

Raising Baby Parrots for the Pet Trade

by Kashmir Csaky, Forest, Virginia

A lone figure traveled between two buildings, his collar turned up against the winter wind and his hands tucked tightly in his pants pockets. All eyes were fixed on him until he disappeared into the long low structure. As soon as he was out of sight there was a loud crash that built up to a cacophony of sounds; laughter and giggling, pierced by screams and loud voices shouting, "Shut up!" and "Stop that, will ya!"

This happened every time the teacher left the room in my fifth period junior high school physical science class. We all knew that Mr. Smith left to smoke a cigarette and was watching from the principal's office. He also left the intercom on to monitor our shenanigans. A long line of unruly students formed at the pencil sharpener, next to the intercom. As the students finished sharpening their pencils, they were overcome by an irresistible urge to ball up paper in front of the intercom. Could this unusual behavior exhibited by my junior high school classmates be the fault of their mothers?

It is doubtful, with a few exceptions, since this behavior appeared to be limited to the physical science class. Mr. Smith was probably doing something to encourage the willful antics that took place.

Unfortunately, it is typical for pet owners whose birds exhibit any unwanted behavior to blame the breeder. I suppose this is natural in our society today. Everyone wants to point fingers and relieve himself or herself of the burden of guilt. Aviculturists have brought some of this upon themselves by creating unrealistic expectations. Not too many years ago breeders advertised their hand-raised babies as being puppy or kitten sweet. So, the message the public got was that, hand-raised parrots are no different than puppies and kittens – which we all know is

not true. Sometimes it is the breeder's fault when the chicks are obviously abused or neglected.

The aviculturist, who raised a bird and then sold the bird at six months of age, should not be held accountable for that bird's behavior two years later. Ultimately, the responsibility for having shaped a bird's behavior belongs to the pet owner who has had that bird the longest, unless the bird has been abused. Although, aviculturists may have given their babies the necessary training and opportunities to have the best possible start in life, this does not preclude the development of behavioral problems. A bird's personality is dependent on the sum of all of his experiences.

Many breeders make an honest effort to raise good birds for the pet trade. However they may be overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of babies that are suddenly produced during breeding season, especially dur-



With careful early training, this young Hyacinth Macaw will enjoy its long life in an understanding and loving home.

ing an unexpectedly productive year. When aviculturists get very little sleep because they must feed babies throughout the night, training the babies becomes sec-

Photo courtesy of Kashmir Csaky

ondary to keeping babies alive. Consumer satisfaction will be dependent on the good health of the bird and that bird's ability to become a successful member of the family. If the birds do not meet expectations then sales will drop off.

Some simple training that takes place early in life can determine whether or not the bird will adjust well to family life.

Aviculturists with small aviaries have time to spend with their babies. They can virtually customize birds to the desires of the individual, choosing the bird with all the traits that the customer desires and cultivating these traits to raise a good companion bird. Yet, many reputable aviculturists have different opinions about how best to raise good pets. Major changes may be required if new methods are adopted. These changes may be expensive and unreasonable to accomplish, so no changes are made even if the need for change is recognized. However, there are little things that can be done to improve the pet quality of the baby birds, even by those with limited time and at no extra expense.

Organization

As with all things, being organized is the key to reaching your goals. Preparation and organization will even give you more time to relax. Make certain that all equipment you use is in one place and easy to find. Establish an efficient method for the way you go about your tasks, one that you follow precisely every time you prepare food, feed babies, and clean up. The method should be like a choreographed routine with a rhythm all its own. If your routine is this well organized you will immediately sense when something has gone wrong, because it will break your rhythm. Then you will be able to quickly make corrections and perhaps avert a disaster.

Weight Management

Weigh babies daily. Make this your first priority each morning when babies' crops are empty. Use a form that identifies each baby down one column and has the dates in a row across the top. Enter each baby's weight under the correct date. If you do not have too many babies, you can create a chart for each chick that can contain additional information. A glance at the chart will reveal if a particular baby is not gaining weight properly. Keep the forms on a clipboard so that they will not be misplaced. These records may also be beneficial if anyone questions the health of a baby that you sold them. If the chick had a healthy beginning, your weight records will indicate that the chick progressed well while in your care.

Daily Exams

Take time daily to do a quick physical exam on each baby. A rudimentary knowledge of normal avian anatomy and common pediatric diseases will be bene-

ficial.

This examination will serve multiple purposes. It will allow early detection of physical problems such as splayed legs, constricted toes, and other abnormalities. With early detection you can correct some of these problems yourself at very little or no expense. If the problems are noticed only after they have become severe, corrections may be costly or impossible. Daily handling of this type accustoms the birds to human touch, making grooming and veterinary exams easier to conduct. This handling also teaches the birds to enjoy being touched and is a major part of socialization.

The examination should consist of touching the baby's head while checking the eyes and ears and looking into the mouth. Rub the baby's neck, feel the crop and run your hand down the spine. Lift up each wing with a soft stroking motion and look under the wings and inspect the bird's hips. Hold each leg in your hands and then slide your hands down the baby's legs. Inspect each toe, toe nails and check the tail. When you check the baby's underside, gently pick the baby up and look at the cloaca and abdomen. If your baby is four weeks old or older, gently wrap the baby up in a little towel. When this is done in a stress free environment it will help to get babies accustomed to being toweled. I prefer not to towel babies younger than four weeks; the towel might be too rough on their skin. Record on the baby's chart when the eyes and ears opened and any abnormalities or suspected abnormalities.

