

# Raising Good Pets

by Kelly Tucker, CAS  
Tucker Farms, Estancia, NM

## Introduction

**T**ucker Farms is a small aviary. By a small aviary I mean that our family does all the work that needs to be done without outside help. My husband Ron builds equipment and cages and does most of the heavy cleaning. I handfeed babies, prepare food, and feed breeder birds. I try to educate people about birds by writing articles and speaking at bird club meetings and conventions. I also take care of sales. My daughter Dawn helps with most chores. Her husband George helps with building construction. Ron and George both have "regular" jobs.

The children, Lewis (11), Stephen (9), and Samantha (3), play with the birds when the birds are old enough. Samantha has certain breeder pairs that she likes to feed. Ron and I have been breeding birds for 13 years and live on a farm near Estancia, New Mexico.

We have raised over 500 psittacine birds, including Peach-faced Lovebirds, Cockatiels, Red-rumped Parakeets, Double Yellow-headed Amazons, Yellow-naped Amazons, Blue-fronted Amazons and Lilac-crowned Amazons, Umbrella Cockatoos and Moluccan Cockatoos, African Grey Parrots, Senegal Parrots, and Sun Conures.

Many of these birds are over 10 years old now. Most have passed adolescence and reached sexual maturity. None of these babies have grown up to become screamers, biters, or pluckers. We must be doing something different than many other breeders because we are asked frequently to take in other breeders' birds that have become screamers, biters or pluckers.

I am sharing what we do here in the

hope that other breeders can emulate our success in raising happy, well-adjusted and confident pet birds.

## Reason Number One

Reason Number One for our birds' success as pets in their homes is that our birds' owners have reasonable expectations of bird behavior. This comes from educating the prospective bird owner in normal bird characteristics and matching the natural tendencies of a species and the individual bird with the prospective owner's needs and requirements. Some of the questions that we ask to start a conversation are, "How did you become interested in Parrots? Do you have other breeder or pet parrots? Other Birds? Dogs? Cats? Ferrets? Reptiles? How many people live in your house? Children's ages, if any?"

Notice that I said, "prospective bird owner." We do not sell a bird to everyone who thinks that they want one. Sometimes, after talking to someone for a while, it becomes obvious to that person that his life circumstances are not suitable for a pet bird right now. They usually go away happy that they did not make an expensive mistake and many come back later when they are more settled. A few go buy a bird somewhere else.

Sometimes, an apartment dweller comes to us wanting an Amazon parrot and leaves with a Senegal or an Umbrella Cockatoo. Yes, we have placed Umbrella Cockatoos in apartments in downtown Denver and Washington, D.C. The right bird with the right people in the right circumstances can work nicely.

## Reason Number Two

We have healthy birds. No bird with a parasite infestation or a gut infection will be a happy camper. Every bird that comes to our farm has to come in through quarantine including about \$250 in vet tests and check-ups before he can come into contact with any of our existing flock. Our flock is all polyoma, papilloma, parasite, PBFD, TB, and psittacosis free. We intend to keep it that way. Every bird that leaves here is guaranteed to not have any of these problems. We use a standard avian health guarantee and contract recommended by the Association of Avian Veterinarians and the Model Aviculture Program (MAP). Thank all the Powers that be that we have never had a case of PDD. There is no test available for it yet. We will probably test for PDD when a test becomes available.

All our birds eat an excellent varied diet. For any creature to live up to its potential, it must have excellent nutrition. Our birds eat a bean-corn-wheat-pea soak and simmer mix. We mix this with a sprouted or germinated seed and grain mixture. This mixture is served fresh every day with a treat on top for bowl interest. Treat foods may be hard-boiled eggs, asparagus, broccoli, carrots, green beans, fresh peas, apples, oranges, pears, peaches, walnuts, almonds, pecans, noodles, spaghetti, – everything from apples to zucchini. We do have trouble finding fresh greens in the wilds of Estancia. I'd grow my own if not for the gophers and prairie dogs.

All birds have pellets free choice. *Poicephalus* and Cockatoos get a dry seed mix once a week. Some of them eat the dry seeds eagerly. Others save them for a few days.

Our breeder birds are kept indoors in large flights separated from wild bird contamination. Buildings are heated in the winter because I don't think the birds are comfortable when the temperature gets below 55F. I know they can survive lower temperatures but I doubt that they are comfortable.

