

Small Indoor Aviaries for Breeding Parrots

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There is no question that outdoor facilities where the flock is exposed to the natural sun and fresh air are the best settings for caged birds. But keeping a small flock of producing Amazon parrots in an in-house aviary can be a very rewarding experience if you practice a few guidelines. What I have tried to do is set up an aviary for the enjoyment of the birds and that will make their lives more comfortable. Too many owners of totally indoor breeding facilities have done little to enrich the physical environment of their expensive and intelligent birds. Small things can have a significant effect.

In my area, partly due to the cold winters, there are several indoor bird breeding facilities. Before elaborating on my own aviaries, I should like to highlight another well done indoor aviary belonging to Susan Bondelier. She houses her Amazons in her basement, a common practice of hobbyists. The birds have large suspended flights with an automatic showering system. Sue uses grapevines and willow branches to stimulate breeding activity. The advantage to this type of setting is the ease of cleaning—you can hose down the flights. And it is a great joy seeing those water-loving Amazons splashing and "Singing in the Rain." Shower curtains separate the flock during the breeding season. The lights in the aviary are set on three different timers. In the morning it takes approximately 20 minutes for all the lights to come on. The evening lights are set the same way—going out gradually to give the parents time to get that last snack before it turns dark. Parrots need visual stimulation and lots of toys and ropes or branches to swing and play on when they are confined in a small space. They need to work off that energy and aggression you so often see when breeding season is approaching.

In my own operation, I have held

back three generations for future breeding and in order to stay small I sell or breeder loan the second generation as they produce to fellow aviculturists who are interested in breeding domestics. I keep the third generation. We have a group of dedicated enthusiasts within the Amazona Society willing to trade offspring and keep meticulous records.

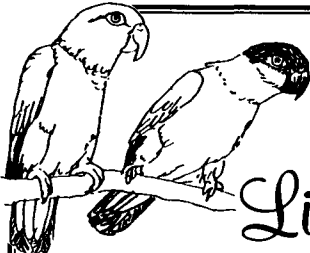
My flock of Amazons and Great-billed Parrots were all pets at one time, so they are used to a home setting. The Aviary is on the third floor of our old Victorian home. The floor is carpeted in a soft green, the walls are also green. There are 18 vita-lites placed in the ceiling. Amazons love color and need lots of visual stimulation, so the walls are covered with puzzles and posters. Cages are separated by leafy fake trees and hanging planted baskets, a few old office dividers made of wood and glass, and folding wicker-like screens. During non-breeding season the dividers are folded back so the birds can see each other. They have a color T.V. and a radio. All these items were bought at garage sales or discount stores. You don't have to spend a fortune. Amazons love cartoons and M.T.V. I think they thrive on chaos. They sing and show off when the T.V. is on.

The birds are housed in Kings Aviary macaw cages 5 by 3 by 3 feet with an additional wire flight measuring 4 by 3 by 2 feet that is attached at the breeder door. This gives the birds the security of a cage filled with toys and food dishes, plus an area for some wing flapping and short flights. The nest boxes are attached to the end of the wire flights. They are put up in the spring and removed after breeding season. There is a small room with a sink where food dishes are washed and cleaning materials are kept which keeps the area self-contained. While this is not ideal, it is the best I can do with limited space. I vacuum twice a

day and keep the room clean and as bright and airy as I can with artificial lighting. The windows are small and do not provide much natural light. Our house has central air but it does not reach the third floor. We installed a large commercial fan that sucks the air in from outside creating an extremely well ventilated area. It was a more expensive venture than I had expected but it works well.

I tried to squeeze one more flight in this room and it resulted in infertile eggs and male aggression. My long-time pairs were fighting and biting each other. The minute I removed that pair, all went back to the way it had been. Birds are very sensitive to their environment—keep in mind that nest cavities are often limited in the wild and few species of parrots flock up to breed in the atmosphere of a crowded bird room. I am proud of the success of my domestic breeders but always recall the saying "you can take the bird out of the jungle, but you can't take the jungle out of the bird."

Remember to stay small, with the



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cages well spaced, and look the other way when those deals come along if you don't have the room. This room houses Amazons of similar size. The flock is checked each fall by my avian vet. He takes cultures, does blood work, and weighs each bird. This way he is familiar with the flock. When I have a problem he knows the birds by name. We talk about improvements that can be made, and how the older birds are doing. Several of my wild caught pairs have been producing since 1980 to 1982. We estimate their ages to be 25 to 30 plus years. Nest boxes go up at the end of January, and the lighting is increased by half hour increments weekly from 12 to 14 hours. Predictable results are eggs the end of March to early May. Several pairs double clutch with eggs hatching August and September. Babies are pulled at ten days for hand feeding. While parents are fed soft foods daily year round. Lots of sprouts, beans and large nuts are added to stimulate breeding. Daily misting becomes "drenching."

