

Timneh Greys

a Wallflower Worth Noticing



by Rita Shimniok,
Oakridge Feather Farm
Cross Plains, Wisconsin

Oakridge Feather Farm has been raising parrots for over 10 years, with the latter half focusing primarily on African species. In the past two years, I have noticed a budding increase in the number of inquiries received requesting availability status of Timneh African Greys, *Psittacus erithacus timneh*. Our small aviary can never produce enough babies to keep up with the demand. If you are new to aviculture, or are considering specialization, I urge you to give serious thought to adding these African treasures to your flock.

Rising in Popularity

Yes, it is true. Timneh African Greys do talk just as well as their red-tailed cousins, and they have personalities that are just as big, despite their smaller size. The demand for the Timneh African Grey is on the rise as more and more people are realizing all that this subtly colored wallflower has to offer.

It seems much more difficult to locate an aviculturist raising Timneh babies versus Congo Greys, *Psittacus e. erithacus*. I believe there are at least two reasons for this. One being that Timnehs were never imported in large numbers, especially compared to the Congo Grey from which importers could make a larger profit; and secondly, it seems, that for many breeders, Timneh Greys are not as prolific in breeding as the Congos. This is unfortunate, as some breeders attempting to breed Timnehs even become frustrated with the lack of production and sell their pairs. If everyone were to give up on breeding the Timneh African Grey, pet owners would miss the opportunity of having one of the most wonderful parrots as their feathered companion.

People who are lucky enough to cater to both Congo and Timneh Grey companions, have noticed that often

the Timneh is a more outgoing in presence of company, compared to their seemingly more introverted, larger cousin. Timnehs do not seem to be as concerned about strangers in their presence, and go on about their leisure, playing with toys and chattering to their hearts content.

Why is this? Do Timneh African Greys really have a more laidback personality? Or, does it just seem that way because so many Congo Greys are raised in production style facilities, and perhaps are not as well socialized as the Timnehs, which are often bred by the smaller, non commercialized breeder?

Many breeders who raise both the Timneh and the Congo Grey, also find that the Timneh babies have a more low-key temperament, and do not seem as high-strung as the Congos. If a family with children calls me wanting an African Grey, I highly recommend the Timneh to them over the larger Congo, not only because I feel their size is less intimidating to children, but because I also feel the Timneh's personality will be better suited to a family situation. In fact, of all the African parrots we raise here at Oakridge, I trust the Timneh babies the most with my

two-year-old son, who loves to help feed and play with the chicks. The Timneh babies are less inclined to explore and beak everything in their path, including little fingers offering a bird toy.

Raising Domestic Timneh Greys

If one can locate a domestic hand-fed Timneh Grey baby he or she is likely to be smitten by these black-eyed, sometimes red speckled, charcoal gray parrots. Baby Timnehs exhibit their extroverted personalities early. At an age where Congo Grey babies demonstrate caution or mild interest towards their hand-feeder, Timneh chicks are scrambling over one another in their efforts to be the first one to "mama." These early behavior differences really do seem to justify the statement that Timnehs are more easy going.

In a nurturing environment, Timneh babies do not hesitate to climb aboard visitors to inspect buttons, glasses and such. When our baby Timnehs are approximately six weeks old we begin the process of teaching the babies to explore. We spread bed sheets on the floor and sprinkle the sheets with baby toys and bits of cereal, hard pasta, popcorn, pellets, etc. It is fun to watch a baby spot a "must have" item several feet away, and quickly waddle its fluffy gray bottom with sprouting, bright red tail feathers over to grasp the toy or morsel in its black beak.

As baby Timnehs mature, their upper mandibles become lighter, and bright red tail feathers are replaced by



Learning to fly is critical to the development of a confident Grey.

Photos by Rita Shimniok



Baby Timnehs find comfort in our warm weaning mush.

maroon feathers. Just like most Congo Greys, baby Timnehs will lose the red speckles scattered amid their body feathers during their first several molts.