Amazons, especially, look miserable when it's cold. They can all see outside through screened windows. In our high mountain desert climate, cooling is seldom necessary. If the temperature

in the bird building gets too warm, we open the windows and hose down the inside with plain water. We can drop the temperature 15F in a few minutes with the normal summer humidity less than 20%.

### **Reason Number Three**

The birds that we have chosen to be the parents of our babies have proven themselves to be excellent pets. I believe that the tendency for many desirable pet qualities is inherited. If you want to produce talking birds, start your breeding program with birds that talk. If you want excellent color in your bird offspring, the parents must have excellent color. If you are looking for a pleasant, playful personality in a companion, look for that quality in the parents. If you start with good stock it is much easier to produce good stock. Of course, good parent birds can contribute the seeds for good pet and companion animals. It is up to us to provide the total environmental package that allows those seeds to grow and flower.

### **Reason Number Four**

Our new bird owners know a lot about their baby's early life. This baby is not a surprise package. All of our babies go home with their own Baby Book. The book has developmental and weight records and details about the baby, copies of articles that I've written, including recipes, grooming, safety, and bird care instructions.

If a baby prefers big purple grapes to green grapes, that is in his Baby Book. If the baby has a toy that he loves, the toy goes home with him. If the baby likes to sleep late in the morning, we find him a person that likes to sleep late.

We try to get him on a schedule that matches the schedule in his new home as closely as possible. This requires knowing the habits of the household where he is going. Whenever possible, we like for the new owners to come to the farm and meet the baby and play with him several times before he goes home. If this is not possible, we email pictures and reports of the baby's progress. Often babies will go home with their weaning cage so they have

a familiar sleeping perch for the first week or two in their new home.

We always send some of the staple diet and a few favorite foods home with the youngster. If the baby must be shipped, we send his food with him or send it ahead of time. Babies are weaned to a wide variety of fresh foods, sprouted or germinated seeds, dry seeds, uncolored pellets and healthy people food.

### **Reason Number Five**

I consider this to be the most important thing in raising confident babies and the single biggest factor in avoiding the clinging, feather-plucking, self-mutilating, neurotic Cockatoo or naked, fearful African Grey, or biting, screaming Amazon.

Our baby birds fly through weaning. In Nature, birds fly or they die. Simple as that and birds know it instinctively.

I believe that clipping wings before a bird has really mastered flight has a lifelong detrimental effect on the personality, making it more prone to neurotic behavior like screaming and feather plucking. None of our babies (over 500 psittacines) have ever become screamers or pluckers or biters.

Our babies learn to fly really well. They master flying up and down and turning in tight places. They learn to take off from all types of perches. They learn to land on many surfaces. They get enough practice that it becomes easy for them to go where they want to go. We encourage them to explore and try to laugh with them when the landing spot they choose turns out to be not quite as stable as it looked.

They learn that the play gym is a good place to land. Ron and I are usually fairly stable. Grandchildren are okay if you don't surprise them. Door frames are good. Lamp shades and piles of paper are not very stable when you are a Cockatoo weighing 600+ grams, but okay if you are a Senegal at 130 grams. Our home is as safe as we can make it for birds learning to fly.

Flight lessons are strictly supervised. In fact, all play outside the cage is supervised.

Our babies stay here until they are

good flyers. We give them a gradual wing clip before they go to their new homes. When they leave they are not traumatized. They have the confidence that comes from knowing that they are independent and that they can take care of themselves. Having their flight feathers clipped after they have mastered flight does not seem to faze them at all. The confidence is already there.

Most of our Cockatoo babies go home when they are around six or seven months of age. Some of them stay here until they are eight or nine months old. They all go home when they are ready, not before.

Amazon and African Grey Parrots go to their new homes at about four to six months of age. The smaller African Parrots, Senegals and Meyer's, are usually ready when they are three months old.

### **Reason Number Six**

Our babies have the same hand-feeder all the way through weaning. We do not sell babies when they are down to two feedings a day. We do not sell unweaned babies that are to be pets. If you want one of our babies to be your pet, we will feed him and wean him for you. The myth that you must handfeed a baby for him to bond to you is nonsense. If birds bonded to whomever fed them, they would never leave their parents in the wild. No one believes that other pets must be handfed by their future owners in order to bond to them.

