Veterinary Viewpoints

Edited by
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QUESTION #1: What is the best way to prevent male cockatoos from killing the females? I have lost three Moluccan hens this year already. I have 10-foot flights, double entry nest boxes, and I clip the males' wings. One of the pairs had been together for about seven years.

G. Smith, Hawaii

Answer #1: Aggression in cockatoos is very common. In the wild, if the male is too aggressive, the female at least has a chance to get a divorce by leaving. Breeding pairs of birds in confinement is not natural and since the birds rarely have a chance to choose their own partners, there is an increase in this aggression. Consider re-pairing your birds by selecting a tough hen for the aggressive male. Alternately, you might consider removing an aggressive cock bird from your breeding program.

James M. Harris, DVM
Oakland, CA

Answer #2: Mate aggression is probably the major reason for cockatoo death. It is becoming an increasingly serious problem as the number of wild-caught male cockatoos declines. Your approach to controlling the problem is logical, but the problem usually lies with bonded cockatoo males.

Most of the breeding stock available is captive bred: therefore, most birds are "bonded" to humans rather than being socialized to their own kind. This is more of a problem with cockatoos than with other species such as Amazons or macaws, where hormones seem to take precedence over any psychological influences. If you have a captive-bred male, and he has demonstrated that he is a killer or abuser, it has been my experience that rehabilitating this bird is virtually impossible. Often, once a killer, always a killer. This is why the market usually gets flooded with single male cockatoos shortly after the breeding season is over. Do not risk your hens with a known killer male: it's not worth it! Even though some birds have been together for some time, as with your pair which had been together for seven years, you cannot predict when aggression will occur. One approach you might try is to erect visual barriers between pairs or place unrelated birds such as African Greys between the breeding cockatoos.

Behaviorists speculate that the males in the wild come into breeding condition prior to females in order to establish territory. The females are free to fly away if undue aggression occurs, but this is obviously not the case in the aviary. If one male can see another, then territorial aggression ensues and the males may then displace that aggression onto their mates. This displaced aggression may become compounded when the bird is bonded to humans and confusion results when the bird comes into breeding condition.

The answer may be to find males which are parent-reared or have been allowed to flock with their own kind shortly after weaning such that the human-bird bond is broken. I have known instances where a Moluccan male is a good breeder and could be handled in the off-breeding season, but this is a rarity.

Hens also have this problem to some extent, but their maternal drive seems to override any bonding. However, the hens' problem is evidenced as inability to brood the eggs, refusal to feed, or even to killing the chicks.

We in aviculture must strive to produce more wild-type behaviors in birds through either parent rearing or by using techniques such as those used in zoos where animals are destined for release programs and not bonded to humans.

Darrel K. Styles, DVM
Dripping Springs, Texas

Answer #3: Potential aggression is unfortunately commonplace amongst cockatoos kept in captive breeding situations. The aggression is usually in the form of serious or fatal attacks by the male to the hen. As with your own situation, the aggression in one pair of birds occurred following many years of captive enclosure. Many ideas have been suggested as to why the aggression occurs as well as ideas to aid in preventing these aggressive attacks. At this time, I am unaware of a foolproof method to guarantee survival of the female in all situations.

Ideas that have been utilized with varying degrees of success, include double entry nest boxes, long flights, tree branches for hiding places, clipping the males wings AND tail feathers, dulling the males maxillary tip (top bill), and placing older mature hens, with younger males.

Seclusion dividers between pairs may help. Allowing multiple pairs of birds to flock together in a large enclosure during non-breeding season and occasionally during the breeding season, and continual video monitoring of pairs, are additional suggestions.

At this time in our development as aviculturists, we have not yet arrived at better solutions for this sad and unfortunate occurrence. Successes achieved by an aviculturist hopefully will be willingly shared with other aviculturists to ensure that these species survive. In addition to Moluccans, it is not uncommon to have aggression in pairs of Red-vented, Citron-crested, and Ducorp's Cockatoos.

