

# Notes on Breeding and Hand-feeding Hooded Parrots

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The hooded parrot (*Psephotus chrysopterygius dissimilis*), is one of the most outstandingly beautiful members of the Psephotus genus. This little bird is actually a subspecies of the golden-shouldered parrot (*Psephotus chrysopterygius*). The range of the hooded parrot is quite restricted; from the Macarthur River, west to the Arnhem Land plateau in the Northern Territory of Australia. The wild population is on the decline most probably due to illegal trapping and various other man-made and natural disasters. For these reasons, hooded parrots are quite rare in collections today.

The adult male is turquoise blue over most of the body, rump, and cheeks. The feathers are highly iridescent, giving the male a jewel-like appearance. The wing patches are bright yellow. The head has a black "hood" which extends down the nape and blends into the back which is greenish-black. The tail and flight feathers are also greenish-black, central tail feathers are tipped in white. The vent feathers are crimson. The



A pair of golden-shouldered parakeets (*Psephotus c. chrysopterygius*). This is the nominate species of which the hooded parakeet is a sub-species. The golden-shouldered is seldom if ever found in aviculture.

adult female is a soft blue-green overall, with the wings and tail feathers being olive green, the central tail feathers are also tipped in white, and the vent feathers are a lighter shade of red, or salmon pink. The young birds resemble the females in coloration.

The hooded parrots available to aviculturists today are domestically raised individuals, and are descendants of European stock. Hooded parrots have a reputation for being delicate and difficult to keep alive, much less breed in captivity. This delicate nature can be much compensated for by handling the birds according to details outlined in

this article. In our experience, these methods have greatly improved the survival rate of baby hooded parrots.

Hooded parrots in the wild nest in termite mounds from May through January. The babies hatch with a light down feather, which wears off quickly, leaving them quite naked. A heavy down feathering would actually be a problem since the termite mound generates enough heat to keep the babies warm, thus freeing the parents to seek food at greater distances from the nest. The termite mounds provide the perfect nursery, being constant in temperature and free from drafts.

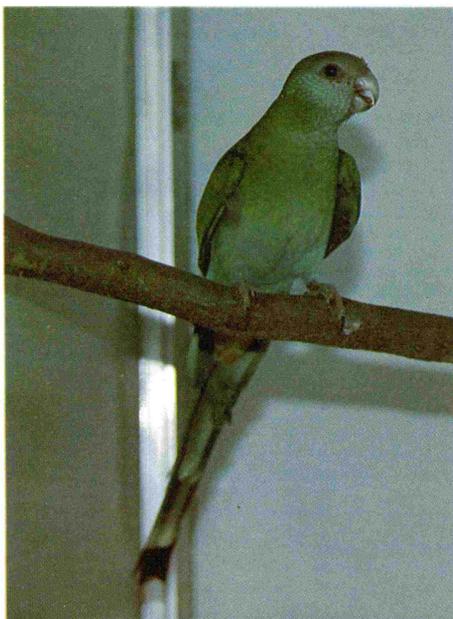


Photo by R. Lyn

Female  
hooded  
parakeet



Photo by R. Lyn

Male hooded parakeet (*Psephotus chrysopterygius dissimilis*).

Hooded parrots have developed a very interesting survival technique when the nest is disturbed by predators. They will “sacrifice” one or all of the babies. Usually, if disturbed, one baby will be killed and dragged up to the entrance of the nest and left for the predator. This deceptive tactic gives the rest of the babies a better chance of survival, including the parents, since they might not be able to escape if the attack came when they were in the nest cavity.

The babies feather very slowly in the termite mounds, since heat retention is not a problem, they also do not acquire an under-coat of down feather. The parents are devoted and keep the babies stuffed throughout the time they are in the nest. When they fledge, the parents continue to feed the babies and will gradually wean them. The parents tend to tolerate the babies being around for longer periods than most other parrots.

Nature’s solutions to the problems of hooded parrots in the wild have created some interesting problems for aviculturists who wish to breed them in captivity! Most unfortunate is the fact that the biological clocks in hooded parrots do not adjust when they cross the equator into the northern latitudes. The breeding season is still May through January, and encompasses both our hottest and coldest months of the year. The hooded parrots in Southern California tend to go to nest around October or November, with the babies hatching in December and January—our winter! This is further complicated by the fact that the hen can’t tell the difference between a nest box and a warm termite mound, and she gets off the nest to help collect food with the male for most of the day. The naked little babies chill and die very soon.

