

Establishing a Small Commercial Aviary

Lessons Learned : The First Five Years

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Linda and I bought our first pairs of parrots in January 1994. Now, we have about 50 pairs, mostly Africans and Eclectus with a few cockatoos and Hawk-headed. We have learned so much the hard way that we feel it would be helpful to relate some of our experiences. Much of the information in this article will be old news to experienced aviculturists, but we hope that those who are just getting started in aviculture may learn from this article and not repeat some of our mistakes. We are not trying to discourage you if you want to breed birds. However, we do feel that you should go into aviculture with your eyes open.

Understand Your Commitment

First and foremost, understand your commitment. The decision to breed birds should not be considered lightly. The only reason to breed birds is love of the birds. There are many easier ways to make a living. Aviculture is one of the most demanding professions I can think of. The commitments, both personal and financial, are serious.

Consider the personal commitment. Although it may not involve that many hours each day, breeding birds is a 7-day/week, 365-day/year job. If you don't feel well, the birds have to eat. If you would like to get away for a weekend, the birds have to eat. If it's Christmas day, the birds have to eat. There really are only two ways that you can take time off. Either stay small

enough that a friend can takeover for a day or two or get large enough so that you can afford employees.

When you have babies, which is the whole idea, your time is even more restricted. If you have good parents and can pull babies at two or three weeks, the babies will need to be on four or five feedings a day when they enter the nursery. An afternoon or evening off is problematic. If you have babies that must be fed from day one because the parents won't sit the eggs or feed the new hatches, expect to feed every two hours from 6 A.M. until midnight for the first few days. Going to a movie is not an option unless it is a short film and you live close to the theater.

The good news is that if you are like me, you will find nothing more rewarding than watching a baby parrot grow under your care. The long hours are more than rewarded by the growing babies. The bad news is that the last time I took a day off was to attend an AFA convention in July, 1997.

Consider the emotional commitment. If you are like me, it is impossible to breed birds and not get attached to the birds and their babies. But, if you keep birds, you will have to deal with heartbreaking situations. Once when I was mourning the loss of a pair of Great-billed Parrots, a good friend told me that, "He who has a collection of living birds also has a collection of dead birds." This is true. If you have many pairs of birds, you will lose breeders. If you feed many babies, you will lose babies. I have had both mature birds and babies die in my hands while I was trying to save them. And, it really doesn't get easier. You love them, and occasionally you will lose them.

Consider the financial commitment. Any commitment to breeding takes money. If you plan to try to breed birds as a profession, it takes a *lot* of money. Birds are expensive; flights are expensive; brooders, incubators, and nursery equipment are expensive. After setup costs, there are always food and vet bills to consider. We have a small fortune invested in our aviary. We showed a little profit for the first time in 1998 if depreciation is not taken into consideration. I may make minimum wage in 1999. So far, we could have received a

much better return on investment in the stock market. But, somehow, stock certificates are not nearly as rewarding as baby birds.

Buying Birds

When we started buying birds we believed whatever we were told. How could people who deal in something as wonderful as parrots be less than honest and upright? Boy, was that a mistake. The first birds we bought were two pairs of Eclectus, a pair of Galahs, and a pair of Goffin's Cockatoos. We also had two pet Greys. Our vet came over to see our dogs and threw a fit over the fact that we had bought pairs of breeder birds and had not quarantined or done any testing. We didn't know that we were supposed to.

The first thing she did was draw blood for PBFD testing. Two weeks later, we found out that four of the eight breeder birds we had bought were positive for PBFD along with one of the pet Greys. We got rid of the suspected carrier, the male Goffin's, and 90 days later all the other birds tested negative. But, these were the longest 90 days of our lives. And, my pet Grey, who tested negative initially, was given to a relative for safe-keeping during the 90-day wait. Bogie spent at least eight hours a day on my shoulder and had a 200+ word vocabulary. He got cooked in a car as a result of negligence on the part of the relative who was keeping him.

When we received the positive test results, we wanted to know where the disease came from and felt that the breeders from whom we bought the birds should know that they had a potential problem. We called the breeder from whom we bought the Eclectus and Galahs. He went into a near panic. He believed that he didn't have a PBFD problem, but immediately tested the pairs he had that hadn't been tested. We called the breeder from whom we had bought the Goffin's. When we bought these birds we were told that they were proven and that the breeder had had them for quite some time. When we told the breeder that we suspected that one of the birds we had bought was a PBFD carrier, we were told that he didn't know anything about

the birds and had only had them for a month before we bought them, at which point, the breeder hung up.