Amy B. Worell, DVM, ABVP-Avian
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Question #2: My pet Red-lored Amazon started to chew on his feet several months ago. I took him to my vet and he said that "Paco" has a mutilation problem that some Amazons get. He said the cause was not known, and it would come and go. He sent me home with a medication to put on his feet three times a day. I have been

doing this for two weeks and the problem seems to be worse. What do you suggest that I do? "Paco" is doing just great otherwise.

T. Pryce, Massachusetts

Answer#1: It sounds to me like your veterinarian has a good understanding of the current information on foot mutilation problems in Amazons. I recommend you contact your veterinarian again, however, as additional therapies might be tried. I think a biopsy is probably a good idea, and a culture depending on the appearance of the lesion. I like using combination creams under a bandage (steroid antibiotic combinations). Many veterinarians like to bandage the foot or apply an Elizabethan collar when signs worsen. A change in diet is sometimes recommended to rule out food allergies. Fatty acid supplements can be tried for birds on pelleted diets.

Louise Bauck, DVM
Montreal, Canada

Answer #2: By your description, it sounds like "Paco" most likely has a condition called Amazon Mutilation Syndrome. The cause of this syndrome is unknown. It is possible that it has an underlying allergic component, as it tends to be very bothersome to the affected birds. It often is somewhat seasonal, in that even though it may never completely resolve, certain individuals may have certain months or seasons in which the condition is noticeably worse. Affected Amazons severely attack and chew on their feet and ankles. They are often presented to a veterinarian with scaly, bleeding feet. Biopsies and other diagnostic tests to date have generally been inconclusive as to a cause and cure. Some veterinarians feel that the condition is more prevalent on the West Coast. A variety of treatment options can be considered, with none being curative. I find that acupuncture and topical sprays applied to the feet, are the most helpful to these birds. Hope this is helpful to you and "Paco."

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The Society Finch: a Wonderful Worker

by Peggy Dalrymple, Galesburg, IL

Photo by John Wise

Green Avadavat baby with its Society Finch foster parent.

The Society Finch, or Bengalese Finch as it is called in some countries, is neither rare nor difficult to breed. It can't carry a tune and, while it may be charming and comical, it is not an avicultural beauty. Its main claim to fame is its controversial ability to incubate and rear the young of other finch species.

Whether the desired result is a clutch of Society Finches or the fostered young of another species, the Society Finch is usually up to the challenge.

Society Finches seem to enjoy their assigned duties of incubation and rearing, but they cannot be expected to perform them without good lighting (16 hours daily), a moderate temperature (around 75°F.), and an excellent diet.

In addition to their seed, they need a soft food supplement at least once a day. This not only adds vitamins, minerals, and protein to their diet, it gives the parent birds a food that is easily regurgitated to feed the nestlings. The soft food content can vary depending upon the nutritional requirements of the nestlings.

Possible soft food contents are many but may include: commercial dried egg food, petamine, cooked rice or small pasta, chopped greens, grated carrot, cooked lentils, and a vitamin/mineral supplement.

After two or three clutches in a breeding cage, Society breeders can be transferred to a flight cage for a well deserved rest.

Breeding Society Finches may be relatively easy but an advancement to a standard of perfection is important with any bird that can produce a large number of young in such a short period of time. Bird exhibitions in the U.S. and around the world give bird breeders a comparative method of quality control.

Fostering the young of other species of Estrildids under Societies has been a subject of controversy for years. This controversy need not continue. modern fostering methods were perfected in several European countries in the 1970s, to the point that almost all of the Australian finches coming from Europe to the U.S. during that time were the result of fostering under Societies.

American breeders used those imported fostered finches (whether they knew it or not) to produce the domestically bred Australian finches available today.

Natural vagaries and variations in parenting behavior and unmet requirements for individual species can cause parenting failures more often than does fostering.

The Society Finch is an integral part of aviculture. U.S. breeders can and will continue to advance finch aviculture with the help of this bird and its never-ending contributions to both novice and experienced aviculturists.

Finch aviculture would be decades behind its present state but for the willing hard work performed by this plain and simple little bird—the Society Finch.