*Problem Number One:* How to keep those naked little babies warm while “mamma” is out shopping for groceries? Fortunately, hoodeds do not require large boxes (One type of nestbox which has proved to be very successful is 6” wide, 6” deep, and 12” long, with a five inch platform step on the inside.), and heating the box is not only possible, but preferable to installing active termite mounds in the aviaries! Some breeders have used tiny resistors, mounted in 8” or 9” dog dishes (the plastic type). These bowls are attached to the outside bottom of the nest box, and when the power is turned on, the resistor heats the underside of the box and consequently raises the temperature inside the box so the babies don’t chill. You may even consider hooking up a thermostat to

automatically turn on when the mercury dips below a certain point. Other breeders have much more elaborate heaters built into specially constructed boxes.

If you are lucky enough to have a good pair of Bourkes on eggs, you could foster the eggs or babies, although the odds are against having Bourkes on eggs at that time of year. There are, of course, those hens that successfully raise their babies from hatch to maturity with no problems at all, and no heat either.

Finally, there is also the alternative of handfeeding when the babies are about ten days old. This will coincide approximately with the time the hen begins leaving the nest for extended periods. Pulling the babies in for handfeeding has by far been the most successful in terms of survival and increased production.

*Problem Number Two:* How to check the progress of the babies (to know when to bring them in for handfeeding), and avoid the problem of “sacrificing babies”? Unfortunately, this one is not so easily overcome. Your experience with birds, knowledge of the specific pair(s), coupled with your powers of observation are about the only things to help you here. The parents will tolerate only minimal inspection of the eggs, and only if you do not drive them off the nest to accomplish this. Using a calendar for a guide, you will need to estimate the date the eggs should hatch. Ideally, you will have enough notes and data to judge about when the last egg should hatch, and plan to bring the babies in when that last baby is ten days old. However, if you make a mistake in your calculations, and the babies appear too young when you pull them, you should consider bringing them in anyway. It is possible to handfeed them as young as five days old. Even at ten days old, it is surprising how tiny the hooded babies are.

It is vitally important to keep them at a constant, warm temperature while brooding. If the babies are too cold, they will shiver; if too warm, their tiny wings will droop and they will pant or “breathe” rapidly. It is a good idea to have the brooder set up well in advance, and check the temperature at various locations within the brooder, eliminating variations as much as possible. We have found that the babies do much better if brooded in the dark. They are active little birds and if allowed enough light to see the interior of the “nest,” they spend a lot of time running every

microgram of weight off! A dark towel over the top of a brooder will do very nicely and still allow enough fresh air through.

We use cardboard boxes, which are purchased at the post office, as brooders. In them, we place our special “hot-water-bottle heaters.” We fill the old-fashioned half-gallon milk bottles (somewhat hard to find these days), with water. The opening at the top of the milk bottle is about 1-1/16”, and is the perfect size to hold a 100 watt aquarium heater steady. The heater is turned up just high enough to keep the lower half of the bottle warm, although the top of the bottle will be quite hot to the touch. This should be set up in advance so you will have time to regulate the temperature and make sure the bottom of the bottle will not be hot enough to burn tender skin. The “hot-water-bottle heaters” heat the air in the box and provide the babies with a warm “mother” to snuggle up to. These have worked out very well for us with other birds besides the hoodeds, although as the larger parrots grow and become too curious, we have had to remove these “hot-water-bottle heaters.” The larger birds are strong enough to chew wires, and pull the bottles over, to be either scalded by the hot water, or squashed by the weight of the bottle. Little birds, of course, are not strong enough to do this, so there is no problem using them with hoodeds. Just be sure that your boxes are placed on level and stable surfaces if you decide to use this type of heating set-up.

A word of warning: *Do not* run an aquarium heater in the open air, outside of water. Aquarium heaters are designed to heat *water*, not air. If the glass tube gets hot, and there is no water to draw the heat off, it may explode, sending fiberglass material and glass shards in all directions. Additional information appears on the aquarium heater package.

Since feathering is so slow in hooded parrots, and since they do not have protective down feathering, the babies will need to remain on heat even after the fledging age.

