

Controlled Breeding Quarters

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There are many advantages in controlled breeding quarters. The best reason is that the birds can be kept in breeding condition any time of the year, and most of the parrots will go to nest two or more times a year and any month of the year if the babies are pulled at an early age for hand feeding.

The outside weather may change drastically from day to day with heat waves, cold spells and storms. This, in outside aviaries, can mean losing the young in the nest or not going to nest at all. This could cause the loss of a complete breeding season.

The indoor breeding quarters are much safer for the birds. When one escapes, it is still confined to a small area and can easily be caught. Dogs, cats, wild birds and animals cannot scare or kill them. Also, being quartered inside where they cannot be seen or heard should keep vandalism and robbery down, and the neighbors happy.

With the inside breeding quarters, it is much easier to keep a check on the birds with convex truck mirrors, one-way mirrors, and video cameras with monitors. I always carry a small diary and write all the important activities that are going on with each pair. In this way, you can soon tell where each pair is in the breeding cycle.

There are some disadvantages to the indoor quarters. By far, the worst is disease. For this reason, large numbers of breeding pairs should not be kept in one room. If there is more than one room, each room should have all its own tools, and when entering another room, antiseptic precautions should be taken. If new pairs are being put into an established breeding room, they should be quarantined 30 to 60 days in another building. At this time, each bird should be checked by a good veterinarian for parasites and any other visible trouble. There should be stool samples taken and checked for any contamination. The blood should also be checked to see that it is in good condition.

Another disadvantage of an inside bird room or breeding quarters that bothers me more each year is the noise. When a couple of macaws, cockatoos or amazons start screaming all at one time, it can get a little upsetting. To bring the noise level down so it does not bother me, I use a cylinder ear plug. They use these on shooting ranges, factories, and around airports. With these in your ears, you can still hear a whisper or answer the

telephone. All the loud noises are brought down so that they are no longer objectionable. These are called Sonic Ear Valves, and come in small, medium and large sizes. They are put out by Norton Co., Cerritos, CA 90701.

A lot of thought should be given to the selection of your breeding pairs. For my own stock, I spent considerable time and money to find tame and docile stock. The birds being in such close quarters have to be very calm at all times. If there is just one African gray that is a growler, it can upset all the other birds and make breeding almost impossible. It isn't only the African gray that does this. Macaws, cockatoos and amazons will all do it but in different ways. A bare-eyed cockatoo at the Brookfield Zoo used to give a warning call just to upset the rest of the parrots in the building.

When you use tame birds for breeders, you have to reject them. Just feed and water them, and when they come around, ignore them. By doing this, the tame bird will go to the other bird in the cage and they usually soon become friends. I have only had one female African gray that would not pair off. She would fight with the first two males, and the third male was faster than she and was able to stay out of her way. She has never paired off but I think that with a very aggressive male, she would.

With the tame birds, you cannot play with them. If you do, the other bird usually gets very jealous and will either attack you or its mate. Once they go to nest, usually neither bird will want you around. I have one African gray that was hand-tamed within a few minutes after I pulled her babies. She will not tolerate me looking in the nest box when she has eggs or young.

One of the important things is to be sure that you have a pair. There are a few ways to be sure that you have a pair. One is to have them surgically sexed, and the other is to get a proven pair that have produced young. I bought a proven pair of double yellow-headed amazons, and after having them over six months, they had not gone to nest. They were taken in and surgically sexed, and they turned out to be two males.

Now I will tell you about the setup that I have for my parrots. They are kept in the basement of our home. The first thing that was done was to put a sealer on the cement floor so the droppings and food particles

cannot penetrate into the cement. With the sealer on, it is much easier to scrape and sweep the waste off the floor. Then, when the breeding season is over or slack, it can be scrubbed and disinfected. When the birds are moulting, I use a heavy duty shop vacuum cleaner. This vacuum cleaner has a 2½" hose and it takes a pretty big feather to plug the hose.

