

NOTICE

All correspondence intended for the editor of the Watchbird should be mailed directly to his address.

Sheldon Dingle
P.O. Box 340
Norco, CA 91760

From The Editor's Desk

by Sheldon Dingle
Norco, California

Dear Sir/Madam:

On February 3, 1985, I purchased a 7 week old yellow nape Amazon from a very reputable pet store in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Although I have owned a Blue and gold macaw, an African grey, a Double yellow head, and a cockatoo, I've never owned or raised a baby bird.

I proudly took my "baby" home, named her Cleopatra, and gave her the care as I would have a child. I followed all the instructions of the pet store, heating only the formula that I would be using at one feeding and keeping the remainder refrigerated, changing the paper in the aquarium morning and night, feeding her twice a day at the exact same time each day, keeping her isolated from my other birds, and washing my hands before and after handling. I took more pictures of her than I did my own daughter, planning to make a scrapbook of her "childhood." I took her to a veterinarian in Milwaukee for a check-up, found her to have a bacterial infection and she was given an injection daily for five days. The infection was cleared up on March 30, 1985 with Cleopatra weighing 424.7 grams.

As the weeks went on, she got bigger, grew her feathers, and became a major part of my life. She was the center of my attention. We'd play for hours; we'd "snuggle" and take naps together. I would put a satin sheet on the couch, so in the afternoon sometimes she could take a nap in style! She'd climb two flights of stairs, just so she could be with me. I loved her so very much....

The only problem I ever had with her was trying to get her to eat on her own. All the suggestions the pet store gave me, such as putting seed in a dish in her cage, soaked monkey chow in another dish, handfeeding her bits of food, just didn't work. She would only eat from her bottle, only when I fed her. At this point in time, she was 17

weeks old. I called my regular vet for other suggestions. He was out sick and the receptionist referred me to another vet at another clinic. I telephoned him on April 16, 1985 and explained the situation. He told me that I was over-feeding her for her age, that I had obviously spoiled her rotten and if I didn't give her an incentive to eat on her own, she never would, and I'd have serious problems with her the rest of my life. He told me to immediately start feeding her *once* a day until she was full, and the "rest of the time she's on her own." He also advised me to leave Lafeber pellets in her cage, which I did. He said I was to "ignore her cries of hunger." After the first seven days, I was then to only feed her until she was half full, once a day, and by the end of that time she should be fully weaned. He assured me she wouldn't die of starvation, when I expressed a concern eluding to such.

On April 22nd, I called him again because she refused to even nibble at the pellets left in her cage, and took her in to be checked. He weighed her (334 grams), said she was a "little underweight, not bad!" This is the ONLY thing that was done. (He did not know what her previous weight was on 3/30, and at the time neither did I.) At that time I also informed him that she slept alot (which she never did before), that she drank an excessive amount of water (approximately one half dish per day), and that she had regurgitated her food, a small amount, on two occasions. He told me she was spoiled and felt "there was nothing wrong with her." I reiterated to him again that this bird meant as much to me as my daughter did, and I wanted nothing to happen to her. I told him if he felt there was the slightest, remotest, possible chance that there was something wrong with her, test her, x-ray her, take blood tests, whatever it takes. He insisted she was "spoiled," and gave me a different formula to give her. (The formula was 3 parts Lefeber pellets, 1 part monkey chow, 1 part honey, and water to mix.)

The following day, April 23rd, I called him again because her stool looked like "black tar." He didn't feel it was a problem and thought there would be improvement by Friday. He said if there wasn't, to call back. On Thursday, April 25th, I called my regular clinic again, found my regular vet had returned, and took Cleopatra in.

She weighed 308.4 grams, and they kept her there at the hospital. The doctor ran tests, found a bacterial

infection, and treated her with Amikacin. Improvement was only seen in the gram negative infection after switching to trimethoprim/sulfa. He ran blood tests, did gram stains approximately twice a day, x-rayed her, and tube fed her five times per day. He came in on his day off; he came in at 10:30 p.m. to feed her—he tried so hard. She continued to regurgitate her food and lose weight. I would go and visit her at night, taking her out of the incubator, holding her, talking to her, petting her. I'd stay there for hours, trying to breathe life into her little, frail body. She had to live, she just had to. I needed her so much. She would seem to get a little better, and then take a turn for the worse. Everyone at the clinic was hoping for her, everyone prayed for her.

On May 3, 1985, weighing 284 grams, at 8:30 a.m. she died. A post mortem exam was done and the cause of death was listed as *starvation* and *kidney failure*. Her right kidney was enlarged twice the normal size and her left kidney three times the normal size. A pathologist's report showed her kidneys were so grossly enlarged due to the bacterial infection, not a congenital defect. The rest of the vital organs were normal, as were her air sacs and crop.