We do not recommend the use of shavings or any similar material to absorb the droppings in the brooder. The babies will pick at and try to ingest anything they can reach. If ingested, shavings may block the opening from the crop to the proventriculus, causing death from starvation; or sharp edges may damage the delicate tissues inside the baby. Additionally, we have noticed that babies brooded on shavings tend to



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have bacterial infections more often than babies which are brooded on other materials. Disposable diapers also present problems for these babies because the tiny toenails pull up "strings" from the diapers which wrap around tiny toes—most often this will pinch off a toe before you can get to the next feeding. The best material is a terrycloth towel or washcloth. Use the velvet side or one that has very tight loops. Towels can be washed and disinfected with bleach in the washing machine.

When the babies are fairly feathered out and begin flying up to the edge of the box when the towel is lifted, it's time to begin weaning them off of the heat. The first cage is very small, 12" x 12" x 12", and will hold three to four babies. These special first cages are constructed out of 1/2" x 1" welded wire, and have a door on the front 7-1/2" x 6". The cage is covered in black and white newspaper on two sides and the back. On top we place a clamp-on type light fixture for heat and light. This light is on twenty-four hours a day, so use only new bulbs—you would not want to have a bulb burn out in the middle of the night and chill the babies. The size bulb you should use will be determined by observing the babies' reactions. If they appear too cold, change the bulb to the next higher wattage; if too hot, reduce the wattage used. Check them about every ten minutes for at least the first hour. Light bulbs heat up small areas at different paces, largely depending on the surrounding environment. A 100 watt bulb may heat up the cage to a comfortable temperature in about 10 minutes, and then, because of the restricted airflow on the sides and back of the cage, may cause the area to become overheated, within the next ten minutes, possibly killing the babies. Check often, and make all necessary adjustments.

The babies will be skittish at first in the new environment. We have found it helpful to put a light towel over the front of the cage for the first day or so. We continue to put a washcloth on the floor of the cage for the first several days. This will give the babies a chance to get used to gripping wire, and toughen up the feet. The babies will still need to be handled about four to five times per day at this stage. When the babies begin picking feathers on each other, or appear to really "mean it" when they fight, it's time to move them into a larger cage.

The next stage is a 1/2" x 1" welded wire cage that is 18" x 18" x 24", again

this cage is wrapped in newspaper on two sides and the back, and part of the top, with the light fixture overhead as before. As with the first cage, you will need to check about every ten minutes to be sure the temperature is comfortable, and you may want to put a towel over the front for the first day or so while the birds get used to the new cage. You will probably only need to feed them three to four times per day at this stage.

Gradually, over a period of many days, we begin the removal of the newspaper starting at the sides. Alternately, we decrease the size bulb, until the babies have ultimately adjusted to open sides and no heat from the bulb. If the babies appear too uncomfortable, or are inactive for any longer than four hours, or do not eat, go back to the last stage for a while and try again another day. You will also be gradually weaning them off formula and on to seed and soft foods during this stage.

When the hooded babies are fully on their own, they can be moved into a small aviary, a 2' x 6' x 6' is a perfect choice. Suspended cages are fine too.

You can expect to spend from four to six months handfeeding and weaning your baby hooded parrots from the time you first bring them in. Patience is the key here and, of course, close observation.

We have found that many handfeeding formulas can be utilized to raise hooded parrots, however, a greater success has been achieved by thinning a normal liquid formula with one-third to one-half more water. We have successfully raised many more Princess of Wales and hooded parrots by increasing the water content of our formula. These birds' digestive systems draw the water content out of the formula (while in the crop) at a much faster rate than the solids pass through. The higher solids content in a formula doesn't digest completely, leaving a hard, dry ball in the crop; this will have to be carefully worked through with more liquids. When the solids content is lowered by adding more water, the babies' crops will tend to enlarge. If the crop is filled completely, it becomes pendulous and drops lower than the opening to the proventriculus. Muscle action slows and eventually stops. . . food in the crop will sour. The problems will seem to snowball from there, and you may end up losing the babies. We strongly caution against completely filling the crop when using a thin formula for these birds, and recommend that the feedings per day be increased instead.

