

Breeding the Eclectus Parrot

by Carolyn Swicegood
Hollywood, Florida

One often hears that the Eclectus Parrot is "easy to breed but hard to feed." This is a reference to the fact that proven Eclectus pairs are prolific producers, but that Eclectus chicks are more difficult to feed than the young of many other large parrot species. Breeders who are accustomed to the strong feeding response of macaw chicks often are surprised to discover that the feeding response of Eclectus chicks is much weaker. They do little if any pumping during feeding. Obviously feeding can be a time consuming proposition that requires a little extra care and patience.

For the handfeeder who is new to the joy and frustration of feeding a day-one Eclectus chick, a curved-tip glass eye dropper is worth its weight in gold. From day one through the first week of life, this inexpensive tool can save the lives of Eclectus babies while giving the handfeeder great peace of mind. This dropper is available in the eye-care section of most pharmacies and allows the handfeeder to place one drop of formula at a time on the side of the upper mandible. For the first week of life, an Eclectus chick has a tiny crop that holds only a few drops per feeding. The eye dropper feeding method assures that a small, exact measure of formula is dispersed gradually and evenly into the chick's mouth.

This helps to guard against aspiration caused by the sudden and unexpected introduction of a large amount of food into the tiny beak. It is much more difficult to dispense a small amount of formula from a handfeeding syringe. The formula should be just thick enough to form a strong droplet, or the consistency of fruit nectar. If you dip the end of the dropper into the formula, one drop should adhere to the end of the glass tube. The consistency of the formula should be thickened daily as the chick grows. By the time the chick is three weeks of age, the

formula is the consistency of pancake batter and a syringe is a better choice of feeding tools because it holds more food. The curved tip dropper is inexpensive insurance against aspiration of newly hatched Eclectus chicks.

Getting Started

Eclectus Parrots are prolific year-round breeders once they bond and figure out the logistics of mating, but there are a number of obstacles on the path toward that goal. The first hurdle to overcome is to find pure subspecies specimen birds to set up together as breeding pairs.

A majority of Eclectus Parrots in the U.S. and other countries carry the genes of more than one subspecies. Pure subspecies Eclectus are very difficult to locate. Eclectus males of the commonly available subspecies look frustratingly similar. To maximize the chance of getting birds that are not of crossed subspecies heritage, enlist the help of a knowledgeable Eclectus breeder who is familiar with the various subspecies.

There is a serious problem of cross-bred subspecies in Eclectus aviculture. A large part of this problem is because the subspecies identity of the male Eclectus is almost impossible for the novice to determine. In fact, subspecies identification of the male can be a challenge even for the experienced breeder.

Birds often are paired on the basis of the subspecies that the male appears to be. By the time the pair matures and produces a female offspring, by which subspecies purity can be determined, the pair is likely to have been together for several years. When a mismatch is discovered, the owner is sometimes reluctant to break up the pair and obtain new mates of the appropriate subspecies.

Pairing Birds

Some breeders insist that raising young, unrelated Eclectus males and females together is the best way to

obtain successful breeding pairs. Others believe that pairing adult birds is a faster and easier way to achieve the same result, but the success of this method is dependent upon one's source of birds. Buying adult birds from any source other than a known and trusted breeder requires caution because birds that have problems, such as mate aggression and egg eating, are more likely to be offered for sale than are problem-free birds. The careful buyer always asks why a proven male or female is being offered for sale.

Once compatible individuals are set up in a breeding situation, things might go exceptionally well. A newly paired Eclectus male and female sometimes bond immediately. Males have been observed regurgitating to newly introduced females within an hour of their introduction. Some "love at first sight" pairs lay fertile eggs within a month of being introduced. However, this seems to be the exception rather than the rule.

Some birds set up as pairs are incompatible or take considerable time to develop a pair bond. Switching mates is often effective and it is sometimes done even after Eclectus pairs have produced many clutches of babies. Either male or female Eclectus can lose interest in their partner and cease to produce. The Eclectus attitude toward bonding covers the entire spectrum from bonding for life to an attitude of "if you can't be with the one you love, love the one you're with." Random mate swapping is not unusual in an Eclectus colony breeding situation.

Squabbling or Fighting?

Sparring is common between the newly introduced male and female Eclectus, as well as young bonded pairs, as they become sexually mature. The inexperienced owner can easily misinterpret this natural part of the bonding process as serious, even life-threatening, fighting. Injuries are rare among Eclectus pairs that chase each other, neck wrestle, and engage in beak fighting. Sometimes the male sustains an injury to the beak, and less

often, to other areas of the body. Female injuries are much less common. Male beak injuries usually heal without a problem and the bonding process continues without further injury. There are very few cases of Eclectus mate aggression involving serious injury or death, but close observation of a newly-introduced pair is important to prevent such tragedies.