Although she had an infection, which she responded to when finally treated for, could she have fought it off, had she not been suffering from malnutrition? Did she not want to eat on her own because she was "spoiled" or sick? Why did the second vet not know from looking at her and feeling her breastbone (which was protruding) that she was *severely* underweight? What is the *correct* procedure for weaning a baby, so the result isn't death and starvation? Should Cleopatra have been checked before even beginning the weaning process? What can I do now? I would sincerely appreciate an answer to these questions, your opinion and/or any advice that you or your readers could possibly offer, either publicly or by private response.

The death of my little pride and joy still tears at the very core of my soul. The reason she died gnaws at my guts.

Thanking you, sincerely, in advance for your attention and cooperation.

Respectfully,
Janice L. Giles

Mt. Prospect, Illinois

My Dear Ms. Giles,

I know there are thousands of readers who would put their arms around you and comfort you in your

anguish—experienced AFA members, my wife and I included, who have suffered the anguish, anger, and guilt that the death of a baby bird can arouse.

Everyone who has fed many baby birds has his or her horror story to tell. We have all made tragic, often stupid mistakes to the cost of the small birds that depend upon us for their very lives. My wife and I have shed many a bitter tear over the death of a baby bird that shouldn't have died. We know so little about our birds. And experience is gained at such high cost.

For years we have raised and hand fed many species of psittacines. We felt we were seasoned aviculturists but two pairs of cockatoos thrust us instantly into avian kindergarten. We were forced to incubate eggs, hatch and handfeed rare cockatoos. If you haven't done it you can't imagine the labor, time, anguish, expense, and errors involved. The sleepless nights, long-distance phone calls, midnight trips to the vet's office, giving shots to day-old chicks with my great clumsy hands, feeding every two hours, chicks pipping the wrong way in the egg, chicks not pipping at all, incubators and brooders malfunctioning—the list is endless—have taken a great toll upon my wife and I and upon everyone else who hand feeds psittacines from the egg.

Fortunately, my wife and I complement one another in these matters and we have survived and even achieved some success at hand rearing baby birds. She alone handles the incubation and hatching (a process that terrifies me) and I give shots when necessary. We both feed. We both feel the joys and traumas.

Your first attempt cost you a great deal. You were emotionally and financially beat up. But don't give up. Get another baby bird and start over again.

Many people have "paid their dues" and have become good at hand rearing birds. Seek their advice. You were obviously given bad advice by the second veterinarian you consulted but you must forgive yourself for that. Any novice would have done the same thing—and should have.

Most of the questions you pose are not really answerable. Malnutrition obviously complicates a bird's infection or illness but there is no way to know if Cleopatra could have won the battle even with good nutrition.

I'm afraid no one will ever know exactly why Cleopatra didn't eat on

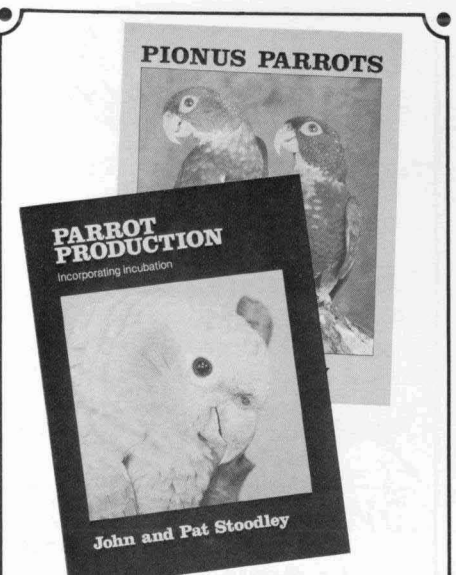
her own either. Birds differ according to species and individuals. Some seem to wean themselves overnight while others beg for the spoon for months and months. The principle is the same in both cases though—feed them by hand until they feed themselves no matter how long it takes.

Your third question (why didn't the vet know Cleopatra was starving) is hard to answer. He should have known. If he had experience with birds he would have known. If he lacked experience he should have told you so and sent you away. He seems to have experimented in an unfamiliar field with disastrous results. This fellow was either an ignoramus or a charlatan. I hope you confronted him with the end results of his work. Keep in mind, however, that even your original good veterinarian could have run into problems no one could solve. He might have lost Cleopatra too.