I have several pictures of Panama and Yellow-fronted Amazons among my slides to point out the obvious differences between these species when viewed side by side. They are being hybridized by breeders who claim there is little difference. Panamas have lighter green feathers, horn colored beaks with variations of dark streaks that come and go, beige feet with white toenails, yellow from the nares up, and a totally different call. We must recognize these differences or the species will be lost.

My pairs of Mealies and Yellow-napes are not with the other birds but are housed in a room off the kitchen which used to be a butlers pantry. One joy of living in a 120 year old house is the blessing of those 12 to 15 foot ceilings. The birds live in Kings Aviary breeder cages 3 by 4 by 6 and a half feet, separated by leafy trees (the high ceilings make small trees possible), a colorful bamboo screen and a partition that I decorated with flowers. The room has posters, hanging plants, and a radio. The birds can look out the door and see our kitchen activities. Mealies are so loud we thought they would be better off in this area where

we could regulate the noise level.

The baby room is a bright cheery room with a cathedral ceiling that reaches 20 feet and there are two long, horizontal windows that are above eye level. I have four infant isolettes that are probably 40 years old and work like a dream and two spares stashed in a closet. The babies are placed on diapers and receiving blankets. They have their own soft toys which they love to cuddle with and get very attached to. Since I spoon feed I have no problem with the new human parents feeding their baby under supervision. Spoon-feeding is so easy! It encourages a natural eating response in the chicks. I love to watch the little ones eating. They learn to taste all the different baby foods that go into the formula and have their little faces wiped with a damp Kleenex when they are finished eating. They wean like a dream. The babies are moved from the isolettes at about seven weeks and put into individual Preview 125s.

It is very important to separate Amazon babies. They turn nippy if they are flocked. They may spend supervised playtime together then go to separate cages. I have a wooden playpen in the family room where the weanlings can be socialized with their new families. Buyers spend several hours holding and playing with their baby. When baby goes home it is comfortable with the new family. All babies are sold close banded and vet checked including a C.B.C. and cultures and they are D.N.A. sexed. A certificate (put out by the A.A.V.) is provided by my avian vet. The babies are sent home at about 12 weeks with a spoon, written instructions, and Abba green nestling food used as a weaning formula. This makes the transition much less traumatic for everyone. While they are eating and drinking on their own at this age they may still need that extra feeding for many more weeks or months depending on the individual weanling. When you have happy customers they tell their friends and you build up a clientele. My babies are gorgeous, healthy and full of the joys of living. Music, including opera, and parrot talking tapes as well as cartoons have been played for the babies before their eyes opened. They are rubbed


Commercial Members

and petted and played with. I have never raised a baby that did not like the human touch. Always be honest, the bird world is too small, it will come back to haunt you some day if you misrepresent your birds. New owners are encouraged to keep in touch. Some do while others choose not to.

When babies hatch I send out a postcard to every caller that left their name and address whether it was one year or one week ago. To market your birds as a small breeder I think honesty and integrity and a healthy, good looking flock are the key ingredients. Keep your place spotlessly clean. Prospective buyers notice little details and are always impressed with an "eat off the floor" facility.

People looking for a bargain are not going to buy from us. I try to fit each baby with the personality and lifestyle of its new owner. We all know that baby birds turn out just like our children. They are raised with the same nurturing care and can end up as different as day and night. The Billy-Joe Bobs that lie on their backs while you tickle their tummies should go to families with kids, or people with active life styles. The whiny Prima Donnas might go to single persons who play the piano and will cater to their whims. Buyers are encouraged to visit and pick out their baby and then visit weekly until it is weaned.

Always be honest, the bird world is too small. It will come back to haunt you some day if you misrepresent your birds. My hobby could not be considered a profit-making venture. When you are dealing with living creatures, unpredictable things can happen. Some years are great and others a disaster monetarily. I live in a housing zone that allows for a small business, but was advised by my accountant to keep it a hobby. I save all my receipts and declare a small profit on my income tax from my hobby of bird keeping every year. I have records of every bird that has been in my home since 1980.

I can't imagine any one making a huge profit operating a small in-house aviary but hopefully we can make enough to sustain and improve the lives of our birds and pay our expenses to the marvelous AFA conventions. 

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