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breeding LOVEBIRDS in cage or aviary

By Rainer R. Erhart
Kalamozoo, Michigan

One of the questions frequently discussed by lovebird breeders concerns the pros and cons of breeding lovebirds in cages or aviaries. Basically there is no single answer, because the choice not only depends on the species but also on the available breeding space.

My experiences with lovebirds over the past twenty five years form the basis for most of the ideas in this article, but I have tried to incorporate successful practices of other aviculturists who I have befriended in America as well as Europe.

Every species of lovebird has its own breeding preferences in the wilds of Africa and knowledge of these preferences should give us our initial clues as to how to breed them in captivity. Only after the stock has become semidomesticated should we attempt to alter some of these preferences in order to make them fit better into our own breeding environment. A good example is *Agapornis pullaria* (the redfaced lovebird) which chooses an arboreal termite mound as its breeding site. When first attempting to breed wild-caught *pullaria* we must match this nesting environment as close as possible. However, well-established, aviary raised redfaced may be tempted to breed in less-complicated nest boxes, filled with peat or similar material.

As a general rule those species without white eyerings (Madagascar, Abyssinian and redfaced Lovebirds) breed in single pairs, their nesting cavities being widely separated in a forest or forest savanna environment. Interestingly enough these same three species also do best in captivity when bred in single pairs. The peachfaced lovebird and the white eyeringed species (Fischer, blackmasked, Nyasa and blackchecked lovebirds) are all colony breeders and a number of pairs will occupy large weaver nests. Some also occupy closely spaced nesting cavities in one single tree such as the baobab. These last five species therefore have no difficulty adjusting to a colony-type breeding arrangement.

In my own aviaries I have basically followed the natural breeding prefer-

ences of lovebirds, but as you will read later on, I have also experimented with different arrangements. All my Abyssinian lovebirds of past years (I have none as of this moment) I have bred in single pairs in aviaries six to eight feet in length, three feet wide and nine feet high. This species becomes very aggressive during the breeding season and doesn't tolerate other birds in the aviary. Several friends also had good success breeding the Abyssinian in large flight cages (see the AFA Watchbird, Dec./Jan. 1980).

The Madagascar lovebird is the most timid of all the species I have kept; hence it settles down much faster in small flight cages. If given a choice it actually prefers a box type cage. In these semi-enclosed cages it quickly selects a nest box and settles down to commence with the breeding activity. I have never kept more than one pair per cage or aviary, although I don't find them particularly aggressive toward other birds.

I have never bred redfaced lovebirds, but have corresponded with breeders who have. Most have kept them as single breeding pair but some success has been recorded under colony style conditions (see Prestwich, 1957 Avicultural Magazine, Vol. 63, 1).

Until recently all my peachfaced lovebirds were bred colony style in aviaries measuring 8' x 3' by 9' high. Each aviary holds between 3 or 4 pair. This arrangement has produced more consistent results for me than any other. A few breeders in California also have recorded good successes in very large aviaries with as many as 20 or even 30 pair per aviary. Such large numbers obviously limit any control breeding. On the other hand a number of California breeders have successfully changed to cage breeding which has allowed them to set up many more breeding pair per given area. Individual cage breeding, however, has also increased their workload.

My Fischer's and Nyasa lovebirds are all bred colony style and I really don't intend to change that arrangement. I have long learned that "the more the merrier" applies particularly to the Nyasa. Breeding results improve significantly if many pairs are kept together and if the colony is disturbed as little as possible. Ralph Small achieved some of his biggest successes keeping as many as 15 or more pair per aviary. Unfortunately, the number of Nyasa have declined significantly and one rarely encounters large breeding colonies.

My experiences with colony breeding are summarized below where I have

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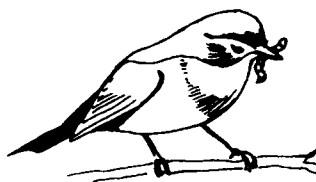
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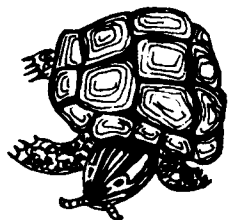
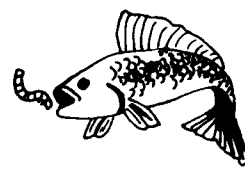
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listed both the advantages and disadvantages.

While traveling in Europe last summer I saw a modular system of individual breeding cages that were not only functional but also very beautiful. Unfortunately the price of this unit, including shipping, was prohibitive and I began to look for alternate options. What I finally came up with is a unit which is as practical and space saving as the European unit, but easier to clean, easier to move and at about one fourth the cost. I was fortunate to find all materials needed for this unit right in my own hometown through "Corners Limited."