When the birds are only squabbling about ground rules, such as whether the male will be allowed to enter the nestbox, the owner should observe rather than intervene. Due to the misinterpretation of normal sparring, nervous new owners often break up pairs that were well on their way to becoming successful breeders. It is important for all birds to get sufficient exercise, but I believe that a lot of mate aggression could be avoided by providing breeding birds adequate exercise to work off excess energy.

Common Breeding Problems

In the best case scenario, an Eclectus pair would bond immediately and lay fertile eggs the first time. The female would sit tight on the nest until the chicks hatched and the male would feed the female who would in turn feed the babies from day one through fledging.

It is more likely, however, that there will be some problems along the way. The most common problem is that there are many clear eggs before a pair masters successful mating techniques. Many pairs lay infertile eggs for a year or more. The main reason for this is thought to be that the males take longer to mature than the females.

Another problem that might be encountered is that the female does not always incubate the eggs properly.

And a pair also might not feed their first few clutches of babies. Although the majority of Eclectus Parrots usually become wonderful parents and sometimes do everything right the first time, this certainly is not always the case. Some males will destroy the eggs, or even newly hatched chicks. In this case, the male can be caged within the aviary when it is time for the eggs to

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hatch, or an arrangement can be made so that the male can feed the female through a wire or other barrier, but cannot enter the nest area.

The use of indestructible fake eggs is sometimes effective to break the egg destruction habit of males. These eggs can be purchased where breeding supplies are found.

Birds that were hatched from artificially incubated eggs and handfed from day one sometimes have difficulty with parenting skills that are natural to parent-reared birds. A hen might dutifully brood her chicks but fail to feed them, seemingly oblivious that they are crying for food and that they will starve to death without it.

One such female frustrated my every attempt to teach her to feed her chicks. I tried swapping her newly hatched baby for a week old baby that could beg louder and longer. I also tried removing her new babies for handfeeding several times a day and then returning them to the nest, hoping that their hungry cries at feeding time would stimulate her to feed them. I even tried showing her how to feed the baby, using my finger tips as a stand-in for her beak.

After a year, when I had completely given up on her ever feeding, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that her new chick had been fed! Now she feeds like an old pro and there has never been another problem with her.

Once the birds figure out the logistics of breeding, egg sitting, and raising chicks, many Eclectus females are so determined to lay eggs that having the nestbox taken away is only a minor inconvenience to them. They will lay eggs in any reasonable facsimile of a nest. The owner, of course, must restore the nestbox when it becomes obvious that egg laying is imminent. Some of the tell-tale signs that a hen is about to lay are a bulge in the vent area and loose droppings.

Eclectus Parrots become mature enough to breed at the age of two to five years. The smaller Solomon Island subspecies can reproduce as early as two years of age. Some of the larger subspecies, such as the Vosmaeris and

Macgillivrays, mature sexually as late as five or even six years of age. If a mature pair is healthy and bonded, as indicated by mutual feeding, and if the owner is prepared to make the commitment necessary to raise babies, the birds are ready for a nestbox.

In my opinion, young bonded birds can be given a nestbox, but if a male and female Eclectus have only recently been introduced and are not yet engaging in mutual feeding, it is best to delay providing them a nestbox until mutual feeding has been observed. This is one of the few indications of bonding in Eclectus pairs since mutual preening is not as prevalent as it is in many other parrot species.

If one provides a nestbox too soon, the hen of a new pair might well disappear into the nestbox for up to 23 hours a day, giving the pair no chance to continue the bonding process. Mutual feeding is critical to the successful rearing of young. The male must feed the female so that she can incubate the eggs and feed her young while he delivers the necessary food via regurgitation.

Nestbox Types

Eclectus are not particular about where they nest. They will use a Z-shaped nestbox, a boot-shaped box, a horizontal box, a hollow log turned upright or horizontal, or a grandfather style box – an upright rectangular box with a four to five-inch diameter opening in the upper third of the front of the box and an inspection door in the lower third of the back of the box. A ladder must be provided from the opening to the floor of the nest.

Some breeders prefer the boot style (or L-shape box) which is the same configuration as a grandfather box except for an additional floor area (the horizontal part of the L) for the nest. The advantage of this style is that the birds cannot jump directly onto the eggs when entering the nest.

