

Co-Parenting of The Keel-billed Toucan

Text and Photo by Regine DeRobert, San Diego, California

In 1995 I acquired my first pair of Keel-billed Toucans. Imported from Nicaragua by Jerry Jennings of Emerald Forest Bird Gardens, they are part of a Cooperative Breeding Program for toucans, known as the "Toucan Preservation Center." The Keel-billed toucan is found from southern Mexico and includes central America to Northern Columbia. As I found while researching toucans, not a lot was known about them. Before I could even pronounce Ramphastids, I found very few articles and those that I did find were mostly found in the AFA Watchbird back issues

I was determined to make the surroundings for my toucans as natural as possible. The flight which is 20 feet long and eight foot wide has a building at the rear. The flights are surrounded by potted bamboo plants along with other tropical plants, such as bananas. Misters are set to simulate rain, and the toucans love to sit in the mist and enjoy the shower.

In addition to the plants, a bamboo reed fence meets the wire for added privacy and a natural look. It also helps to prevent a raccoon or other critter from reaching in with his paws, and recently (for added security) it was extended to include the side on which the morning sun appears. The fence now reaches all the way around the aviary complex without obscuring the sunlight. The wire is the same gauge as is used for parrots but the spacing of the bars of the flight is 1/2 inch, so that a raccoon paw can

not reach in, although raccoons do have claws three inches long.

The nest is a palm log which has been hollowed out and a slice of the log serves as a lid on which a tropical plant rests. The plant helps to prevent the toucans from attempting to enter via the top (knocking the lid off, so to speak) while they are working the nest. The food dishes were placed close to the nest log which enabled me to keep an eye on the nest and what is inside. This was helpful in co-parenting, as I believe my being near the nest became a natural thing. It helped the parents as well. The nest log is four feet high and rests on the floor of the flight, giving me the opportunity to see into the nest as I approach the food dishes.

The breeding behavior begins in spring and one can usually find sawdust on the ground from the birds tapping the nest with their beaks. The male will feed the female and some will chase the hen around the flight, making repeated visits to the nest while purring. I have even seen the male place his head and beak over the female's back as if to give her a hug.

Incubation of the eggs begins with the second egg and only takes 16 days for toucans. The first baby Keel-billed was hatched June 7, 1998, and with my bucket of crickets ready for the first sound or sight of a piece of eggshell I was ready.

Encountering a piece of shell on the floor, I walked to the side of the nest where the food is located. Depositing the fruit, I then checked the food and looked down into the hole of the nest as I passed by. The hen did not come out. Leaving, I deposited a treasured piece of grape at the opening. In this way I communicated to the hen that I, like the male, am feeding her. I left the bucket of crickets nearby and the male began taking crickets to the nest. It was not long until I learned to put a



Keel-billed Toucan.

small heavy rock in the center of the bucket, as it easily tipped over with the parents hopping around the edge.

Within a day or so I was able to peek in and see the baby usually in the afternoon when the female, due to the heat of the day, is out. This was the beginning of my little experiment to attempt to hand feed the baby in the nest. Would the parents allow it?

It seemed that they found the schedule and checking perfectly normal, so on a gut feeling and unspoken intuitive understanding between the female and myself, I first fed the baby when its eyes opened on June 28. As I opened the top the female flew to my elbow at the perch. I slowly with my right hand reached down and found the chick willingly excepted the papaya.

At the same time I could see that the mother at my left elbow was watching carefully, ready to attack. She relaxed as she saw I was feeding her baby and, having been on her tiptoes watching, sat back on her perch. From that moment on we have always had a special relationship and acceptance which included her purring sounds when I brought her a treat or she wanted me to know she was ready to nest again.

This was indicated to me by her going to the second nest in the back, and thrusting her beak into the hole, and purring her happy contented approval, and of her wish to do it again.

I continued to hand feed in the nest thinking it may produce a parent-fed baby who was also hand fed and partly tame as well. I succeeded and the male is today a normal but calm Keel-billed which should make an excellent breeder.

On August 1, 1998 the pair

went to nest again and this time produced two female babies which hatched on August 18. When the sisters fledged on Oct 3, after also being hand fed from day 3, the first-born picked on his sisters. During this time I was learning a lot from

the birds and also picking the brain of poor Jerry Jennings about such things as where did the third egg go as it had disappeared without a trace. Jerry was very supportive and we shared information and theories.

