

# Happy Greys are Here Again

## African Grey Parrots *Psittacus erithacus erithacus* at Disney's Animal Kingdom

by Greg Bockheim  
Disney's Animal Kingdom, FL

### Introduction

In April 1998 Disney's Animal Kingdom (DAK) received two previously unpaired African Grey Parrots from a Colorado based foundation dedicated to accepting or rescuing unwanted pet birds. Both Greys, a male and female, had their original USDA quarantine bands and were therefore known to be wild caught specimens. The records available revealed that the birds were not strangers to captive life, the male being a pet bird for approximately 19 years and the female for nine years. The birds have contrasting personalities, the female being very skittish, growling when approached by humans, while the male is not shy and was stick trained easily. Both birds often carried on with the familiar repertoire of wolf whistles, cat meows, and assorted calls that most pet Greys seem to quickly learn and mimic. Both birds arrived with clipped flight feathers and were quick to become friends with each other when placed in adjoining cages during their quarantine period.

Subtle variations in color make this Grey subspecies easily sexed visually, the male having more evenly dark charcoal gray coloration from his wing coverts to his primary flight feathers and from chest to vent, while the female has more defined contrast in color from light gray to charcoal gray in the same areas as well as the gray scalloping coloration of the chest continuing through the red feathers surrounding the vent (the male has solid red feathers surrounding his vent). A slight size difference also exists between the pair with the male weighing 480g and the female 430g. The Greys were brought to the African

aviary for introduction following the required quarantine period and medical examination in which fecal samples are taken and blood chemistries performed.

### The Habitat

The African Aviary at DAK covers an area 162 feet long by 62 feet wide and 45 feet high. The aviary space is approximately 450,000 cubic feet and includes mature trees that create a nearly unbroken canopy overhead. A two story waterfall pours into pools at two different levels intentionally flooding areas which become "tidal zones." A path meanders through the center of the aviary allowing guests a close encounter with 23 avian species—over 140 individual specimens.

In June of 1998 we were prepared to introduce the Greys to their enormous new home. Since neither bird had regrown its primary flight feathers, and therefore was incapable of comfortably and confidently reaching feeding areas, nor capable of retreating from curious and not always friendly aviary inhabitants, a unique process of introduction would have to be employed. We decided to place the birds in one of the mature trees in the aviary so that they had the opportunity to become accustomed to guests and other aviary inhabitants while remaining under the watchful eye of the aviary staff. We soon found that the Greys had other plans. We hoped that the pair might remain within arms reach or within a close proximity so that they could be easily retrieved with a stick, but they traveled on foot, climbing through the tops of the trees with no intentions of coming

down when called. By the end of their first week the pair was roosting overnight in the top of their favorite tree and climbed through the mid and upper canopies to reach feeding stations located in the aviary introduction cages.

### Meeting the Neighbors

The DAK African Aviary is home to a wide range of birds and, being clever, intelligent, and curious, the Greys were likely to cross paths with a variety of avian species. The other aviary inhabitants include aquatic birds such as African Jacanas *Actophilornis africanus*, Pygmy Geese *Nettapus auritus*, White-backed Ducks *Thalassornis leuconotus*, and Hottentot Teal *Anas hottentota*. The more arboreal bird species that the Greys may have occasional or frequent contact with include Hadada Ibis *Hagedashia hagedosh brevirostris*, Hammerkops *Scopus umbretta*, Superb Starlings *Spreo superbus*, Gold-breasted Starlings *Cosmopsarus regius*, Emerald Starlings *Lamprolornis iris*, Amethyst Starlings *Cinnyricinclus leucogaster*, Olive Pigeons *Columba arquatrix*, Lady Ross's Turacos *Musophaga rossae*, Long-tailed Magpie Shrikes *Corvinella melanoleuca*, Carmine Bee-eaters *Merops n. nubicus*, Snowy-headed Robin Chat *Cossypha niveicapilla*, White-bellied Go-away Birds *Corythaixoides leucogaster*, Blue-naped Mousebirds *Colius indicus*, Taveta Golden Weavers *Ploceus castaneiceps*, and Racket-tailed Rollers *Coracias spatulata*.

Once the Greys became familiar with their new home they began to interact unfavorably with several of the other aviary birds. The first of their bad habits was to eat from feeding stations that were customarily used by the more shy or delicate birds. Though their wings were clipped, only allowing for short bursts of energy, the Greys frequently lunged at smaller passerines, such as mousebirds, weavers and even bee-eaters. They also took up part-time residence within the feeding zones of many other birds, displacing anyone that approached too closely. The only birds that actively attempted to displace the Greys was a bonded pair of Lady Ross's Turacos, who occa-



An African Grey Parrot chick about six weeks old.