The correct procedure for weaning a baby bird is any procedure that works. When our babies reach the stage where they would leave the nest if they were in the wild we begin to give them various sorts of food to play with. We put grapes, cheerios, raisins, cooked corn, chopped apples, fruit cocktail, breadsticks, chopped vegetables, greens—almost any sort of nutritious soft food, in nearly any combination—in shallow dishes on the floor of a large cage. The birds are learning how to eat, perch, and fly all at once. If possible we put a gentle older bird in the cage to teach them. Monkey see, monkey do works with birds also. The really slow weaners get put in large, outside aviaries where they can perfect their perching and flying and we have to take spoon and formula to them. Many a time I've put the weaning food out and said, "Eat, you S.O.B., or die!" But my wife or I would always break down and provide a few more bites off the spoon.

Believe me, sooner or later the normal bird will refuse the spoon and go on to the soft food and seed. I have never heard of an adult bird that still had to be fed by hand. Patience is the word.

We know how the death of your bird can still tear at your soul. We have experienced the same gnawing at the gut. Time helps. Friends help also. In some of our darkest hours Bob Berry, Curator of Birds at the Houston Zoo, became a great pillar of strength that supported us—by long distance phone, no less. If tears transmit, Bob's ear got



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very wet but he taught us much and was great moral support.

What you can do now is to forget the past and get on with life. Get another baby and go for it. Call my wife, call me. There are many friends you can lean on. You don't have to go it alone. There is another baby bird waiting for you. Ed.



Dear AFA,

I have been a member for over three years now and can't tell you how much information the *Watchbird* magazine has provided during the growth of my bird breeding hobby.

The articles I like best are the 'AFA Visits.' In two of those articles you have included pictures and descriptions of hopper style feeders that are filled from the outside, provide food for the birds inside the aviary, and returns chaff and discarded seed to a container outside the aviary.

I have searched for a supplier of those hoppers but can't locate one. I tried to make similar hoppers myself but it hasn't worked out. Could you provide the address of the aviculturists who featured these hoppers so I can contact them on the matter?

Your cooperation will be greatly appreciated.

Mark Maish
Dayton, Ohio

Dear Mr. Maish,

Nothing has elicited more response than those hoppers you speak of. I know the manufacturer well. He is Mike Verner, lately of Long Beach, California but whereabouts now unknown. Mike, you should know, is that variety of genius little understood by normal folks. He has great inventive ability, is a man with a dream, has boundless energy, is an entrepreneur of the most vigorous sort. By all rights, he should head his own medicine show—indeed, I think he did. In short, Mike is a certifiable banana. But, alas, his show has disappeared. One evening he had a very nice little zoo, store, and beautiful bird breeding complex. The next morning the whole thing was gone lock, stock and barrel. I've tried to locate him but so far to no avail.

Mike, my dear banana, if you chance to read these lines please contact me. Your hoppers are in great demand. Another eccentric genius, after all, will hardly be noticed in the bird fancy. Ed.



Dear Sheldon,

Please share my letter with your readers. Perhaps we can save birds and bird owners the anguish I'm going through now.

My heart is big and compulsive. During the past 6 years I bought a bee bee parrot, a blueheaded pionus, a double yellow head, and greenwing macaw. This winter the macaw ate the Anderson windows. In March the double yellow bit me in the eye. Two weeks ago the macaw bit a toe off the pionus. Yesterday the double yellow broke a leg on the bee bee.

Obviously, sharing my life with one of these magnificent creatures should have been enough. I work full-time. My taming efforts have been inconsistent. The birds have been fighting for my attention.

I am making some tough decisions. I have to think carefully about the quality of life for my birds. The bee bee may have to be destroyed. I'll keep the seven-toed pionus and my "mate" the double yellow. I must sell the macaw. This breaks my heart. We aren't "bonded" yet. However, she is usually gentle and is beginning to talk.

Sheldon, I feel so stupid and selfish. I'm aware that owning a hookbill is a lifetime commitment.

Sincerely,
Susan Mortenson
Mound, Minnesota

Dear Susan,

Welcome, dear heart, to the world of reality. We are all stupid and selfish. Can you think of anything mankind has not screwed up? Indeed, my own family, kids, brothers and sisters have done to me and each other everything your birds have done and then some. Even my dear mother, bless her gentle heart, once accidentally sat on my head when I was a baby—for about an hour, mind you. Things have never been the same since, but I survived and so have all of the Dingles. Tough fibre, I suppose.

You really needn't get rid of your pets. Just manage them better. Invest in a muzzle or two or a whip and chair. Play with them one at a time. Provide a padded holding cage for when things really get out of hand. Feed less raw meat.

But whatever you do, hang in there. Why exchange your current problems for a bunch of new ones with which you have no experience? Ed. ●