquisite head and face. The forehead and crown are creamy white while the remainder of the facial area is colored in by tight and tiny dark brown feathers that contain a cream-colored streak down the center. The head and nape feathers are a rich



*This species is one of the most beautiful parrots of all.*



*These Hawk-headed Parrots were a real challenge to breed.*

Photos by Angie Pitiriciu

shade of red, tipped in cobalt blue that can be raised in a fan formation. This displayed fan frames the hawk-headed's face like an ornamental Indian headdress. These same brilliant red and blue feathers extend from breast to vent. The body, wings, and tail coverts are emerald green while the underside of the tail is black.

The genus *Deryoptus* contains two subspecies. *D. a. accipitrinus* is the nominate species more commonly known as the buff-crowned Hawk-head. This species can be found north of the Amazon River in northern Brazil, the Guianas, southern Venezuela and south-eastern Columbia. *D. a. fuscifrons* or Brazilian Hawk-head occurs south of the Amazon River in north-eastern Brazil. This species is similar to the buff-crown except that the crown and forehead are darker brown with fainter white streaking.

In the wild, Hawk-heads travel in pairs or small groups and roost singly in trees. Due to their solitary nature, few Hawk-heads were ever imported. The buff-crown is the subspecies most commonly found in U.S. aviculture.

We purchased our pair from Fisher Island, a private residential development. The resort's curator of birds,

Anne-Marie Larzelere, obtained the pair from a local importer in the summer of 1988. Both birds were found to have minor bacterial infections by the resort's vet and were treated accordingly. Two months later the pair were placed into a 10 x 15 foot octagonal walk-in flight.

In the spring of 1989, the pair was given a 16 x 16 x 30 inch nest box. The following year they began to roost nightly in their box. Amazingly, this pair of Hawk-heads raised young during the 1991 and 1992 breeding season. Larzelere kept the first baby, a male, and paired him with a female she acquired from another breeder. In 1993, the juvenile pair was introduced into the courtyard where the other exotic birds are displayed. The mature pair again produced in 1993 but began breaking their eggs the following season. They also became increasingly aggressive towards their keepers, making nest box inspections and weekly cage maintenance nearly impossible.

In May of 1996, Larzelere approached me about the possibility of my purchasing the breeding pair. She felt it would be in the best interest of the birds to place them with a private breeder where they would be afforded more privacy and specialized attention.

I could hardly contain my excitement on the day my husband, Mike, and I were to pick up the Hawk-heads. We were finally adding a breeding pair of this spectacular species to our collection.

Upon entering the courtyard I was greeted by an array of beauty and color. Peafowl roamed freely while the breeding birds were housed in large and lovely aviaries surrounded by lush landscaping. I immediately spotted the Hawk-heads and was taken aback by their beauty. They were perched high in their aviary preening one another.

As Larzelere directed us to the front of the cage, the female flew straight for her face. With her ruff fully displayed and eyes blazing, she began to shriek loudly. It was apparent that this female Hawk-head did not like her keeper. Larzelere told me that the bird would viciously attack her each time she entered the flight. Before entering, she would don full rain gear wearing a bird net over her head to avoid being

injured.

As the female hung on the side of the wire, I could see that her abdomen was noticeably swollen. Larzelere said she had observed the pair copulating just days before. I became very excited at the prospect of having baby Hawk-heads so soon.

A cage measuring 4 x 5 x 8 feet was ready and waiting for them. This time they would be presented with a boot shaped box that could be easily altered should they continue to break their eggs. The pair was quickly netted and placed in a carrier. Because the female was so swollen, we decided to postpone the vet exam until after she laid her egg.

Once home, we immediately placed the pair into their new cage. The Hawk-head cage was located in a semi-private area planted with tropical fruit trees. Our hope was that by giving them more privacy they would settle down and successfully rear young.

The female laid her egg five days later and promptly broke it. Prior to laying the egg, we noticed the hen falling to bottom of the cage whenever she attempted to fly. However, she showed no signs of egg binding. She was also chasing the male, crying and begging for food.

