

A Start to Indian Ringnecks in the Pet Market

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Whether you are going to attempt to breed your own pet, purchase young unproven birds, or purchase a proven pair, there are many things you should consider. Only you can answer the following questions because the answers depend on your own circumstances:

- Where are you going to house your breeders?
- Do you have sufficient room?
- Is the temperature suitable year round?
- Will there be too much noise?
- Is the area easy to keep clean?
- Is the area secure to keep the birds in and the predators out?
- What can you afford? Can you afford the:
 - Cost of proper housing?
 - Cost of proper food?
 - Cost of vet bills?
 - Cost of daily time?
 - Initial cost of the birds?
- Where will you acquire your stock?
- How will you market the birds you do not keep?

My Story and How it Might Relate to You

My knowledge of bird breeding was very limited when I bought my first pair of Indian Ringneck Parakeets. I really wasn't interested in breeding birds. I just wanted a blue male Ringneck as a tame pet – one that would hopefully talk. This desire was based solely on a picture I had seen in a book. I was your typical potential bird client. After raising a few batches of love birds, I believed that any parrot hand raised properly could make a great pet. The Indian Ringnecks were the right size range I

wanted and I was attracted to their sleek beauty. I did not really care if I acquired a Plum-head, Alexandrian, or Indian Ringneck. I just knew I wanted to hand raise the bird myself and did not want to purchase through a pet store. Why do I even bring this into the discussion? Because I want to highlight how a breeder responds to potential buyers makes a huge impact on the success of selling into the pet market.

During the weeks I spent calling breeders listed in the back of *Bird Talk*, I also spent time scouring book stores and libraries (pre-internet access). The common theme was that the libraries had very limited texts with none devoted to *Psittacula* and book stores had even less. Only one breeder I called explained the difference between the species. She also explained what she had available. None of the breeders tried to call me back when I left a message even when I said to call collect and gave hours I would be available. Needless to say, the breeder who took the time with me has remained a good friend. Our bird breeding relationship has been beneficial to us both over the years. This all occurred 16 years ago.

Now that I am the breeder, I try to be patient and remember my ignorance and frustration purchasing my first bird. I use this knowledge to better serve the people who are my prospective clients.

Since a blue baby was outside my set budget at the time, I agreed to buy three green babies. During my time searching for my bird, I also found other people who wanted a hand raised Indian Ringneck for a

pet. The breeder I purchased these babies from also offered me an older proven pair for a very reasonable price. She explained that they could produce the blue baby I wanted and they could pay for themselves in the first breeding season. I did not jump on the offer; I told her I would get back to her. What were my answers to the questions I raised earlier?

My family thought it would be a fine idea as long as I remembered this was a hobby and not a business. The moment I try to make a hobby into a business, I am miserable.

My husband and kids went to work building an aviary of my design. I read all I could find at the library. It had flaws but it was safe for the birds and never caused a problem in the 10 years I used it. It could house one pair of breeding ringnecks. It was six feet high, six feet long, four feet wide with a safety area for me to enter, check the nest box and feed the birds without disturbing them. It had adequate shelter from heat and rain for southern California.

The breeder was stunned when I called her and asked when would be a convenient time to pick up the birds. She took the time to give me as much information as possible to ensure that the birds would be taken care of properly. The blue cock was the son of her first blue Indian Ringneck and the hen was green/blue. Even though it was late in the breeding season they gave me two green babies that first year. All five of the babies I raised that year became great pets. All talked in their first year although the one I kept, Mr. Toad, gave up talking at about three-years-old.

But Mr. Toad is a "bullet proof" pet. He doesn't get upset when he is ignored for long periods. He is not very messy as far as birds go. He loves people – everyone. Mr. Toad will not bite a human even when I take him to kindergarten classes and the five-year-olds pull his long tail. He is the perfect example of a bird you want to keep around to demonstrate the best qualities of a pet

Ringneck. He sells birds for me. Everyone wants a "Mr. Toad."

Handfeeding

If you are going to sell your birds into the pet market, you need to handfeed and socialize the babies. Whether you decide to crop feed, spoon feed, or syringe feed does not matter. But, the time you spend handling each bird is critical. During the time of handfeeding the birds, two things occur. The babies get comfortable with the human contact and the person raising the birds can get a pretty good idea of the bird's personality.

Each bird's personality is so different. I use this time to begin to train the birds. The birds who have a more demanding personality will require more training to make a suitable pet. Some birds will display a personality that I am very sure will not make a suitable pet and I will set these aside to sell to other breeders. I do not want to sell a bird as a pet unless I am very sure it will make a good pet. I don't want an unhappy customer and more importantly, I do not want my baby neglected, abused, or moved from home to home because it did not turn out to be a good pet.

Handfeeding Tips in Brief

I place the entire clutch in a five gallon plastic "pet container" with a heating pad under half of it (set on low). I let the babies regulate their own heat by moving together/apart and on/off the heating pad.