In my opinion there are several reasons why people sell unweaned babies to pet owners.

- The breeder himself may believe the myth.
- The breeder does not want to accept the responsibility for weaning the baby.
- The breeder may not want to accept the risk that something may go horribly wrong before the baby weans.

Next to hatching, weaning is prob-

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ably the most stressful time in a bird's life. Not all babies survive the experience. Of course, the baby has the best chance of survival with a knowledgeable, experienced handfeeder who is familiar with that particular species. We are fortunate today that some breeders have shared their experiences and weight and feeding records with others. Not all of the information available is of equal value, however, and that is where the individual's personal experience is necessary.

### Reason Number Seven

Our babies have appropriate socialization and stimulation for each developmental stage. Most of our babies are incubated, hatched and fed for at least two or three weeks by their parents. The babies hear us while they are still in the egg because we talk and sing to them and the breeder birds while we feed, water, clean, and check nest boxes in the aviary. We begin handling the babies in the nest box soon after they hatch. We may weigh them every day on a scale in the aviary. We want to know that they are growing at a normal rate. We also want to know what normal, parent-fed babies weigh in case we ever have to feed babies from that pair or of that species from an early age.

When babies are brought into the nursery in our home, they are kept in brooders about the same size as their nest box. They are kept with their clutchmates. The lighting is dimmer in brooders for young babies and brighter for older babies. Temperature

and humidity are adjusted so babies feel comfortable. We look for babies that sleep quietly after being fed.

If a clutch of three babies is in constant rolling turmoil with all of them trying to be in the middle at once, the temperature is too cool. If the babies are spread out, flat and panting, the temperature is too warm.

Babies are fed when they are hungry. The babies that hatch in the nursery are fed through the night every two or three hours until they sleep through the night. I have heard Cockatoo parents feeding babies in the nest during the night. I believe that babies are supposed to be fed then or the parent birds would not be doing it.

We keep our parrots at home longer than a lot of other breeders. I feel they make better pets and breeders when they leave here at the normal age they would leave their parents in the wild. I feel that this helps them become more confident in new situations.

Keeping them here until they begin to develop their personality helps us match the bird to the right home, too. Some birds like to play with toys a lot. Other birds like to play with people, the more, the merrier. Others form close attachments with a few special people. Some birds prefer to sit back and observe new situations, objects or people before they decide to explore them. Other birds are more assertive and decide instantly whether the new thing is good or evil.

Many birds that are placed in new homes at a very young age, mature into something totally inappropriate for the circumstances. These are the birds that show up for sale in the newspaper "with cage." Many people do not understand that parrots change as they grow up. Someone once said that, "If not for kittens, there would be no cats."

Parrots are very adaptable and able to form new relationships throughout their lives. Remember that large psittacines are not really mature until they are about five years old. Most are not capable of breeding and raising babies until they are six to 10 years old. The life span in captivity is about 35 to 40 years for Senegal Parrots, and 60 to 100 years for some of the

Amazons, cockatoos and macaws. Of course, in the wild they do not usually live that long.

Some of our babies have been good pets and then have been good breeders. Most of these breeder birds are still good pets when they are not distracted with eggs and babies in the nest box. A few are calm and can be handled when they have babies. We have second-generation Senegal Parrots and are working on third-generation Senegals and second-generation Amazons with four pairs.

### Reason Number Eight:

The babies receive early instruction in Up, Down, Come, and Go Poop. The Up and Down commands are true training for a conditioned response. Every time we pick the baby up, we say, "Up." Every time we put the baby down, we say, "Down." By the time the baby is able to stand and perch, he already knows that when we say those words, he is moving onto our hand (Up) or off of our hand (Down).

These two commands are used for controlling the bird's position in our lives throughout his life. Later, these two commands can be used to train him to step on and off a stick, too.

We have used this training to rescue birds from trees where we could not safely reach them. A bird that is in hormone overload or is over-stimulated can be moved from a play area to his cage for some quiet time using a stick. A nervous house sitter can manage the family pet with more confidence using a stick and the Up and Down commands.

When a bird decides that he'd like to be the ruler of the universe and gets obnoxious about it, a short session of "laddering" usually reminds him that his people are in charge of making major decisions for him. Laddering is "UP," "UP," "UP," "UP," from one hand to the other. About six "UP"s in a row are usually sufficient to get your point across and remind him of his place in the family. You want to establish that you are still the one in charge.

