

Breeding the Brown-headed Parrot

by Fred and Robbie Harris
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Back some years ago, Fred and I came across some brown-headed parrots (*Poicephalus cryptoxanthus*) at a retail bird farm. There were two of these birds in a cage which was set off to one side of the shop. We spoke to the owner and he told us that those particular species of birds were not for sale. He told us that the two brown-headed parrots had been surgically sexed and were both males.

Fred and I are intrigued with the African parrots, as we have been breeding many African species for

sometime now such as the Congo and Timneh greys, Senegals, Meyers, Jardine's and even our new pair of Cape parrots had just laid. I was now determined to own the brown-headed parrot species. I begged and pleaded with the shop owner (one of my more persistent traits when I really want something) as I explained to him that two males did him no good just sitting in the cage. We asked him to name his price and he did and out came our money.

We were given our choice as to which

bird we wanted. I carefully examined the two birds and selected the one which I felt was a hen, not a male (even knowing they were both surgically sexed as males). I have picked out all of our Senegal and Meyer's hens by sight and after successfully breeding these birds for many years I truly felt I knew these birds well. The reason I try to pick out hens is that generally in the *Poicephalus* family these birds usually run quite heavy in males, so why not start off with a hen whenever it's possible. Home we went happily with our first brown-headed parrot, now our search would start for more. We made many local and long distance phone calls, all leading nowhere.

Not long after we purchased the new brown-headed parrot, a friend from Texas phoned us to talk about birds. While we exchanged bird news of things going on, the unbelievable happened. He informed us that he saw a brown-headed parrot at a pet shop in a cage with a Meyer's parrot. I called. Sure enough, they said that they had one brown-headed parrot, the sex of the bird was unknown. I told the shop salesman that I'd take the bird regardless of its sex and asked him to ship the bird to us, which he cheerfully did.

Soon we introduced the new bird to the first brown-headed parrot we purchased. Of course this was done under our very close supervision in case the two birds would not get along. The two seemed to hit it off right from the start, as if they were meant to be together. I felt strongly that they were a pair; that is, the sexed male was probably a hen and the bird from Texas appeared to be a male. The two birds looked identical in coloration and size except that the first bird had more of a petite face and head features. We set up an appointment with our veterinarian to have both brown-headed parrots surgically sexed in a week.

That following week we took the birds to the veterinarian to be surgically sexed. The brown-headed parrot from Texas was sexed out as a mature male; and not to my surprise the first one we purchased was surgically sexed (this time by our vet) as a hen. I felt quite strongly that she was indeed a hen. Now we were on our way, for we had a true pair of brown-headed parrots that appeared to be in good health.

The pair was quarantined for thirty days away from our breeding stock to be sure of their good health status before mixing them with our established stock. This was done as a safety precaution, and is practiced with all newly purchased



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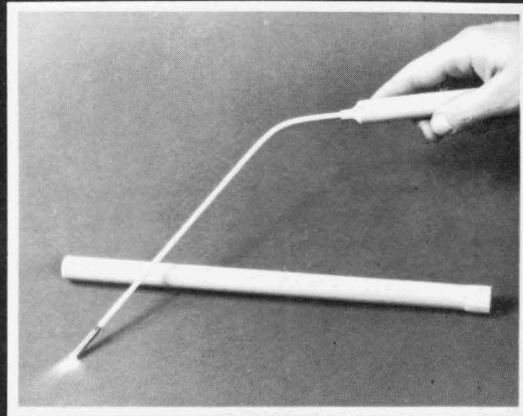
birds. After the quarantine, the pair was set up in a breeding cage outdoors which measured 18" x 18" x 36" long; it was summer and the weather was quite nice to acclimate the birds to our southern California weather conditions.

Three metal rabbit feeders were attached to their cage containing dry seed—medium sunflower seed, safflower seed and parakeet mix. A crock containing fresh water was kept in their cage for drinking as well as bathing purposes. Being like many of the other members of the *Poicephalus* family, the brown-heads like to bathe daily. A standard wooden cockatiel nest box which contained a three inch layer of pine shavings was attached to the pair's cage. They remained in this set-up for some time showing no interest in the nest box or breeding. On a daily basis, the pair received a bowl of various sprouted seeds and a large assortment of fresh fruits and vegetables consisting of apple, oranges, spinach, peas, corn, grated beets and carrots, squash, peaches and many other fruits and vegetables that were in season at the time. By the end of each day all soft foods would be completely devoured.

Even with an excellent diet and being in perfect plumage, they just had no interest in breeding. We decided to try another location, so we moved them to a different locality on our breeding farm. The birds were moved to a cage identical to the one they had been housed in but this time they were placed in a more secluded and darker area. Within just a few days the pair started to show a dramatic interest in their nest box. Shavings were being tossed out of the box daily, and sometimes I would even find a bird in the box. It was the male during this stage that seemed to spend a great deal of his time in the box rearranging the shavings. His strong interest in the nest box went on for a couple of weeks, with the hen spending much of her time outside the box.

One day, while doing my routine nest box inspections, I found the hen in the nest box and the male on the outside perch standing guard at the front entrance. As I peered in the box the hen came out and I noticed that she was now swollen in the vent area. The next morning a very round shaped blood stained egg was found inside the nest box. I kept a close eye on the pair during this time. They seemed to spend much of the day outside of the nest box, and when I inspected the box the eggs just did not seem very warm to the touch. Being the pair's first clutch I decided to remove the two eggs about a week after

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Brown-headed parrot chicks (Poicephalus cryptoxanthus) just weaned.



A brown-headed chick at 47 days of age.



Hand fed chicks become quite tame.

they were laid. I put the eggs in our incubator in the house. At this time candling the eggs revealed nothing, just clear looking eggs with a healthy looking yolk and shell. After the eggs were in the incubator for three days, I candled them with our Proble-lite egg candler and it was obvious that both eggs were fertile. Apparently the hen was not incubating her eggs, otherwise the eggs would have shown some signs of life by the time I brought them into the house.

Twenty-four days after being placed in our incubator one egg hatched. That same day the second egg started to hatch but this chick was pipping from the small end of the egg, which can be a problem. This chick needed assistance in hatching, which I gave it. Within twenty-four hours the second chick emerged from the egg, being just slightly smaller than the first. Both chicks had light grey fluffy down. Toenails were grey and the upper portion of the beak was dark grey with the lower half pink. The first chick hatched weighed 5.9 grams and the second one was 5.4 grams.

At two weeks of age, the chicks weighed about 18 grams. Dark quills could be seen developing under the skin over the entire body. The feet were pink; lower beak pink, upper beak was pinkish-grey being darker at the tip and lower sides; cere was pink having light grey surrounding the nostrils; toenails were dark grey and the longish down was white with a little greyish to it. At this time their eyes were just opening. At one month old the chicks weighed 35 grams. They now were developing their thick (1/4 inch) secondary down which was two shades of grey being medium and dark in color. By the time they were two months old they were almost all feathered and weighed around 85 grams each. At thirteen weeks of age and weighing 95 grams the two brown-headed parrot chicks were eating sunflower seed, safflower seed, parakeet mix and the soft food diet that I feed all my birds. The feathered chicks look very similar to the adults having just a few minor differences, with the most obvious difference being that the youngsters have dark brown eyes. Also the head coloring in the young is slightly darker, the beak and cere are more pink in color than the adults and the feet are a smooth greyish-pink.

Since that first clutch the pair has returned to nest two more times. Each of these clutches contained two or three eggs. We hope to establish second generation breeders and help make the brown-headed parrot a more common bird in American aviculture. ●

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