Being unfamiliar with the species, we were not sure if this was normal breeding behavior. The day after the egg was laid we decided it was time to see our vet. Upon netting the birds, we noted that the female was a little weak. Our vet ran a series of lab tests that showed the female had a minor bacterial infection. The male checked out fine.

We started the female on antibiotic therapy and she quickly recovered. After seven days of treatment, we were able to place her back into her outdoor breeding cage. The pair would retire to their nest box by 6:00 P.M. However, the remainder of the breeding season

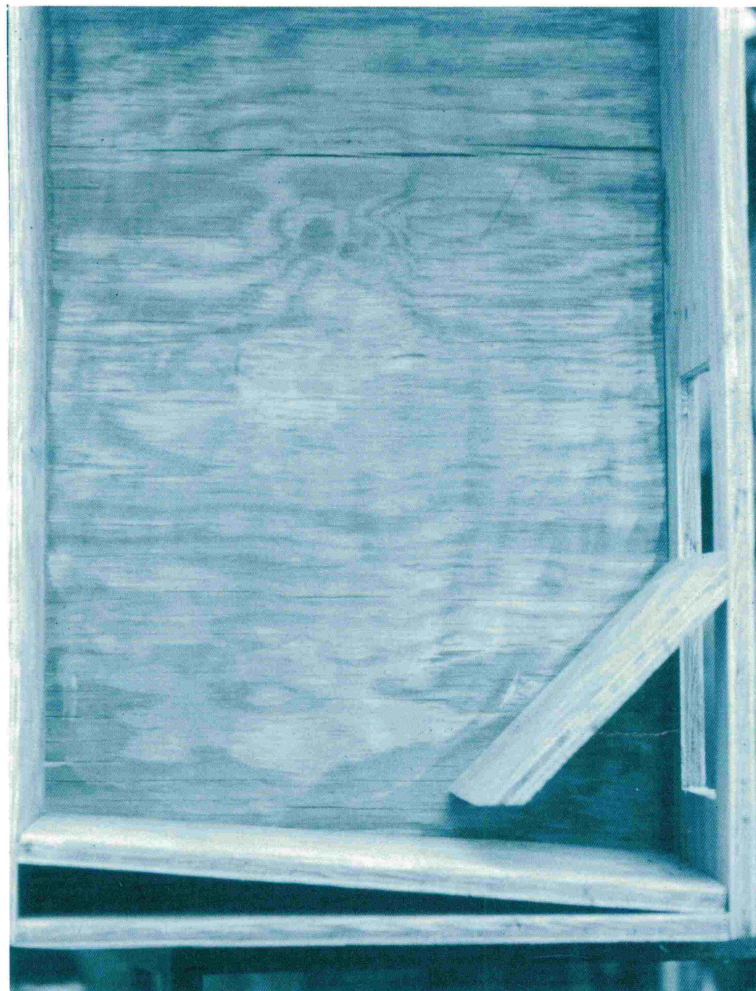


Photo by Angie Pitriciu

*This nest box is designed to thwart egg-eaters. The egg rolls down the grade to find refuge under the wooden overhang where the bird cannot get at it.*

was uneventful.

The 1997 breeding season came and went and I was becoming frustrated. The pair had settled down and seemed to be enjoying their new surroundings. The Hawk-heads are marvelous eaters, receiving a varied diet of seeds, pellets, fresh fruits and veggies, legumes, pastas, breads, and nuts. Our pair has a preference for orange foods, especially carrots, sweet potatoes, mango, and papaya.

In the early spring of 1998, we noticed a change in the Hawk-heads. Both the male and the female began to spend most of the day in their nest box. They had also become extremely aggressive towards me. The hen would thrust herself across the cage and let out a series of shrill cries. The male on the other hand, was a bit more timid. He would sit towards the back of the cage, ruffling his breast feathers while rocking back and forth. If he became very agitated, he would display his ruff and begin to hiss.