This was the most important lesson we learned. Know from whom you are buying. And, regardless of the source, test all birds before you bring them home. Now, we have all birds tested for Pbfd, polyoma, and psittacosis before we accept shipment. It adds to the cost, but we sleep much better at night.

Bonded, Proven, or Producing

If you are buying pairs of birds, you will see them advertised as bonded or proven. Unfortunately, this doesn't mean much.

If a pair is described as bonded, it should mean that the pair shows mating behavior but hasn't yet mated. They perch together. They preen and feed each other. They may be investigating the nest box. What bonded *really* means is that they have coexisted in the same flight and haven't mutilated or killed each other, although a few toes may be missing.

If a pair is described as proven, it should mean that the pair makes babies. What proven *really* means is that the pair may have laid a fertile egg sometime in the last 10 years. And, more than one hopeful novice breeder has bought a proven pair that turned out to be two males or two females.

In our opinion, when you are buying sexually mature birds there are only two kinds of pairs – producing and nonproducing. Although our definition is arbitrary, we define a producing pair as a pair that has laid fertile eggs in the last year or two out of the last three years. We define nonproducing pairs as everything else.

So, if you want to buy good pairs, how do you do it? We think that there are only two ways. The best way is to buy from folks you know. The next best way is to join the AFA and review the Fast Ads. Look for breeders who are selling out. However, understand that these breeders have already offered their best pairs to their friends.

Questions You Should Ask

If you don't ask, you probably won't be told. Does the bird pluck? Although this is not terribly important, if you keep

your birds outside, a plucked bird may have to be brought in during cold weather, especially if it does not sleep in the nest box. Does the bird have a serious beak overgrowth problem? This can affect a hen's ability to feed chicks and requires routine maintenance. Does the bird have all its toes and legs? If a bird is missing a leg, obviously it may cause a problem in its ability to breed. Will the pair incubate eggs? If not, you will need to invest in an incubator or have a good foster pair. Will the pair feed babies? Not all do, and you will have to feed day-ones if the pair won't. Although you shouldn't have to ask whether a bird has all its body parts or has other problems, chances are if you don't ask, you won't find out a problem exists until you pick the bird up at the airport. Finally, if you breed birds for which it is important to keep subspecies separate, you should request photographs. You would be amazed at the confusion about some subspecies even among experienced breeders.

Do Your Homework

Finally, do your homework on the birds you are considering. Do you have close neighbors? Moluccans may not be a good choice. Are you considering Hawk-headed? Mate aggression is a major potential problem. Do you love Great Bills? They are notorious for dismantling flights. Love those Jardine's? Aspergillosis is a potential problem. Simply put, learn all you can about the birds you are considering before you actually buy them.

Setting Up:

Do it Right the First Time

When we started setting up pairs we tried to save money and do it ourselves. Big mistake. I built many flights using 2 X 4s for stands and 1 X 2 mesh wire for the flights. The first problem was that the stands made out of 2 X 4s were unstable and fell apart without constant maintenance. The next problem was much more serious. As it turns out, a rat can go through 1 X 2 mesh wire at a dead run. And rats carry Salmonella, which is an especially nasty disease in psittacines. Rats pee everywhere they go – they go to the birds' food dishes to eat, and

Salmonella is present in their urine.

We found a wonderful producing Red-sided Eclactus hen dead in the nest box with a dead baby. Necropsy revealed that both had died of Salmonella. We decided to observe the flight at night. We saw rats visiting the food and water dishes.

Once we discovered that our flights allowed rats and mice access to the birds' food and water, we decided to replace them with professionally built flights. We have never regretted the decision. All our birds are housed in California-style flights made of 1/2 X 3, 12.5-gauge, double-dipped, galvanized wire. Rodents can't get in. The birds can't reach the ground to get worms. And the wire is heavy enough that you don't have to worry about a bird ever breaking a weld to escape.