Flight School

At around eight to nine weeks of age, baby Timnehs begin preparing for their first flight. They practice for their first flight with many days of exuberant wing flapping, as their unclipped, sharp toenails grasp the natural branch perches in their cage. Once it is obvious that a baby is about ready to take its first flight, we “flight-proof” the room. We put all breakable items in a safe area (or make a valiant effort anyhow), and are sure to close our window treatments prior to opening the weaning cages, as a safety precaution. Baby Timnehs master flying rather quickly, like speeding bullets, but the landing gear makes for a rather ungraceful landing at times.

We allow our babies to practice flying for about two weeks. The flight feathers are not clipped until the baby is repeatedly making graceful flights and sure-footed landings. We start out by clipping only the first 3-4 primaries, and progress to a full baby Grey wing clip, of 6-7 primaries. The gradual loss of height helps the baby to become accustomed and they can maneuver accordingly. I feel that the process of learning to fly helps the babies gain

self-confidence. I firmly believe that a self-confident African Grey is less likely to ever pick or pluck – and this holds true for red-tailed Greys as well.

Weaning Baby Timnehs

Once the babies start nibbling on vegetables, pellets, and other foods – we then start spoon-feeding for the evening feedings. We make a weaning mush of baby cereal, squash and applesauce, sprinkled with Spirulina, and serve it warm. If the babies are out of their cage playing at the time I arrive with a bowl and that “red spoon,” all toys are immediately dropped as they rush towards me for what must be their favorite meal of the day! I demonstrate the spoon feeding technique to our customers, and since the main ingredients of my baby mush are found in almost any grocery store, the evening spoon-feeding session can be continued, and I encourage new owners to do so after the weaned baby leaves my care.

By spoonfeeding warm food to your Grey baby, you will offer it a sense of nurturing and security that is so important with African Greys. Once the babies are weaned, there is no reason to stop feeding them the warm cereals or mashes. Greys love this kind of food, and spoon feeding them nightly or several times weekly offers both the adult Grey and human a few close, delightful moments each day. Under supervision, spoon-feeding is a great way for children to interact and bond with young Greys.

We encourage spoon-feeding through adulthood, as it is also a great way to provide oral medicine, should the need ever arise.

Great Family Birds

Timneh Greys generally have a more laidback personality than Congo Greys, and therefore have been recommended for families with small children. In fact, one of our customers has a young daughter who carries their Timneh around in a towel like a baby doll. We believe in using towels when cuddling our babies, as it helps birds not to be afraid of towels (should they need to be restrained for grooming or medical procedure).

The smaller size of a Timneh is often advantageous since their human family may find the smaller sized bird less intimidating, and if space is limited, a Timneh can dwell in a smaller sized cage than a Congo Grey.

The Timneh Grey is a gentle bird, and more often than not will simply push your finger away if you offer a head scratch and it is not in the mood to accept it. Now this is a nice, fair warning, and if you do not heed such an unmistakable signal, it's *your* pain!

Seriously though, it is important that children learn the behaviors of their pet Timnehs also. A head lowered for a scratch is an invitation for petting, a “click” of the beak accompanied by a push “away” is a signal that the Grey wants some private time. We all have these moments, so why not a Grey?

Their Time Has Come

African Greys have earned their right to being one of the very most sought after parrots due to their excellent potential to mimic human speech. Indeed, you sometimes think they are smarter than their human companions. Many consider all Greys (both Congo and Timneh) to be the most intelligent species, with a definite ability for cognitive thinking. Many pet owners have learned that personality is more important than bright colors. Thus Timneh Greys are enjoying a well-earned reputation for having wonderful personalities.

Traditionally, breeders have been able to sell Congo Greys for a few hundred dollars more than the Timnehs, but take note that the gap is closing. Some breeders are even charging the same price, no matter which African Grey sub-species is for sale. A reputation for raising well socialized and “flight-trained” Grey babies is a key factor in obtaining your desired market price. I personally feel that the scarcity and difficulty in raising these birds should in reality make them worth more than a Congo Grey.

Generally, the laws of demand will always prevail, and many think that “bigger is better.” Those of us lucky enough to have encountered a hand-fed Timneh know the truth – “the best things come in small packages.” 