For heating, there is a gas fired forced-air space heater that has a sealed combustion chamber. This means all air for combustion is drawn from outside so that there is no chance of gas or carbon monoxide getting into the bird room. The heated air is forced through a partition into the bird room. On the other end of this partition is another hole that is on the floor. The air is drawn through this hole and circulates back through the space heater to keep the temperature at about 73° at all times.

If you are planning more than one bird room, it might be better to go to a hot water heater or a forced-air space heater in each room. This would help to keep any air-borne diseases from spreading. There are also filters that can be used between rooms which will filter out most harmful bacteria.

When the heat is on during the colder months, the air becomes very dry. To overcome this, a humidifier is used to bring the humidity up to about 55%. This helps keep a little more humidity in the nest boxes. This also helps keep the eggs from losing too much moisture. The extra moisture also helps the feathers from getting too brittle. It also helps to spray the birds with warm water two or three times a week. This helps keep the feathers in better condition.

In the summer, the basement humidity will build up to more than 60%. When this happens, molds can build up on the droppings and leftover fruit and vegetables. When the humidity builds up to 55%, the dehumidifier is turned on to keep the humidity at 55% or a little lower. There is only one trouble with the dehumidifier running, and that is because the dehumidifier puts out a lot of heat. If it runs for a few days at a time, the temperature will climb to 90° or more. So far, the higher temperature has not bothered the nesting of the birds. The only way to overcome the higher temperatures from the dehumidifier is to have an air conditioner running to keep the heat down. I was told that to have a system like this work efficiently, it has to be set up by an engineer.

The correct lighting is very important in the controlled breeding quarters. If there is too little or too much lighting, it can result in poor breeding results. In my breeding quarters, the lights are left on 15 hours a

day, twelve months a year. The system I use to do this is a chicken time clock with dimming cycle. These can be purchased from Sears or Wards from their Farm Catalog. The 15 minute dimming cycle gives the birds time to get to their roosting or nest box after all the main lights go off. It is best when you are putting in this system to put it in permanently with conduit pipe and double outlet boxes to plug the fluorescent lights into. With it being put in permanently in this way, the parrots have a harder time to get into trouble. For safety, the cords to the fluorescent fixture should be made out of BX cable. The male end is anchored to the BX cable by bolts. Having the fluorescent fixtures hooked into the system in this way, it is very easy to remove burned out tubes or fixtures. These fixtures are put onto wire lines so they can be slid out to be serviced.

The fluorescent fixtures are suspended about 5" above the cages. This is so the parrots can't reach up and move them. One 40-watt fixture is suspended over each end of the cages. The one in the back is shaded so no direct light goes into the nest box. The small parrot cages are 40"x 8'x 6' H. The fixtures are placed over the partitions so light from one fixture goes into two cages. This makes it so half of the perch in each cage is not in direct light. The 40W fluorescent tubes I use in the fixtures are Vita-lites. They are manufactured by the Duro Test Co. Eight hours of direct light from a Vita-lite bulb is supposed to be the same as one hour of sunlight.

I am also a firm believer in night lights. For this I use two 7W or 4W bulbs in series. When all the lights are off and only the night lights are on, it looks like bright moonlight night.

All aviaries that are used in the breeding room are small when compared to outside aviaries. The African gray and other birds of this size are in a cage 40"x 8'x6' H. The wire used was 1"x4", 12½ gauge galvanized before welding. On these cages, I used 3/8" pig rings to hold them together. On the side of the cages, 4" up from the bottom and 4' up, there is a ½" conduit pipe to keep the sides from bulging. These are fastened on with tie wires. On the back of the cage, I use 3 conduit pipes. One is on the very top, middle, and 4" up from the bottom. On the front, there is only one conduit pipe, 4" up from the bottom. This is the only one that is on the inside of the cage. Making the cages this way, they are all free-standing and quite solid. They are very light, and two men can move them very easily.

All of the cage hardware that has been used can be bought from Valentine Equipment Co., 9706 S. Industrial Drive,

Broadview, IL 60455, Telephone (312) 599-1101.