The pair was observed copulating on numerous occasions and in April the female laid an egg that she quickly destroyed. All that remained were a few shards of shell. Luckily, we had a back up plan as this was not our first experience with egg-eaters. Hurriedly, Mike removed the box and revised it in such a way that the egg would roll safely into an area that the female could not access. Mike inserted a sloped floor just above the bottom of the nest box that extended just beyond the boot. The egg would roll to the end of the slope and drop into a waiting pan filled with shavings.

Three days after the hen broke her first egg, she laid a second and later, a third. These two fertile eggs were safely retrieved and placed into the incubator. We were anticipating babies at about 26 to 28 days after the onset of incubation. However, our joy soon turned to frustration as midway through incubation the incubator failed and both eggs were lost.

Fortunately, I have had the opportunity to raise baby Hawk-heads. In 1995 when I first became enamored with the Hawk-heads, a friend of mine put me in touch with a breeder who had a baby still in the nest. On the day the breeder delivered Harley, he was


just four weeks old. Hawk-head babies are adorable. Harley was all head and pin feathers. Whenever I attempted to feed him, he would lunge at the syringe raising his pinned ruff and making "ehh, ehh," noises.

Harley grew into a very affectionate and devoted pet. He loved playing board games with the kids. He would snatch a game piece and quickly run away. At night he enjoyed sleeping nestled in my neck as I watched television.

When Harley reached the age of two, we began to notice changes in his disposition. He became fearful of my daughters, shrinking away from them. He also became aggressive towards my husband. Hawk-heads are naturally territorial and he began attacking fingers and toes. Hawk-heads move swiftly and are adept flyers. Harley would swoop through the house, tail spread and land on Mike's head or shoulder and deliver a painful bite. He has a Jekyll and Hyde persona – sweet one minute and nasty the next. Harley is usually docile with me. However, once over stimulated, he will become assertive.

The other babies I have raised have turned out much like Harley. I find Hawk-heads to be very high-strung and nervous once they reach sexual maturity. There have been reports of mate aggression in this species.

All in all, I am still very enchanted with the Hawk-headed parrot. We have relocated our challenging pair into a larger cage in a more secluded area. We have also purchased a new incubator and Mike has improved on his nest box design for egg-eaters. It is a labyrinth style nest box that measures 16 x 12 x 30 inches. It has a second floor that is sloped at a 7 degree angle. This allows the egg to slowly roll into a safe chamber that is cushioned by soft material. The chamber is created by placing a raised partition at a 45 degree angle just above the second floor. The partition is then dressed with sheet metal to prevent chewing. The space between the partition and second floor is just large enough to allow the egg to roll into the chamber.

Our hope is that this breeding season will be far more productive than in the past. 

# For the Love of Lovebirds

by Vera Appleyard  
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One of the most rewarding and enjoyable birds to breed are Peach-faced Lovebirds *Agapornis roseicollis*. They make exceptional parents and can be bred in a wide variety of beautiful colors. Well-socialized, handfed lovebird babies make terrific pets, and I rarely have enough babies to meet the demand. They are easy to house, easy to convert to healthy diets (contrary to myths), and they are *not* easily disturbed from nesting.

## Acquiring Stock

Lovebirds are not sexually dimorphic. There are some subtle differences between cocks and hens, but for every characteristic someone will tell you they have seen that characteristic in the opposite sex. Some visual differences between the sexes are that hens tend to have a wider stance on the perch, and hens have wider pelvic bones which move a bit when felt with a finger. Also, when you place nesting material in a cage, both hens and cocks will shred the material, but hens will tuck the material under their wings to take them to the nesting box. Males will try to do this, usually unsuccessfully. The best method of determining sex in lovebirds is through DNA testing, and I do this with all my birds before pairing them up.

The wide variety of color mutations makes it hard not to want one of each in the beginning, but it is important to think through a long-range plan when