Photo by Greg Bockheim





Photo by Greg Bockheim

*A parent-reared African Grey chick taking its first look from the nestbox. Note the parents hanging about in the trees.*

hatching after 29 days of incubation, the younger chick being a solid eight days younger than the first. We initially had concerns that the younger chick may not be able to compete for food with the older chick or the parent birds might not care for this chick. But they proved to be outstanding in rearing both chicks. The day-one weight of the first chick was 23.5g and at four days this chick weighed 38.8g. The parent birds became quite savage, preventing us from recording daily weights. It was also difficult to feed the adult pair in the vicinity of the nest territory. On many occasions the adult male flew at the aviary staff, slamming into their heads or upper bodies. As this nest site was located near a precarious cliff, dangerous for humans perfect for birds, attempts at collecting chick developmental data were terminated.

### **Chick Rearing**

Along with the excitement of introducing this pair of Greys to their near-natural habitat, we were allowed further opportunities in husbandry by allowing the pair to rear their own off-

spring. Such a large and densely planted enclosure, with extensive waterfalls and pools, mid and upper canopies (extending to 45 feet over head), the diversity of avian species, and the large number of guests seeking out the birds became not only intriguing components in the birds habitat but also potential dangers for inexperienced fledglings. We were able to observe this breeding occurrence as one might observe Greys in their natural habitat-without human intervention. Parent-rearing is as ultimately fulfilling, even more so, than the bond made between bird and aviculturist when hand-rearing.

As with other psittacines I have observed raising their own chicks, the parent Greys often did not feed the chicks soon after they themselves were fed. Even when the chicks were very young they were often observed with empty crops. Our records indicate that the chick's crops were most often full after 8:00 A.M. and 6:00 P.M. (sunrise being at 6:30 A.M. and sunset being 8:00 P.M.). The adult bird's diet is comprised of soaked and dry Mazuri parrot

tionally dove at them and pursued them through the trees.

An attempt was made to persuade the Grey pair to remain in a specific zone of the aviary. The area selected had to offer guests an attractive view of the birds as well as reduce aggressive interactions with the more delicate avian species. A centrally located area was chosen. A rocky cliff 14 feet above the guest path was designated as the space that we would attempt to make attractive to the Grey pair. The central tree in this area was a large ficus tree, with a canopy 12 feet in diameter and height of 15 feet. At the base of this tree was placed a large palm log nest site along with receptacles for food and water. The plan worked and the Greys soon chose this area as their own territory and displaced any bird that came within 10 feet.

### **Reproduction**

It soon became apparent that although the Grey pair, especially the male, defended their new territory and nest site, they preferred to travel to other areas to feed. We felt that perhaps a more traditional nestbox might be preferred. A grandfather style nestbox was built which the Greys immediately found more to their liking. This box was a typical "boot" style nestbox made from 12-inch pine board and measured 48 inches tall with the boot portion extending 24 inches from its base. The box was the 12 inches square of the pine board and a mesh ladder extended from the entrance to the box floor. The box was filled to a depth of 12 inches with coarse pine shavings dusted with Sevin insecticide dust.

The Greys became increasingly aggressive toward aviary staff and when any person entered their territory they would aggressively lunge, climb, or fly at the intruder. The birds have never been observed to approach the viewing guests in an aggressive manner.

Toward the middle of May the birds were observed to copulate with frequency. Nearly daily observations of copulation were made during the week prior to laying their first egg. On June 1, 1999 the pair laid its first egg and laid a second egg eight days later. Both eggs proved to be fertile with the eggs



breeder pellets as well as fresh corn, sweet potato, yellow squash, grapes, and 4-6 mixed nuts (per day), fed three times a day (8:00 A.M., 12 noon, and 6:00 P.M.). By the time the chicks were 24 days old it was noted that the food that filled their crops was much more coarse in consistency than when the birds were younger.

Because this breeding occurrence concurred with Florida's rainy season, frequent downpours accompanied by sporadic winds, caused frequent saturation of the nest box substrate. Soon the damp pine shavings began to decay, attracting small flies and mosquitoes. To combat this we began routine nestbox cleanings in which the pine shavings were replaced weekly, if not more frequently, depending on the weather. Although the adult birds returned to the nestbox after each cleaning, they never adjusted to this interference and attacked us each time, but continued to competently raise their chicks.

The growing chicks were occasionally observed sleeping on their backs in the nestbox, and at the age of 10

weeks were fully feathered and could be heard vocalizing from inside of the box. One of the chicks was observed to climb the interior nestbox ladder at 12 weeks of age and was seen peering from the nestbox entrance the next day. The parent birds were then seen feeding the chicks at the nestbox entrance three to four times a day. While perched in the nestbox entrance both chicks were observed to perform lengthy yawning gestures in which they repeatedly appeared to be flexing their beaks. This behavior occurred from the first day that the chicks were seen in the nestbox entrance until about the time the chicks had been out of the nest for one week. I have never observed this behavior in any other parent-reared psittacine and would be interested to hear from anyone who has. At 14 weeks of age the older chick fledged from the nest in the ominous path of hurricane Floyd.

