

Birds — The Joys and Tears

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I would like to share with you, the reader, one of my most memorable experiences with keeping birds over the years. Birds are the most unique creatures on earth and I thank God and Mother Nature for this beautiful addition to our world.

When I am blue or depressed, I visit some of my exotic caged bird friends in the yard and they are so excited to see me they do all types of antics to attract my attention. When it is bleak and cold outside, I place handfuls of mixed seeds and vegetables around in favored spots in the back yard to attract the local and visiting bird population. Many cold mornings, I have a waiting group of birds lined up on the telephone wires who are so glad to see food arriving that they swoop down to the feeders without realizing that they should be frightened of me and cautious in their approach.

When spring arrives, it is delightful to find that several red cardinals and blue jays have chosen nesting sites in the trees surrounding our home. I love to sit and watch their activities when they are nest building and looking for food to feed their hungry young. By watching native and exotic caged birds, one can appreciate the beauty of all of the species of birds whether large, small, drab or brightly colored because each bird can provide hours of pleasure and enjoyment.

Speaking of enjoyment, I would like to share with you my early experience in breeding and raising Peachfaced Lovebirds. Lovebirds are a pleasure to own — spunky and independent — they fill their days by tearing up cage papers, plants, or anything else their mischievous beaks can get into around the home.

One of my first breeding pairs of birds was the Peachfaced Lovebird. I furnished the pair with a medium sized cage (18" x 18" x 15") and placed a nest box at one end. After reading several books about the breeding requirements of the lovebird, I placed runners of green Bermuda grass on the cage floor. I was immediately fascinated by the way the birds started chewing and tearing off long strips of the grass. I had read about this but to actually see the female lovebird putting strips of grass into the feathers of her back was a sight to see. As soon as she had four to five pieces of grass, she would pick up another in her beak and fly to the nest box. The female's contribution to the task of nest building far exceeded the male's as he carried his piece of grass in his beak only — no extra cargo stuck among his feathers.

Every day I placed grass in the cage and it immediately was used by the birds. "Good grief," I wondered, "how much grass can two small birds use?" I had only given them a nest box measuring 10" x 8" x 8" and, by the amount of grass they had utilized, I figured the box would be completely stuffed. Well, curiosity got the best of me, and I had to peek into the box. While both birds were out of the nest box, I gently lifted the top of the box and was totally amazed. The inside of the box was lined with strips of grass and, by carefully moving aside the top layer of grass, I noted a hollow area in the grass with a tunnel leading to the opening of the box. Needless to say, this work of art was the most amazing thing I had ever seen.

The lovebirds made sure I did not get bored with them too soon because they laid three eggs shortly after I had inspected the inside of the nest box. After noticing the eggs, I did not tamper with the nest box but duly noted the expected hatching date on the calendar. It seemed as if a lifetime passed in the three weeks of waiting. I kept thinking, could it really be possible that we would be blessed with young lovebirds?

I was too afraid to inspect the nest box during the brooding time because of chasing the female from the nest, so after the designated brooding time, I started placing my ear against the nest box to see if I could hear the sound of babies being fed. And then it happened! I heard the sound of baby birds. I was as proud of these babies as if they were my own. Being very patient and curbing temptation, I waited until I caught the parents out of the nest box before inspecting the babies.

When I moved aside the grass, I found three lovely chicks covered with down with just the hint of pin feathers showing. The chicks crowded against each other and their soft black eyes seemed to say, "Please don't hurt us." I just had to touch them. While speaking softly to the babies, I told them they were beautiful and that I would not hurt them. I slowly reached out and touched the chicks. I then quietly closed the top to the nest box and left the room.

I was so elated with the wonder of the lovebird chicks that I felt as if I would burst with pride. I guess my friends could tell, because I called them with the news.

I decided to pull the chicks for hand-feeding as soon as their pin feathers started to open. I had talked to several bird keepers and read many books so I was prepared to take the next step in raising a bird by hand. I prepared the formula as described by Velma Hart and used a small, cupped spoon to feed the babies. What an experience! I was so nervous the first few times that I spilled most of the formula before the babies could get any food, but soon motherhood took over, and I felt comfortable with feeding the chicks.

After feeding the chicks, I would place them on the bed with me and let them play. What a thrill it was to be able to touch and cuddle such beautiful babies. The three lovebird babies would march stiff legged across the bed toward me, chirping all the way. If they still wanted food, they would hop, flapping their short, stubby wings, trying to see which one could get to me the fastest. I enjoyed the liveliness of the baby lovebirds for about three weeks. Then tragedy struck. One day I noticed that the oldest baby was not as enthusiastic as the other two and did not want to eat. I called several people and was told the babies may be trying to wean themselves but to watch them closely to make sure they did not lose any weight.

The next morning, I found the oldest baby dead with the other two babies huddled next to him. Oh no, disaster. I could not stop crying. What had I done wrong? I checked the other two chicks carefully but could find nothing physically wrong and, after consulting with friends, I was confident the other two chicks would be all right. Several days passed with no problems, but then another chick started looking depressed. Needless to say, this chick was also found dead. The third chick died shortly afterwards. I cried for days because I could not understand why these lively lovebird chicks had died. I blamed myself for being so ignorant and also wished there was a doctor I could have gone to for help. However, there were no avian veterinarians in the area and, in fact, they were not even heard of during this time period.

Time has passed, and I often think of the three lovebird chicks who gave me such joy and sorrow during their short life span. I have since raised young from the parents successfully, but I will never forget my first three babies. They whetted my appetite for seeking knowledge about successfully keeping birds in captivity. ●