

A New Perspective on Parent Rearing

*by Dee Adams
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Like most folks getting into parrots 10 years ago, I had always heard that handfed babies made the best pets. When to “pull” the babies was hotly discussed between breeders. Some said 10 days, some two weeks, some five weeks; some suggested feeding from day one so the babies would bond to you. Another common argument was that you always had to pull the babies before their eyes opened so that you would be the first “parent” they saw. It was believed that parrots were like ducks; if they saw you first, they chose to follow you and imitate your behavior for life. If one were lucky enough to find a baby to “finish” the hand feeding process, that indeed was the ultimate in ensuring a bonded and obedient pet.

Who was I to question the experts? Had the experts questioned themselves? Can anyone really become an expert over the span of a mere 10-15 years of raising birds in captivity? For some reason people seemed to believe that buying a bird could be like buying a car – the product would be tangible, dependable, finite, certain. I began to question how folks had come to decide that hand rearing was the best option for good pets. Having raised many wild and domestic animals as a child, and from my volunteer work at the zoo, I learned the importance of parental involvement in the nutrition as well as in the emotional and intellectual development of the young. The most well adjusted animals in captivity were invariably

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 Mt Olympus Aviaries, Crestwood, KY
 North Carolina Zoological Park, Asheboro, NC
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 Parrot Gizmos, Tallahassee, FL
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 Parrot supply.com, Jim & Ardell Garrick, Ravensdale, WA
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those that were raised in captivity by their own tame parents. Why would parrots be any different?

Since Mother Nature has been raising parrots in the wild infinitely longer than humans have, I began to think that Her level of expertise deserved at least some credence.

I decided to challenge the status quo. My first challenge involved the initial breeding pairs. I faced the idea that “you have to make them either breeders or pets, but not both.” The thought at that time was that tame birds were pets, and any unruly birds were destined to be breeders. While that is an interesting concept, I personally was not comfortable relying on it because I could not understand “why.” Why should the breeders be those that were biters and feather-pluckers, full of phobias and aggression? Would we not want to start a bloodline with parents most likely to pass positive genetic and behavioral traits?

I started with recently weaned and unrelated Eclectus – adorable little pets that had themselves been handfed from day one, but were a touch on the wild side since those particular breeders did not believe in handling the birds too much as they matured. Sunset and Rainbow, four months old, moved into their new home, and there for the next year and a half they were my pets; tame with me at the same time as they were learning about each other. I never experienced any aggressive tendencies while interacting with them as pets; nor did they display aggression for one another.

They were out of the cages daily, knew their “up” commands, and regularly played with toys on their playpen. I hung their nest box in November of 1995, and on December 26, 1995, I discovered two fertile eggs in their nest box. Sunset and Rainbow not quite two years old had surpassed all the norms. Not only did they lay earlier than any other Solomon Island Eclectus that I had researched, but they laid 100% fertility with the first clutch.

On January 18, Baby Lipstick kicked off the last piece of shell, and rolled into her new world. The second egg, though fertile, was not hatched.

I was prepared (after all, most birds that have been handfed will not feed their young, right?). The brooder was ready and warmed, formula and syringes in stock. Emergency medicines blood-clotting potions, periodicals, phone numbers, and all of the other assisted hatching/feeding supplies I had read about.

I checked inside the box, and saw from the pea-sized white bulge

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of a crop, that these parents had been feeding their baby. And they *kept* feeding their baby. The parents consumed large amounts of corn, wheat bread, and tofu, along with other fresh foods. The baby grew and grew and soon acquired the nickname “Godzilla” from one of my e-mail friends. At 4½ weeks, tiny specks of red emerged from the feather sheaths and I knew that baby Godzilla would need a new name. I took a poll of my Internet friends, and the winning name was chosen: Lipstick – the perfect name for a stunning little lady in red.

As soon as Lipstick emerged from the nest box on March 29, 1996, Sunset and Rainbow picked up their mating ritual again. Lipstick watched in earnest as they courted, mated, and laid a new clutch of eggs. Continuing to be fed by Rainbow, Lipstick began to take bits of food on her own. I have to believe that she has something unique in seeing for herself what life is all about. She also watched as the new chicks hatched and as her parents fed them.