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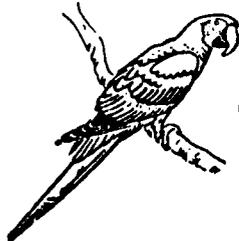
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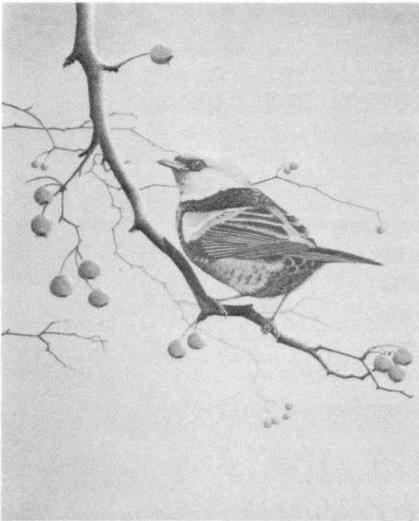


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Anywhere from six to eight small feedings per day will be necessary to begin with. Check to be sure they are digesting regularly.

Fortunately, by ten days old, the babies are old enough to sleep through the night without being fed. Space the feedings out evenly between 6:00 a.m. and 11:00 p.m. As the babies grow, there will be an increase in the amount of formula you will give them at each feeding and you will notice that it will take longer for the crop to empty. This is your cue to adjust the feeding schedule by eliminating one feeding, again spacing feedings evenly throughout the day. Continue this process until weaned. We begin introducing soft foods when the babies go into the first cage, and you will begin reductions in feedings as they eat more and more on their own. Here again we stress taking your time. These little guys look and act like they are more mature than they really are. Our experiences have taught us that the extra effort of stretching out the period of handfeeding has made all the difference in the world.

The soft foods we begin offering the hooded babies in the first cage is our regular soft food mix for cockatiels. It consists basically of cooked brown rice, ground dog food, frozen corn, beans, and peas (thawed first), sprouts, such as wheat, and lentils, and grated carrot. This is mixed up and fed in small dishes, approximately one teaspoon per bird. We also offer them toasted "O" cereal. The soft food is fed daily from this stage on. By the time the babies are old enough to go into the next cage, they are offered seed, usually a cockatiel mix is best; however, we like to add extra canary. When they begin to really eat the seed, take the toasted "O" cereal away and do not offer it again. They like it too much and it will be much more difficult to get them to eat seed if the cereal is still available.

As the young males begin to mature, they become aggressive toward each other, and you should plan on housing them separately. The male parent may also be very aggressive toward the young males if the parents are allowed to raise their babies. Watch closely for any signs of ruffled or torn feathers, and separate the birds promptly.

Do not give babies water in a dish until they no longer require heat either. They love the water and can get chilled if wet. We use tube-type drinkers.

The use of leg bands for identification on hooded parrots is definitely *not* recommended at any time. Even if you find a band to fit perfectly, the

edges are sharp enough to sever not only the skin, but the bone too. Hooded parrots have very little tissue and circulation in the legs, and any damage is slow to heal at best. Even when the damaged leg appears to be healed, it often turns black with gangrene and falls off. If the bird survives this, it will be useless as a breeder. These birds are far too rare to take chances with—please, no bands!

As with most birds, the best insurance afforded the aviculturist is preventative maintenance. Keep all feed dishes clean, and free of bacteria and molds by not allowing uneaten food to remain and spoil. Wet or damp seed is a wonderful medium for growing all sorts of nasty "creatures," keep it as dry as possible, especially in winter. We have found that the infant mortality rate dropped considerably when we treated the parents for bacterial infections and worms prior to breeding season. Most avian vets will be happy to provide you with medications and dosages, based on test results.

It is advisable not to move hooded parrots when they are moulting either. The stress is enormous and they may die from this. Wait until the moult is completely over before changing the environment.

Adjoining aviaries should be double wired, to prevent hooded parrots from attacking other birds through the wire. They will defend their aviary space vehemently all year long, or attack and chew toes of other male hoodeds if within reach.

The hooded parrots demonstrate a great desire to nest and reproduce. They make excellent aviary subjects as they are fairly quiet and do not have the large space requirements some other parrots do. A 2' x 6' x 6' aviary is adequate for breeding them. They often become tame enough to eat right out of your hand!

With proper care and handling, a pair of hoodeds should be able to produce from four to six babies per clutch, two to three times per year. You will, of course, have to pull babies in for hand-feeding to achieve those kinds of numbers.

This is one bird that desperately needs the close attention of captive breeding to increase its numbers. We hope that more aviculturists will take up the challenge of breeding this special little bird to insure its survival. While breeding these birds is not quite as simple as raising budgies or cockatiels, captive breeding is no longer out of reach for the aviculturist. ●