I put a couple of layers of rags with no frays and then paper towels on top. I put in a loose washrag for the babies to scoot under. The paper towels get changed at each feeding and the towels at least once a day but if it is a large clutch, more often. The rags are rinsed and then put in the washing machine on a hot heavy cycle with bleach. It is important to rinse the rags well before putting them in the washer.

The babies stay in the container until they are feathered, can perch, and begin to pick at food. I

then move them to a small cage with a large door. The perches are placed at neck height when the birds are on the bottom of the cage. The birds should be sitting on the low perches by the end of the first day or they might be too young to be in the cage. I cover the cage on three sides for the first week or two. I keep a cloth towel on the bottom of the cage with paper towels on top of the cloth towel. These are cleaned as they were in the pet container.

As soon as the babies are moved to the cage, crocks of water, pellets, seed, and fresh foods are placed at appropriate heights around the cage. Change the fresh food often. Bacteria grows quickly in this environment. Defrosted corn/pea/carrot mix is usually what the babies will eat first.

It is at this time that I really begin to work at socializing the birds. I keep the babies in a high traffic area of the house. Either the kitchen or my office is suitable in my home. When I am in the room the door to the cage is left open and the birds are allowed to explore. If they fly, they are returned to the cage or placed on shoulder. I make sure to cuddle, kiss, and turn upside down the babies many times a day. I hold them on their backs cupped in my hands until they relax. I cuddle them until they are used to these motions.

It is between this time and when the birds wean that I determine which are not going to be suitable as pets. The birds that are going to make the best pets are the ones that are:

- clamoring to get out of the cage
- following you around
- cuddling on the shoulder
- showing extra signs of intelligence.

All of the babies will strike out and threaten to bite when they are frightened. Never back away or withdraw your hand. This is the best time to train them not to bite and not to be frightened. Do not try to work with the bird for more than about fifteen minutes at a time. Always be firm and consistent. Try to return the bird to

his cage on a good note while at his best behavior so that his cage does not become a reward for bad behavior. Many people make the mistake of returning the bird to his cage when he misbehaves, therefore reinforcing the undesirable behavior.

Babies are allowed to go to their new homes when they have been weaned fully for two weeks, have enough flesh on their breast area, and are trained to sit on a shoulder and sit on a hand.

Breeding Stock

We all dream of having a new mutation spontaneously appear in one of our clutches. But in reality we need to buy the best stock with the best genetics we can afford. We work from that stock on developing the best birds. These should be our goals regardless of whether we are hobby breeders or professionals. We want our birds to be of "type" (proper size,

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shape, conformation proportions, feather), we want them to be good breeders and socialize well with other Ringnecks. In addition, those of us breeding for the pet market must select parents that meet this criteria but also produce calm, easy to handle babies. Birds that do not meet these requirements are culled from the flock (i.e., sold/given to other breeders, retired to a flight, made into another one of my pets).

Aviculturists who have established flocks of other species may have the resources to purchase expensive stock. But someone just getting into breeding Ringnecks may need to purchase common mutations. If you are selling into the pet market, the return on the investment of unusual mutations is poor. From my experience, people like to buy green, blue, or lutino birds for pets. People do not want to pay much more for a white-headed white-tailed blue bird than they would for a blue. Not in the price range that the birds generally go for.

In general expect to get no less than \$100 for a green and no more than \$300 for a blue or grey in the pet market. No use in selling the expensive mutations into the pet market. I do not feel this is good for the overall trade.

I have been successful purchasing proven pairs as well as buying young birds to pair up (and wait a few years). I have also had mixed experience with these methods. So I would like to see an article in this journal from someone with much greater experience than myself on the issue of purchasing proven pairs, young birds, or converting pets to breeders. But regardless, the important part is that you must have good healthy stock where the birds are compatible and breed well.

Information to Have Ready

Information is more readily available now than in the past. Keep a source list of this information that you can mail or give to people who inquire about your birds. The better informed they are the better bird

owner they will become and the better home your bird will have when it leaves your care. Remember, this information is a sales tool. Include sources for information about Indian Ring-necked Parakeets as pets (www.mresource.com/Birds). This will be helpful to dispel the notion that Ringnecks are not suitable as pets.

When I was first doing my inquiries and research, 100% of the Ringneck owners/breeders/experts I spoke to told me Ringnecks would not make good pets even if hand raised individually, and that they would revert back to a wild bird very quickly. I now have many sources to dispute this; my own breeding pairs are good examples.

I direct people to my web site for information on how to care and handle the birds after they leave my care. Before I built the web site, I gave each new owner a booklet I wrote along with a hatch certificate and a picture of the baby when first pulled from the nest. It is just as important with pet birds to keep good records. You never know when one of these will end up back in your aviary as a breeder someday.