#### Hurricane Floyd Strikes DAK

Up until this point our African Grey pair were proving to be excellent parents. On September 14, 1999 the state of Florida, especially central Florida, was under the threat of a hurricane warning. Many of the bird species throughout the park had to be caught up from their large and beautiful habitats and placed in indoor hurricane proof buildings. The adult African Grey pair was also caught up and placed indoors along with the younger chick who was yet to fledge. The older chick, having fledged the day before, was nowhere to be found in the vast and foliage-dense African Aviary and had to be left to ride out the storm. The pair of Greys did not enter the nestbox, nor feed the chick, while indoors for the 24 hour duration of the hurricane warning. I questioned whether or not the pair would actually return to properly caring for the chicks after such a dramatic occurrence.

#### Calm Returns to the African Aviary

The following morning the worst of hurricane Floyd had past, the storm moving to the north. The nestbox was returned to its original spot in the aviary, and the female was seen to




Photo by Greg Bockheim

The adult male Grey perched about mid-canopy in a ficus tree

immediately feed the younger chick who, being obviously hungry, was calling from the nestbox entrance. The older chick had held steady amidst the 40 mph winds (accompanied by 60 mph gusts) in the aviary's tree top canopy. Two days after fledging, this chick was seen confidently flying from tree to tree in the aviary although landing clumsily. The younger chick fledged at 12 1/2 weeks of age and both chicks and the parents could be seen in close proximity to the nestbox. Neither chick was observed to re-enter the nestbox after fledging.

Once they were a week out of the nestbox both chicks were quite coordinated flyers and occasionally "flocked" with the parent birds. For the greatest portion of the day the chicks perched in silence in a favorite perch high in the tree canopy. Even after mastering flying, landing, and recognizing the aviary wall barriers, the chicks never came down lower than mid canopy. (At the time of this writing, the chicks being six months old, they have yet to come lower than mid-canopy which is a height of 18 feet).

For the first two weeks out of the



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nest the chicks were observed approaching the parent birds, most often the female, in a submissive manner and beg for food. These parental feedings did not seem to occur in any timely or routine manner and likely occurred 2-4 times each day. The fledglings were observed feeding from the food bowl, placed within the territory of their nest site, 10 days after leaving the nest. Parent to chick feedings became less frequent as the chicks began to feed on their own and were likely weaned by October 10, 1998, about 20 days after leaving the nest.

### Family Behavior

Within the first week of the chicks leaving the nestbox the parent birds became increasingly aggressive toward one another. On more than one occasion the birds were seen chasing each other in flight, landing, and then battling while perched until they fell to the ground with their claws locked. We were able to break up these fights when the birds were in accessible areas. We observed the majority of these battles beginning when a fresh bowl of food was placed in their nest site territory, even though they had six feeding stations placed throughout the aviary to choose from. It appeared as though the female instigated these fights, the likely cause being that she was the primary chick feeder at this time and wanted first access to the food—the first food items taken being any nuts offered. The birds never caused each other any serious physical injury.

Once the chicks had been out of the nestbox for a month, and were feeding on their own, the aggression between the parent birds reduced to the infrequent squabble and chase. The adult birds also became more bold toward the keeper staff, flying to perches along the guest path at eye level and making threatening gestures and repetitive displacement behavior. The parent Greys have since calmed down and approach keeper staff out of curiosity and in an attempt to solicit interactions, such as whistling “duets” and to receive an occasional treat.

The Grey juveniles feather coloration is less defined than the parental color.


They appear to be a half a shade lighter than their parents, their head feathers noticeably faded and whitish. Their eye color also varies, the color of one chick being whitish gray by the time it was 5 1/2 months old while the second chick (only eight days younger) still retains the dark gray color. Both chicks' tail feathers lack the depth of red of the adults and appear “dirty” because they are shaded with dark gray. The juvenile Greys have been observed foraging in the tree canopy and eating the fruit and seed pods growing from ficus (*Ficus* sp.), tepu *Tipuana tipu*, and the magnolia trees *Magnolia grandiflora*. As a group, the birds have caused negligible plant damage to their aviary habitat.

Now a month after having left the nest the chicks are confident flyers and are often seen seeking out each others company, allopreening, and playing high in the tree tops. As part of their evening ritual, beginning an hour before roosting for the night, the youngsters fly the length and breadth of the aviary repeatedly, screaming their heads off. Often joined by their parents in flight, our small flock of four

Greys, scarlet tails flared in flight, is quite a spectacular sight. Guests never tire of the clownish antics of the Greys and are forever whistling to the birds and are elated when the birds return their calls.

When the birds recognize an aviary keeper and hear the familiar whistle, the parent birds will fly and land on tree branches just outside of arms reach, providing the aviary guests with a close encounter with the avian kind. We are looking forward to watching our juvenile African Grey Parrots grow, and interact with the aviary team and guests as well as fully utilize their habitat. We could not have asked for a more thrilling and crowd-pleasing addition to this mixed species habitat.

### Acknowledgments

Thanks to Disney's Animal Kingdom Aviary Team for their skill and perseverance in data collection. Even in the face of grave danger – African Grey attacks on a rocky cliff – skilled observations were made. Most importantly, thanks for allowing these birds to be birds. 



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