My basic unit is shown in Photos 1 and 2. It consists of four cages, each measuring 36" by 18" by 12" deep. The entire cage unit is designed to fit through a standard door so it can be easily taken outside for thorough washing after each breeding season.

The bottom of each cage can be outfitted with a galvanized metal tray, though I prefer the unit without trays. Instead I use a heavy pliable plastic sheet similar to the plastic used as runners for carpets. A thick plastic prevents the birds from destroying it, yet it is clear or transparent enough to let light shine right through to the bottom cage. Metal drawers always give the bottom cages a very dark appearance. Another advantage of the soft plastic is that it can be rolled up easily, taken out through the large cage door and then washed thoroughly in the sink. Any dirt which is spilled from the cages and falls to the floor is easily swept up once a day and presents no real problem. On the whole I find this breeding arrangement very hygienic and breeding success has been very good.

One of the very unique features of this breeding unit is the horizontally placed nest box in the upper right hand corner inside the cage. This nest box is made of 3/4 inch pine, measures 10" by 7" by 7" and has a 2" diameter entrance hole. The nest box slides in and out on a simple tray and can be easily inspected by partially pulling out the box and then lifting the hinged lid. (see Photo 2). Eggs and young will always be in the front part, away from the entrance hole. None of the boxes have been fitted with a landing perch at the entrance hole, yet the birds instantly adapt to it, often disappearing into the box within a few hours after having been introduced.

Presently, I am using this arrangement with a control breeding program of a new mutation and I am somewhat excited about the results. All young are removed from these breeding cages as soon as they are on their own and are



These photos show the author's custom built multi-level individual breeding cages. Photo on opposing page shows how the nest boxes can be pulled out for observation.

placed in an aviary to strengthen their flight and to prepare them for next year's breeding program.

Again let me summarize my experiences with cage breeding:

Advantages:

1. Colony breeding saves time during watering, feeding and cleaning.
2. The competition of several pair in one aviary stimulates breeding activity; often all pairs within one aviary will commence breeding at the very same time.
3. The fact that laying and hatching commences at about the same time it allows for easy switching of eggs or young should that become necessary.
4. Young birds leaving the nest, quickly learn through competition and imitation. They become stronger birds and are much better flyers than those raised in cages.
5. Total output per pair has always been very high under colony style conditions.

Possible Disadvantages

1. Occasional serious attacks have been observed on newly fledged birds. I have found, however, that strong young rarely get hurt or killed, and

the only young birds which are not protected by their parents are those too weak to chirp for help.

2. Control breeding can be a problem. Lovebird's don't always act like loving, pair bonded birds.
3. Removal of one bird for health or other reasons can be a real problem since it disturbs the entire colony.
4. Colony breeding requires more space than cage breeding.
5. Birds raised in an aviary are somewhat wild and don't easily settle down in a cage.

Important Hints for Colony Breeding

1. You should carefully select birds which you want to breed together.
2. Pairs should be of equal age. Don't mix young inexperienced pairs with old breeding pairs.
3. All birds should be introduced to their aviary at the same time and you should closely observe them for a day or two.
4. Include more nest boxes than breeding pairs.
5. Provide more than one feeding dish, especially if you feed soft nestling food during the rearing of young.

Most aviculturists suffer from the chronic problem of "not enough space." I am certainly no exception and to solve part of my space problems I decided last year to switch some of my peachfaced breeders to individual cages. I had seen many successful attempts, but basically didn't like the setup for aesthetic reasons. Since I am not a commercial breeder I like my birdroom to give me some visual pleasure when I return from a day's work. I certainly don't like a chicken coop-like arrangement. But that's obviously a personal point of view and each breeder should solve that prob-

lem according to his or her own taste or pocket book.

Advantages:

1. This is an attractive unit and is custom fitted to my birdroom to save space.
2. It is easily cleaned and therefore functionally hygienic.
3. The nestboxes are safely tucked inside the cage, yet are easily checked on a daily basis.
4. Some of the more timid birds have a much higher success rate of raising their young.
5. There are no problems of control breeding.
6. There are no problems of catching young from one unit without disturbing the other birds.
7. You eliminate any fighting between breeding pairs.
8. Young birds seem to be more calm and thus adjust better to a cage environment once sold to other breeders who basically use cages.

I really have not found any disadvantages with this individualized breeding unit, though I have had a few pairs which absolutely refused to commence breeding. Once they were back in their old accustomed aviary they quickly went to work. Birds, like human beings, obviously have very definite preferences.

During the next breeding season I will try to expand slightly and will test if other species such as *fischeri* will adapt freely to this new breeding arrangement. However, the conversion of some of my aviary space to individual breeding cages does not signal a total conversion. I find both methods attractive and successful, but I recognize that each serves a different function, works better for certain birds and utilizes space in a quite different manner. ●

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