With the new clutch came

Journey. Journey hatched 10 days before my move from Texas to Chicago. We all know what fun it is to move alone, much less with an entire aviary in tow. And we also know how some of the most special babies seem to arrive at some of the least convenient moments. I was faced with a new challenge. Sunset and Rainbow had proven themselves as excellent parents. But could they take the stress of a move and still feed this one? I decided the best option would be to pull and hand-feed little Journey during the move.

Everyone has heard how a chick can never be returned to the parents after it is pulled. Well, two days into the move, I put Journey back into the carrier that was Sunset’s home during the move. My heart skipped several beats as I watched, and then she immediately began to feed her chick again. Through the rest of the trip, this special family sat in the seat beside me. Sunset would beg for food that I slipped to her through the slits in the carrier, and she fed and kept baby Journey warm. Rainbow’s carrier was on top of them, and he proudly screeched and strutted while protecting his family.

Upon arrival in Chicago, they spent another couple of days in their carriers before their cages were set up again, and when Journey was placed into the nest box, Sunset and Rainbow continued “business as usual” in raising little Journey. What could account for their calmness in this situation? Could it be that I had raised them both as pets *and* breeders? Could it be that they trusted me enough to allow handling of this chick?

To date, Sunset and Rainbow raised 22 chicks, and they have fed all but one chick through weaning. I am currently handfeeding one of their babies that acquired a bacterial infection and had to be pulled at eight days and placed in a brooder. I retained this baby for a week in the brooder while administering medications, as weather conditions were cool. An attempt to return him was

unsuccessful, so baby "Art" will be my first handfed Eclectus parrot.

Sunset and Rainbow hatched only the first egg in each clutch during their first year. After that they began hatching two chicks, and finally began to hatch all three a couple of years ago. As the chicks are raised, I remove them from the nest a few times a week for weighing and checking. Through this process, the chicks learn to trust me at the same time they are learning all about being a bird from their parents. Following Nature's model as closely as possible, the chicks remain with their parents and the flock approximately two years before transitioning to their new homes. It is believed that chicks remain with their parents a couple of years in the wild before venturing off on their own. My thought is that by providing the chicks a solid foundation in learning from their parents, the transition to a new life will be more of an adventure, than a fearful encounter. A comparison may be made to a human child that develops a solid connection with his/her family before venturing off to college, or to start a new family of his/her own.

Each of the parent reared chicks from my aviary has been sold into the pet market, direct to responsible individuals, and each is today thriving as a well adjusted, parent reared, hand tame parrot. I believe they have what they deserve – the best of both worlds. My thought is that these birds may be less prone to behavioral problems such as plucking/fear biting, because they have a better routed sense of who they are. They know they are tame birds, not little humans with feathers as is perhaps the case with those that are fully hand reared by humans.

My Hahn's Macaws also raise their own chicks. Again, the breeders are pets; the chicks are parent reared, and hand tame. The male was parent reared for three weeks, and weaned out through human handfeeding. The female was fully parent reared, but not tame. Again, as the babies grew,



Photo by Dee Adams

Sunset and Rainbow on playpen.

I removed them from the nest for checking and weighing. They have no fear of humans, but are fully aware of their identity as Hahn's Macaws. I watch today as the chicks try and hold a wedge of corn just like their parents, and realize they are learning more than I could ever teach them alone.

For me, the most critical element in attempting to parent rear parrots is to first know your birds. Spend time with them. Watch them. Try and imagine life and perceptions from their point of view. Pay attention to every detail. What seems to stress them? What brings them comfort? Taking chances is the only way to learn if and how your birds will parent rear their babies. Sometimes we face success, and sometimes failure. My Severe Macaws will not raise their babies, but prefer to think of them as meals. I have tried many alternatives in helping my breeder

Severes feel safe, but so far they have yet to rear any of their babies. For the moment I am handfeeding their babies until another suitable arrangement for surrogate parent rearing is available. Emotionally parent rearing can be very rewarding; it can also be extremely challenging. Providing healthy, well-adjusted feathered companions to the pet trade is the ultimate reward.

In my experience, the combination of parent rearing and human interaction truly appears to be the best of both worlds for the birds as well as their human caretakers. Birds who know they are birds, are less likely to attach co-dependent associations with humans. They realize they can play and interact on their own or with other birds, and they trust humans to be their companions and caretakers. What a winning combination!

COMING NEXT ISSUE: SPECIFIC TECHNIQUES OF PARENT REARING. ➤