My aviaries are located in the subtropical climate of South Florida, so even though I would prefer the L-shaped boot box, due to the high temperature during much of the year, the

low ceiling of the nest area in the boot area does not allow enough heat to escape for the comfort of the hen and chicks. If a pair seems less than enthusiastic about one type of nestbox, offer them a different style.

Some Eclectus pairs mate inside the nestbox so it is necessary to provide enough space for both birds, without providing enough excess space for eggs or young chicks to get lost along the sides of the nest. After trying nearly all the configurations of nestboxes, the favorite of my small flock of Vosmaeri Eclectus Parrots is a 24 inch tall grandfather style box with 12 x 12 inch nest area.

Many breeders use large, clean pine shavings for nestbox substrate although it can be difficult to locate a source of large shavings rather than small pieces and sawdust. It is important to provide pieces of wood large enough for the hen to shred to make her nest. With a planer and a clean, untreated 1 x 6 inch pine board, one can make large pieces of shavings. Otherwise, small pieces of the board can be cut for the hen to chew inside the nestbox.

Both birds will enjoy shredding clean branches from safe trees. In the wild, the pair works together to excavate a nest in the hollow of a tree. Chewing wood in the deep, dark hollow is thought to be an important part of the stimulation required by the female for ovulation. Working together on the nest site is a natural part of the bonding process leading up to mating.

Eggs

Eclectus pairs usually lay two eggs per clutch. Hens of the smaller Solomon Island subspecies sometimes lay three eggs. Usually, there are two days between the laying of the first and the second egg. One could say that the eggs are laid on day one and day four. However, the eggs usually hatch with only one day between eggs. That is, they hatch on day one and day three. Some hens do not seriously start to incubate their eggs until the last egg is laid and others incubate from the time the first egg is laid. It is thought that Eclectus hens turn their

eggs once an hour and that the temperature of the eggs during incubation is 98.5 degrees Fahrenheit.

By the time an egg is five days old, one can see evidence of fertility with the aid of a candler or mag-lite. Small red spidery veins radiating outward from a small, dark spot in the egg alert the breeder that the egg is fertile.

Since the hen turns the egg only once per hour, I think it is best not to handle the eggs. The embryo is undergoing important developmental changes at any given time during incubation, and we do not know what effect an extra turn or two might have on the embryo. It is possible that many dead in shell babies are the result of rough handling and contamination of the egg. Bacteria from our hands can be transported to the developing embryo through the porous shell with disastrous results. One should be able to candle eggs without handling them.

Infertile eggs should be left with the hen for the full 28 days required for incubation. Otherwise, a hen can become trained to abandon future nests at the same time that her first few nests of eggs were pulled. Allowing the hen to incubate the eggs for the full cycle also helps to prevent the depletion of calcium from her system if she lays too often. Eclectus hens would lay year round if not forced to take a break. Many breeders remove nestboxes during the hottest months of the year to allow the birds to rest and to rebuild calcium stores.

Owner as Third Wheel

One of the characteristics that I appreciate most about Eclectus Parrots is that their strong bond with the owner continues during nesting. Most parrot species will not allow human interference with their eggs and chicks. However, if the breeder enjoys a close bond with an Eclectus pair, he or she will be trusted to candle eggs and handle babies. The only exception, in my experience, is that the birds do not appreciate interaction with the caregiver during the days of actual mating. My males – who are not biters – will nip me if I go near their mates during this

time. Once mating is over, I am once again allowed to interact with them.

If one does not have a close relationship with an Eclectus pair, the birds must be removed from the nesting area before checking eggs or chicks in order to avoid personal injury, broken eggs, or injured chicks. An untamed female Eclectus can be quite aggressive in her attempt to protect her eggs and chicks. Even so, I have never heard of an Eclectus hen that would fly at the caregiver, as the occasional Amazon parrot is known to do.

However, being the devoted parents that Eclectus pairs certainly are, they will defend their nest with fervor if they feel threatened.

Incubation and Hatching

Eclectus hens sit tightly on their eggs and leave the nest only a few times a day to eliminate and drink water. Some hens also spend a few minutes eating. Other hens depend entirely on the male for food which he dutifully delivers to the nestbox entrance many times a day. As the hatch date approaches, the hen can be heard making a shrill and persistent cry, very much like that of a young chick. This seems to be of great interest to the male who promptly delivers food to the nest.

Fertile Eclectus eggs generally hatch in 28 days. The chicks hatch blind and naked, but are pink and hearty looking. Some hens do not feed the newly-hatched chick for the first 12 to 24 hours as the chick absorbs the yolk sac; others feed the chicks shortly after hatching.