The trick is to do it enough times so he knows it's *your* idea and to *stop* before he rebels. Keep your hands low, moving the one he's on down, so





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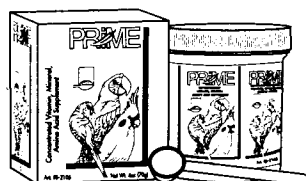
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you don't end up with him higher than your chest.

We recommend that the bird owner and other members of the family practice laddering with the bird once or twice a week.

The "Come" and "Go Poop" learning is for our convenience. It is not necessary for the health or safety of the bird. Come is easy to teach at a certain age of development.

When very young babies are being handfed, they assume the begging position and plant their feet. They act like their feet are glued to the spot. They will turn around, but they will not move at this age. When they are about half feathered, all of a sudden, they will come running when they see you. At that point, you start calling them to come to you. A clutch of African Grey babies is very comical when they come running and tumbling over each other. Their little red tail feathers stick out half an inch and their gray plush leggings give them the look of children in snowsuits.

Go Poop is taught by watching the baby and saying the words when he goes. We are really just "naming" a natural action. After he knows what the

phrase means, we ask him to Go Poop before we pick him up or take him out to play, much the same way that you tell the kids to Go Potty before they get in the car to go on a trip. He quickly learns that if he wants to come out and play, he needs to Go Poop first. Some babies learn to say Go Poop and go when they want to come out. It is nothing rigid. We never ask him to "Hold it," – only to go.

#### Reason Number Nine

Reason Number Nine is the support and care provided after the baby goes to his new home. Since not every possible situation can be covered in a Baby Book, even one that is going on 30 pages, we provide resources for our babies' owners after the baby goes home. I am almost always available by telephone or email. We have an email list that owners are encouraged to join where everyone can share experiences, funny stories, and photographs. We also share hazard alerts and research developments. This is a good place to compare molting patterns, bathing options, behavior, and to brag about the clever things the birds do and say.

#### Reason Number Ten

Our babies have a flexible schedule, but they do have a schedule. They have variety within their structure. They get up, have their cages cleaned, breakfast served, play time in cages, take a nap, more play time in cages, play time with the family, eat dinner and go to sleep for the night.

This is their basic daily activity schedule. Within this schedule, there may be a lot of variety.

Breakfast always has Soak & Simmer and a sprouted seed mix. This is topped with hard-cooked eggs, fresh fruits or vegetables, nuts or pasta. Today, it was eggs, peas and corn. Yesterday it was apples and broccoli.

Play with the family can be any time of the day, but always includes an evening session. One of our Umbrella Cockatoo babies has been out to play three times today. He played on his play gym this morning while Ron read the paper. He helped Samantha and Stephen build a Lego house this after-

noon and now he's helping me write this article. He will come out again today for his regular play, dinner, and bedtime routine.


#### Summary

The way that we breed birds and raise babies has produced over 500 psittacines in 13 years that have been good pets and good breeders. We provide healthy birds to knowledgeable people. Both the bird and the human can approach this new relationship with the confidence that comes from knowing what to expect from each other. The bird expects the same healthy diet that he learned to eat when he was here. He expects to spend a reasonable amount of time in his cage, entertaining himself with toys, while his people are at work or busy at home. He expects to play with his people and join in family activities for a reasonable amount of time every day. He expects grooming and health care on a regular schedule and protection from danger and disease. He expects lots of love and companionship.

The bird's owner can expect to provide everything that the bird needs and some of the things that the bird wants. The owner can expect an intelligent companion that is sometimes loving and sometimes indifferent, sometimes wants to play and sometimes wants to sleep, sometimes wants to be held and sometimes doesn't want to be touched, sometimes quiet and sometimes loud, may or may not speak English, but is never boring.

#### Conclusion

Raising confident baby birds and placing them in the right home is possible. It takes time and effort. Food independence is one step in the weaning process. It is not the last step. A baby bird is not ready for the transition to a new home as soon as he is eating independently. This move should be made after the baby has become a competent flyer.

I don't know which of these 10 things makes our baby birds such good pets. I believe that every single step is important. It is my sincere hope that other breeders will duplicate our success. 

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