But, there are many more reasons than avoiding rats to set up right to start with. For example, all our flights have feeding stations that are accessible without opening the main doors. All have roofs above the nest boxes to provide extra shade and shield the boxes from rain. All have windbreaks and partial covers to keep the birds out of the wind and rain. All nest boxes have sliding wire grids that cover the inspection holes when doors are open. These features are important for the comfort of our birds and for facilitating our care of them.

Predators

If your birds are outside, you will have to deal with various animals that think that the birds look like lunch. Most people worry about snakes. But, if you have suspended flights, snakes can't climb the legs. And, even if they do manage to, the worst that a typical snake can do is eat an egg or baby. Pairs are not at risk.

What pairs are at risk from are raccoons. If you don't have the stomach to shoot a raccoon, don't breed birds in an outside aviary. Raccoons are very intelligent. Raccoons have long skinny fingers. Raccoons will scare birds in suspended flights until they end up on the bottoms stunned, then reach through and tear the birds apart at their leisure. We have had only one bad experience with a raccoon. About two years ago,



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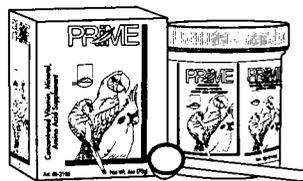
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one got into the yard and tore a Jardine's apart through 1/2 X 3 inch mesh. It scared a Red-bellied Parrot to the point that the bird killed itself in the flight. And, it scared a Brown-headed to the point that the bird injured itself and abandoned three babies, which subsequently froze to death. That was one expensive night. And I have little tolerance for raccoons as a result.

Although opossums may not try to get birds through the cage wire, they must be controlled, too. Sarcocystis is a protozoal disease that is dangerous for all psittacines and especially deadly for old-world birds. Opossums are part of the organism's life cycle. The protozoan is shed in the feces and carried by flies and roaches. If you have opossums, chances are that you will lose birds to sarcocystis.

Even hawks can be a problem. We have friends who have lost birds to hawks through the cage wire. This presents an awkward situation to the aviculturist because they are federally protected.

Miscellaneous Hazards

When you set birds up, assume that if they can get into trouble they will. And, assume that if something can go wrong, it will. Here are a few of the hazards of which we have learned the hard way.

Leaky Nest Boxes

We knew that our nest boxes had the potential to leak around the doors. So, we put roofs above all the nest boxes. For two years we never had a box with wet material. Last year, we had a week of steady rain. We had a Cape hen on two babies. The babies died because the nest box material was soaked. It never occurred to me to check the box for wet material because it had been bone dry for over two years.

Perching on Metal

If you maintain an outside aviary in a part of the country where temperatures fall below freezing, you already know that you must keep your birds dry and out of the wind. But, inspect your flights and ensure that it is impossible for your birds to perch on metal

instead of wood. Our nest boxes have safety flanges to keep birds from getting tangled between the entrance holes and the cage wire. However, this safety feature can be a hazard. We lost a Cape hen that decided to perch on top of the flange on a freezing night. Her feet froze; she chewed her toes off when they started thawing; and we found her dead in the bottom of the flight.

Over-Feeding

It is easy to be too nice to your birds. Parrots and other birds are evolved to expend large amounts of energy while flying and foraging. Parrots in breeding flights get a very small percentage of the exercise that they would get in nature. Yet, they are typically presented with large amounts of food often of high fat content. Although pairs may do well on excessive diets for a few years, eventually the excess calories will cause problems. Recently, we lost an Eclectus hen that had so much fat in her body cavity that it was crowding the internal organs and causing them to atrophy. Now, all our birds are on a diet. The current ration for each pair during the off-season is 1/8 cup seed, 1/2 cup low-fat pellets, and no-fat produce. And we are waiting to see if we need to reduce this further.

Fiber Board

This one shouldn't be a problem for most breeders, but naturally we learned about it the hard way. When we were just getting started our birds were outside in cages that didn't have sheet-metal wind and rain shields. The weather got nasty, so we covered the tops of the cages with Masonite. For some bizarre reason, a Grey decided that the Masonite was tasty. He totally impacted his digestive tract and died of starvation.

Summary

We have found breeding birds to be incredibly rewarding. We do it because we love the birds. But, many of the lessons we have learned have been learned the hard way at significant cost. We hope that this article will help some of you who are just starting avoid some of our mistakes. 