If an owner checks after 24 hours to be sure that a first-time parent is feeding her new chick, it is important to know what to expect. A one or two-day old chick that has been fed has a tiny bulge in the crop about the size of half an English pea. Often, a new owner mistakenly assumes that the chick has not been fed and pulls the chick for handfeeding because of the small size of the full crop at this stage.

It is important to allow first-time Eclectus parents to raise their new chick(s) for as long as they will feed them. If one pulls the chicks after a

few days or weeks, the parents will come to expect the babies to leave the nest prematurely and might never feed their chicks to the fledging stage. In fact, at the time that they expect the chicks to be pulled, many hens will pluck the down feathers from the chicks, starting with the backside of the chick and eventually stripping the entire body.

Tips and Tricks of Eclectus Breeding

Here are a few tips for those interested in breeding Eclectus Parrots.

1. If possible, raise the male and female together. If they are paired at a later time, allowing them to select their mate from a colony situation increases the likelihood of successful breeding.

2. Keeping only Eclectus Parrots in the immediate vicinity is helpful. Although they will breed with other parrot species around, the chances that they will breed successfully are increased by providing privacy from louder parrot species. The presence of other Eclectus pairs within hearing range can strengthen pair bonding, but a visual barrier is necessary to prevent squabbling between neighboring pairs.

3. Nestboxes should not be given to newly paired adults before evidence of bonding is seen. If the hen starts living in the nestbox before she has trained the male to feed her, successful breeding is less likely. Hens spend up to 23 hours a day in the nestbox. Some pairs lay clear eggs for the first year when the nestbox is given too soon.

4. Nestbox location is not as critical once a pair has started producing, but initially it is important to position it in the highest part of the aviary with the greatest possible degree of privacy. The location should be protected from sources of stress such as predators (hawks, cats, rodents, reptiles, raccoons, and opossums) as well as loud noises, auto traffic, other pets, and children.

5. Wood should be provided to both the male and female Eclectus for chewing. It is an important part of their pre-mating ritual. In the wild, they would work together to excavate a nest



Let the good times roll. This is what all Eclectus breeders like to see.



Three young Vosmaeri Eclectus Parrots

high in a tree. Safe, clean tree branches in the aviary are a good substitute.

6. Food must be provided in abundance every day to reassure the pair that enough food will be available to raise chicks, simulating a time of plenty in the wild. Soft foods such as cooked beans, brown rice, corn, and sweet potatoes are a favorite of Eclectus pairs. Fresh green foods including sprouts should be included for a live source of

enzymes, and hardboiled eggs with shells should be provided for protein and calcium. Supplemental vitamins and minerals should not be added if an adequate diet is provided and the birds are outside with access to sunshine which aids in the production of vitamin D, which affects calcium absorption. If raised indoors with artificial lighting, an avian vet might prescribe a calcium supplement for hens that are laying

eggs. Hyperactivity caused by the over-supplementation of vitamins can lead to mate aggression and physical injury.

7. When breeding Eclectus Parrots indoors, an increase in daylight hours can stimulate the production of reproductive hormones and breeding behavior. Automatic timers are the most efficient way to gradually increase daylight hours.

8. There is no information available about the effect of bathing on Eclectus breeder pairs, but when my birds are mating, they are eager for any type of bath. Natural rain baths are their favorite of course, but they enjoy spritz baths from spray bottles as well as bathing in a shallow pool of water.

9. When all else fails to get a newly mature Eclectus pair interested in breeding, a change of scenery can have the desired effect. A move to a different aviary with a new nestbox is sometimes sufficient stimulus for a pair to go to nest.

10. There are a few nutritional tricks that are considered helpful to stimulate breeding. Since every living creature has a unique chemical makeup, no one remedy fits all. Here are a few substances that are reputed to be effective in some instances. Herbal remedies such as chamomile tea, kava, passion flower, valerian root, and other relaxing herbs can have a calming effect and help stressed birds to settle down and go to nest. Hemp seeds have been reported to have a stimulating effect on breeding birds. Fresh, raw wheat germ is given to some breeding parrots to boost to vitamin E levels, thought to be important for successful breeding. Moderation is important and straight vitamin E, which is much too stimulating even to the point of causing mate aggression, should be avoided.

If given the proper diet in an appropriate setting, Eclectus Parrots are relatively easy to breed. Eclectus chicks are in great demand for their exceptional beauty and great pet quality. Even newcomers to the art of parrot breeding are likely to be successful in their endeavor to breed the exquisitely beautiful Eclectus Parrot. 