All cages are surrounded by ½" plywood, painted white. Only the front of the cages are open. The conduit pipe on each side and back keep the parrots from chewing on the plywood. The partitions between the cages keep the birds from being distracted or from fighting with their neighbors.

On the front of the cage is a large door for entering. This door is made 8" wider than the opening that is cut into the front. This is done so that it will make the door stronger. The door is made out of 1"x 4" mesh wire, 12½ gauge. The hinge is pig rings that are placed every 2" for the length of the door. In the large door near the bottom is a small door. This is hinged on the top with pig rings. The catches for the doors are chinchilla or rabbit catches. These are made of spring wire and come in right or left. They are put on with pig rings and val clips. All the birds are fed and watered on the floor. The water dish is a 6" rabbit water crock, and 9" cake pans are used for the seed and vegetables.

There are several reasons why I feed the birds on the floor. They scatter less food in the larger pans and there is less contact with the birds. The less contact that you have with the tame or semi-tame birds, the better the chance is that they will pair off and make good breeders. If the birds start to move the feed pans around the cage, I take a small C-clamp and clamp them to the wire. If there is a bird that is trying to bite you all the time, I fix the front of the cage so the feed and water containers can be slipped under the cage.

All cages have natural perches. One is placed about 18" from the front and one about 12" from the back. The back perch always has a branch going up to the nest box hole. The perches are notched on each end and are forced in so that they are solid. The branches that are used are hawthorn, crabapple, or apple. These if cut green and left to dry for a month or so, become very hard and it takes quite awhile for the parrots to destroy them. I sometimes use swings and chains for the birds to play with.

Lately, I have been raising the cages up off of the floor about one inch. This makes it much easier to clean. Most of the small feathers blow under the cages instead of lodging between the wire and partition where they are hard to get out.

The nest boxes I use for African grays and others of that size are about 2½' deep or more. The boxes are 12" square and they are lined with ½"x 1" mesh wire. This keeps them from chewing out and also acts as a ladder to climb out. There is an access hole a little more than halfway up from the

bottom so that it is easy to check or remove the babies. The tops are made removable so they can be cleaned easier. Around the entrance hole, there is a 1" angle iron facing out. This is put on so that it will go through the partition to the cage wire. To hold the nest box onto the cage, there are 2 eye bolts that go about 6" down from the top of the nest box and in the middle. One-quarter inch or 5/16" threaded bars are bent into a hook at the end to hold them to the cage. These are hooked over the partition and pipe. A washer and nut are put on the two rods that are through the eye bolts and tightened until the nest box hole matches the one in the partition and cage.

The cage for the macaws was made out of chain link fencing. They are basically dog kennels with 2" mesh wire that I cut up so they would go into the basement. They are approximately 6'H x 8'W x 11'long. Heavy branches are put across the corners so it is easy to walk in and clean without having to duck branches. In the back, there is a partition with a door on the right end. This partition is about 24" from the end of the cage. Behind this is their nest barrel. The door in the partition, when open, is against a 24" door in the cage. This is so you can lock the pair in the cage or nest area. This makes it easier to clean the main area or the nest area while they are locked in the opposite area. When the birds are nesting, this is very handy because the eggs can be checked for fertility. Then, if the eggs do not hatch at the proper time, it is sometimes possible to help the chick out of the shell. Also, you can keep watch on the chick to see if it is being fed and taken care of. Sometimes, more harm can be done by checking, so if it isn't a very tame pair, it is better to leave them alone.

Here is a list of things I think are important in a controlled breeding quarters:

1. Only one person to take care of the breeding stock.
2. No strangers, children or pets allowed in breeding room while birds are nesting.
3. A routine that is done daily at about the same time each morning. After this, only enter in case of an emergency.
4. Little or no cleaning in the cages when birds are nesting.
5. Only breeding stock that is calm or tame is used for breeding pairs.
6. All birds are surgically sexed.
7. About 73° and not more than 80° temp.
8. About 15 hours of light daily.
9. Night lights.
10. 50% to 55% humidity while birds are nesting.
11. Cages that are partitioned so the pairs cannot see other pairs.