Wing Clipping

Wing clipping is a very emotional subject and therefore subject to much debate. I have very mixed feelings about it. Here are some of the pros and cons that I address with prospective bird owners:

I do not clip wings until the bird is paid for in full. Though it is easier to train the bird with clipped wings, I have had too many buyers over the years renege and not pick up the bird. If the wings are clipped I cannot sell the bird to be placed in a flight. I am then forced to keep the bird until it sells or until the feathers grow out the next year and it can fly.

Another aspect of why I prefer to wait to clip wings is that I found that many clipped birds do not develop either the flying muscles or the coordination to fly. Pets converted to breeders that had their wings clipped never fly as well as those who never had their wings clipped.

Also, because of the lack of development of the shoulder and chest muscles, the wing tips cross at the tips. This would not be acceptable if the birds were to be shown. Lastly, I don't find it to be a major factor in the keeping the birds tame. All my pets are fully flighted but restricted to my office for safety reasons.

On the other side, I feel clipping wings for a family pet is a much safer way to keep the bird. If let loose, the bird has less chance of flying out an open door, into a window, or getting out of reach. I clip so that the birds can glide down to the ground and not fall like a rock. If the bird is frightened or determined enough, it can fly to safety.

How Does a New Breeder Market Her Birds?

In this section I am referring to new breeders who have never marketed animals before. People experienced in breeding and selling other animals will already have a good idea of what they want to do.

I suggest in starting small. Babies from one or two pair are easier to sell than having 30 babies to sell the first year. Take the time to learn and grow your business. Since my discussion is geared to the pet market, we will assume that the babies are going to be pulled for hand-feeding at 10-27 days. This will allow for two clutches a year per pair (though I suggest you double clutch each pair only every other year). On the average I get eight babies a year from a pair. So, starting small you don't have a huge number of babies to sell. But the cost of marketing per bird can be high.

Let us look at some of the ways I have marketed my birds:

- Magazine ads
- Bird clubs
- Posters and flyers at pet and bird stores
- Word of mouth
- Web sites on the internet

Magazine ads include classified ads in the *Bird Talk* (monthly), *Bird World* (yearly), *AFA Fast-ads*, *ABA*

Journal, and other journals that take free or paid classifieds. If you decide to advertise nationally, be prepared to ship your birds. In *Bird Talk*, you will reach the largest audience looking for pets.

From all sources you will get a high percentage of inquiries used just to compare prices or to learn general information. This alone can be costly. When you place your ad, note in the text whether you are willing to ship, include the color you have and age/sex if known. Include a phone number and e-mail address.

If you do not plan on returning long distance calls left on voice mail be sure to note this on your voice mail greeting. If you have a voice mail service that allows you multiple voice mailboxes, set one up especially for your birds. Have your bird information sheet near the phone so that you can save time by not having to search for it.

I have found that when I place an ad in *Bird Talk* (usually December through February), I will continue to get residual phone calls for about two years. You don't need to advertise all of the time to get results. This should help with the budget.

I do note in all my advertising that I am "taking orders" for the next season. The majority of my bird sales are from people who have waited months for their special bird. Some of these people still send Christmas Cards and "Mother's Day" cards from the birds.

Bird clubs and word-of-mouth provide an excellent venue for selling birds. Join bird clubs and get to know other bird people. This helps you develop your reputation and get exposure. Learning about other types of birds and other bird owners can also enhance your knowledge of your birds. You can gather ideas to improve your aviary and skill raising birds. Become a supporting sponsor of your local bird clubs. Get involved and become known.

Create colorful posters and fliers of what you have coming available and post them anywhere you can. The local feed store where I

purchase seed has a bulletin board. All of the local Petcos and Petmarts have bulletin boards where you can place your advertisement for one week. Even the local grocery has a message board. Talk up your birds at all of these places. These ads can have much more information than a classified ad. Mine include tear-offs on the bottom with my name, phone and "Indian Ringneck Babies for Sale." I include a graphic of an adult bird in each of the colors I will have available. I might include a picture of a baby. Like advertising a car, I include the features that will help sell the bird. "Perfect Working Person's Pet," "Hand Raised, Socialized & Tame," "Parents on Premises."

My best success in selling birds has been over the Internet. My real world occupation involves computing services for small companies. Because the world of computing is ever evolving, my skills must grow and improve to keep pace. Creating the site for my birds was an early experiment. It is intended as an

information/education site, but the by-product has been countless inquiries a week on obtaining one of my birds. Though my site involved setting up my own web server, firewalls, connections to an ISP, email server, and designing the site, almost anyone can set up a site at their current Internet Service Provider (ISP) for no additional cost.

After the Sale

You've sold a bird and the new owners are coming to pick it up. Do they have a travel carrier suitable for the bird? Explain why they need one. Is their cage appropriate for the bird? One-inch wire bars are spaced too far apart. Have you discussed wing clipping? How about diet and training? Can they call you with technical support questions? I feel that your responsibility doesn't end when you've sold the bird. You need to decide how to handle many other situations that any breeder needs to address whether they sell into the pet market, wholesale or to other breeders. ➔



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