

Teaching Parrots to Parent Their Own Chicks

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The latest BCV (Bird Clubs of Virginia) Convention in March 2002, has prompted me to write this. Many of the speakers were saying how important it is for parrots to be socialized with their own species, and that we need to start parent rearing for our future breeding stock. My husband and I have successfully taught a pair of Indian Ringnecked Parakeets to feed their chicks, when they would incubate, hatch, but not feed. We have also gotten three separate pairs of Goffin's Cockatoos to wean their own chicks. One of these pairs was proven when we received them, but had been conditioned to having the chicks pulled for hand feeding at 2 to 3 weeks old. They plucked very heavy if left any longer, just like 'tiels.

First of all, you need to start with a compatible male and female bird of the same species. A good diet and proper enclosure are also a necessary. Forced pairing is not recommended, unless it is a very rare bird and you have trouble finding mates. Most people cannot afford the luxury of a large flight to allow natural selection, or the number of birds needed for that.

If you must force-pair the birds, start by having them side by side in similar cages. Put their food dishes so that they are near each other, so the birds will eat together. This will begin a good common ground of eating together. If you can, let the birds out to play together, supervised. Depending on the species, either the male or the female may naturally be the dominant one. With the cockatoos, this will be the male and with the ringnecks, it's the female. If the dominant bird lets the other bird enter his or her cage without problem, you're probably safe to introduce them together to a new, neutral cage. If one is much more dominant, you may want to introduce the submissive bird to the new cage or flight first, then add the dominant one. If other birds are around, you may also see posturing as to protect the mate from outsiders. This may take several months or even a year, before the birds will be comfortable caged together. It is also best to start the intro, after mating season, so there is no pressure.

Get to know other breeders of the species, and learn everything you can about the birds, including diet & habits in the wild. The next thing, only you can do! GET TO KNOW YOUR BIRDS. (This may actually be the most important step!) All birds are individuals, just like you and me. What are my birds' preferences? What's normal for my bird? Do not feel compelled to check the nest box all the time. This actually makes some pairs very nervous, can make them break eggs, abandon the nest, or just not set the eggs properly. You

may prevent your pairs from feeling comfortable and secure enough to even go to nest. (How would you like someone barging in your bedroom, every time you and your mate get intimate?) If your birds incubate, but won't feed, some push the chicks aside, and keep incubating; put the chicks back with the eggs. Do this until the parents catch on, sit on the chicks and start feeding. Ideally catch them out of the nest to do this. Only chase them out if it is absolutely necessary, or you don't hear any feeding action, but know there are chicks. Make sure the cage is stuffed with food at all times. When feeding chicks, the birds need lots of soft food to make the crop milk; millet is also a favorite for parents while raising chicks. I feed mine veggies around the clock when feeding chicks, and add probac if using frozen or cooked beans and rice mix, to keep them from growing the wrong type bacteria and this will help to establish good flora for the chicks.

Ideally, when they hatch the first clutch, pull all but the youngest chick for hand feeding at about 3 weeks or a little longer as long as the parents are feeding them all well. Leave the youngest for them to wean. If you are not the one who got the pair to the point of being a proven pair, they may already be conditioned to having the chicks pulled at 2 to 3 weeks, and may not feed past then, or abuse by over preening. Try letting them keep the chick a few more weeks each time they hatch a clutch. On some of the larger parrots, and cockatoos, you may only get one or two eggs, and the parents may only feed one chick. In nature that 2nd egg is their insurance. Many times the 2nd egg will not hatch, will be destroyed, or it simply disappears! We may be disturbing them too much. If this is the history with your pair, try to subsidize the 2nd chick with a little formula, and put him back in the nest. They may still let the 2nd chick starve this time, but the next time, you can bet they will feed it. This is especially true if you have given your other pairs the opportunity to wean their own. The pair needing assistance will also catch on from the others in your flock. They all communicate and know what is going on, better than you do. Most of all, just remember, not to disturb the pairs too much, especially while breeding. Keep a regular feeding schedule, so they know when and what to expect to eat. This makes for a better comfort level. Happy parent-rearing!

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