I will never forget his reaction when I told him I was being allowed to hand feed in the nest. "Can you send me a picture of that, with the parents looking on," he asked? So I went out and as I fed the baby with my right hand, I took a picture with my left. In order to get the picture of the parents in the background looking on, I needed to enlist the next most familiar person. A friends eight year old daughter, Jacklyn, entered the flight with me and took the picture. A future aviculturist one day, or perhaps a photographer, she stayed by the door, and captured the picture.

As seeing is believing, Jerry Jennings congratulated me.


I wish I could do this with macaws, I said. And, strangely enough, I *am* now doing just that with my Scarlet female, and a one year old male, both raised by myself. It will be two more years at least before I know if this is going to work. I work with the birds every day, and I believe I will be allowed to do so.

I went with my instinct. I would not try this with just any pair of birds, but as always, there are exceptions to the general rules. I believe if filling the feed bowls near the nest site is an everyday routine, the birds from early in their lives will find it perfectly natural that you are near the nest. It will facilitate the checking of the nest of eggs and young.

The next time (feeding the two sisters) I began feeding and weighing at two days of age. Little toucans raise their heads and open their beaks wide. The stimulus seems to be the touch on top of the head. The parents feed them clinging to the side of the nest or from the opening.

At the age of two days the babies appear pink but look more like a baby crow or a hawk, with the beak not developed to its characteristic length.

The following year, two little Keel-billed babies were hatched on June 19th. One of the two babies was found the following morning dead. I removed it from the nest leaving the one baby and unhatched two eggs in the nest. The babies like to lay their heads over the eggs that



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are unhatched. The dead baby's head was "squashed" (I can not find a better word) and it was apparently between the unhatched eggs and the other baby.

Had I not removed it, it would have been possible to come to the conclusion that the parents ate the baby. I have heard many stories. It is my belief from the experience I have had that they will eat a dead baby or an egg which fails to hatch, but if food is on hand they do not eat live babies.

I like to take in a bucket of crickets or the "KBC" special as I call it, a day before the eggs are to hatch. Call it insurance and peace of mind that there is enough "live" food. The baby hatched on June 19, 1999 was not only hand fed once a day by me, but also weighed daily beginning June 21, 1999. This was Jerry's request and on day two of its life she was removed each morning and weighed as I nervously watched the female for signs of aggressiveness, or attack.

She reacted as if it were perfectly normal to remove her baby, feed it, and weigh it. The male stood back and did not appear to be bothered by it. The babies appear to gain a steady 5 grams per day, for the first two weeks with me feeding one piece of papaya and one soaked kibble each day.

I have only been attacked once, by the female, because one of the babies sustained a beak injury which was bleeding and needed emergency care. The little one let out a shriek as I scooped her up and the female flew at me in attack. I was bleeding as I exited the flight with the injured bird. It was not serious though and I had turned from her attack not wanting to let go of the injured baby. The new baby is the sweetest and funniest little thing today. It is quite an experience having her flying about the house and trying to play with baby Scarlet Macaws, who appear frightened by her.

I will have to portray sometime in the future what living with a tou-

can is like. I will say this for now, it has been one of the most rewarding things I have done in my life. They don't need to talk, they are playful, and humorous with their antics.

I have found that each bird is unique, and that in the attempt to co-parent, it helps if one does not have too many birds, as the small breeder has more time to watch and develop a relationship with the birds. Trust is the first thing that must be accomplished. Making the birds happy is the second. If they feel secure, happy, and trust you, they will begin to speak to you in their own way by non verbal communication such as body language, and vocalization such as the purring or the loud cricket sound they make when excited, or indicating an intruder, be it crows or humans.

I give credit to the bird, for sometimes it is they who will teach us. We have to know how to listen and analyze what we see and sense, and to give feedback to the bird that we understand its behavior, in which a two way conversation is then possible. If you have ever traveled in a country in which you do not understand the language, but you begin a conversation with someone using sign language, pointing, drawing, and speaking with your hands, then perhaps you can understand how the language barrier can be overcome. The female Keel-billed is an exceptional bird and I give her a lot of the credit. The experience began as an experiment. I would have backed off if I had felt that the birds were concerned with my hand feeding in the nest, or weighing the babies. If I had not tried, or felt that I could try, I would have never known that I could. It is pretty basic, nothing ventured nothing gained. A little luck helps, as well as an open mind and the lack of preconceived ideas about what we can and can not do.

In navigating unbroken waters, it is always helpful to have a map, a bit of experience, an open mind, and the ability to listen and to see from another point-of-view. ♦

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