Examination of a baby with no noticeable problems should take about 30 seconds, unless you have more time and choose to take longer.

Music Therapy

Many people may find it difficult to talk to baby birds, to tell the babies they are cute and loveable. Yet, it is important that your chicks are stimulated with sound. Sound is very important to the development of all parrots, in captivity or in the wild. Hearing the human voice often and at a young age helps birds develop their talking ability which is a desirable characteristic in a pet parrot. My baby macaws begin talking as young as seven weeks of age. Although you may find constant baby talk to be tiresome, most people are capable of singing to their babies while feeding them. In this way the human voice will be associated with food and comfort, and therefore happiness, which will help to make them better pets.

"Up" and "Down" Commands

Birds that understand the "up" and "down" commands and willingly step up and down when they are told have the best chance of success in their new homes. These two things, more than any others, allow you to maintain control of your bird. Birds that are kept

Continued on page 8



Photo courtesy of Kashmir Csaky

Companion birds deserve the careful selection of the best home. Their long life span is a long-time commitment.

in control do not develop unwanted behaviors such as biting and excessive screaming.

Teaching the “up” and “down” commands becomes easy if you begin as soon as the chicks are removed from the nest. Every time you pick up a baby (even if it is in a container) say, “Up.” Each time you put the baby down say, “Down.” It is that simple. When an older baby wants to run up your arm, hold one of the baby’s feet in place with your thumb then gently press the baby to your chest and stroke the baby’s head. This is how you maintain control without becoming overly emotional. Some babies become unruly at this stage in their development. This might be the time you begin teaching them, “No.”

“No” Command

“No” is often incorrectly communicated to birds. By the time that a bird is told “No,” the situation has

often escalated to an emotional confrontation. When people become angry they tend to yell and their voices become high pitched. Loud noises only further excite an out-of-control bird. Birds enjoy high-pitched sounds, so as the angry human voice becomes higher in pitch the bird is being sent mixed signals. It is best to teach a bird the meaning of “No” as soon as the bird exhibits an unwanted behavior and when the owner is calm rather than emotional.

However, if the situation is already stressful, take a deep breath to get yourself under control before saying “No.” Limit body movements as much possible and try to say “No” an octave deeper than your normal voice. Do not shout or flail your arms, which is a drama reward and will encourage the bird to continue an unwanted behavior. The calmer you remain, the greater chance you have of communicating “No” to a bird. Baby birds are very eager to

please if they understand what is expected of them.

There are many more techniques that can be utilized to raise babies to be well-behaved pets that will have the best chance for happiness in their lives. However, I consider daily examinations, music therapy, and learning the “up,” “down,” and “no” commands the most important. All of these can be easily managed with minor efforts from busy breeders.

By providing healthy, well adjusted, partially trained baby parrots for the pet trade, you can guarantee yourself repeat, long-term business and the satisfaction of knowing that you have provided potentially loving, life-sharing companion birds. Birds that integrate well into the lives of their companions will teach the people they encounter the wonder and reward of keeping a parrot. 🐦

So you want to breed more birds

You've tried vitamins, you've tried pellets and still you have bad seasons as well as good.

There is another way.

There are two secrets to improved breeding through good nutrition.

- * Firstly you must feed your birds for bouncing health and vitality.
- * Secondly you must give them the nutritional messages that tell them that raising chicks is going to be easy and successful.

At The Birdcare Company we think this is impossible to do with pellets. This is why UK and European breeders have rejected complete diets. Traditional vitamin and mineral supplements also only go a small way to achieving this. So we have developed far more sophisticated supplements that put both you and your birds in control. These products are easy to use and backed by our free advisory service. They have proved themselves in the UK, Europe and, more recently, America.

Just look at these supplement ingredient innovations introduced to cage bird breeders by The Birdcare Company in the last few years. Ask yourself if your birds are getting these benefits from their current diet. If they are not - simply contact us or our retailers. And find out how our very comprehensive and simple-to-use supplements can help give you consistently good breeding results year after year.

Breeder benefits from Birdcare Company innovations

Year	Innovation	Benefits	Still unique in cage bird supplements?
2001	Powder essential fatty acids	Improved fertility and chick development	World
	Organic acids	Improved shell structure and chick growth	World
	White cell support system	Improved disease resistance in hand reared chicks	World
	Live yeast probiotics	Improved disease resistance in hand reared chicks	World
1999	Herb enriched softfood/HRF	Healthier, faster growing chicks	UK, USA, Asia
	Probiotic/prebiotic blends	Even better digestion	World?
1997	Non-smelly highly bio-available trace minerals	Improved fitness, fertility and disease resistance	World
1996	Bio-available sulphur	Improved fertility, feathering and disease resistance	World
	High levels of amino acids	Faster, stress free molts, obesity control	World?
	High value protein	Good breeding condition, bigger, fertility and chick growth	UK, USA, Asia
1994	Liquid calcium/magnesium/VitD3 (Europe)	Larger clutch sizes, improved hatchability, fitter hens, more clutches, improved behaviour, less stress	Europe, USA

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