

# The Fabulous Derbyan a year of surprises

(*Psittacula derbiana*)

PART II

by Lyrae Perry  
Corona, California

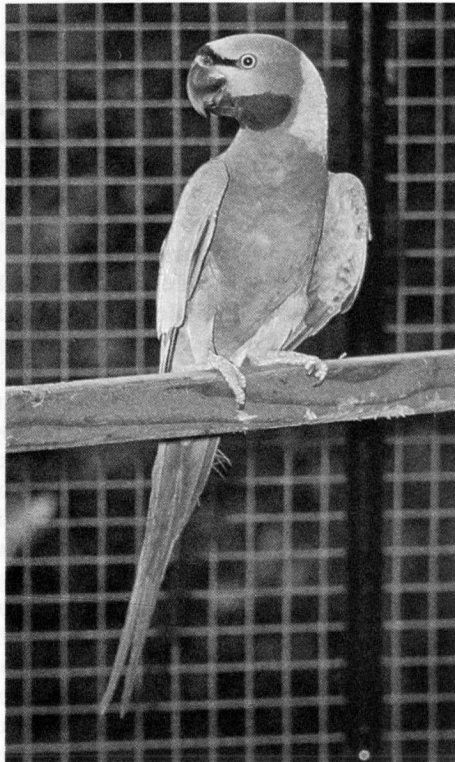


Photo by George D. Dodge and Dale R. Thompson

This photo was printed in color on page 40 of the last issue, April/May '90.

The 1987 breeding season actually began back in the last weeks of September 1986 when our Derbyans were going through the preliminaries of pair bonding. Derbyans, like the other members of the *Psittacula* genus, pair bond for only one season at a time. This makes it possible to take full advantage of all the members of a particular species for the purpose of extending the gene pool.

In October of 1986, we set up three pairs of Derbyans in side-by-side aviaries, and numbered #1, #2, and #3. The most experienced pair was housed in the #1 aviary. These birds were wild-caught and have been reliably nesting for us the past eight years. The #2 and #3 aviaries each housed a pair consisting of a wild-caught hen (mature, but of unknown age), and a two-year old domestically raised male.

1986 ended like most other years with one exception. Four days after Christmas, we found the male housed

in the middle (#2) aviary dead on the ground. (A veterinary report revealed he had died of a nasty bacterial infection.) We were extremely disappointed. The #2 hen seemed a bit distressed too, however, she was a lovely mourning widow for only a short time.

The male in the #1 aviary chewed a hole through the plywood wall that separated the #1 and #2 flights. He slipped through the opening and began to feed and mate with the lonely hen in the center flight! The #1 male continued to go back and forth through the hole in the plywood several times each day. He was feeding, displaying and mating with his hen in the first flight and also with this merry widow in #2. We dubbed the number two hen "Merry".

About ten days later, another hole appeared on the opposite wall of the center aviary. The young male from the #3 flight poked his head through and flew up to the perch to feed

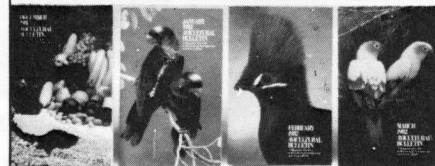
Merry! She was, indeed, a busy lady. When he had finished mating with her, he would dutifully return to his own hen in aviary #3.

The pair in #3 was the first to lay eggs, and were only ahead of the #1 pair by a few days. Each pair laid eggs during the month of March.

Two and three times a day we'd observe the #1 male and the #3 male in the center aviary at the same time with Merry. But a menage a trois was not to be. The elder Derbyan male established his dominance, badgering the young male until he scrambled back through the hole and into his proper place in #3 aviary.

On 12 occasions, we discovered the #3 male in the #1 flight! When the #1 male returned "home", he'd drive the younger one off again. The #1

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Derbyan male was willing to share his mistress, but certainly not his wife!

Two weeks passed when our Merry disappeared into the nest box and laid her first egg. She laid three altogether, and my husband and I wondered if this little lady's eggs were going to be fertile. Even more important, what if they were? Provided the eggs hatched, how was Merry going to feed those babies by herself?

Normally, it's the male's responsibility to feed the hen while she gets the job of sitting on the eggs for 28 to 30 days. Perching at the entrance hole of the nest box, the male will feed the hen throughout the incubation period. He continues to feed her even after the eggs hatch. It's six or seven days after the hatch before the male enters the box to help feed the chicks directly. At this point in their development, the chicks are nearly doubling in size and food requirements on a daily basis.

Would it really be possible for this one hen to take on the task of raising and feeding those babies? If so, how many days would she be able to keep up with the increasing food demands of the chicks? Would she instead starve, waiting for a male to show up to help feed? The more likely outcome would be that Merry would attempt feeding the chicks by herself for a day, maybe two. We were not optimistic about the survival chances for her chicks in this case. There have been occasions when a single bird has been able to take care of its offspring for a surprising period of time. But more often, unable to keep up, the parent bird allows the babies to die (or kills them) within a few days.

What may seem cold-hearted by human standards is good instinct by bird standards. Better to let one clutch die, survive and return next season when things are more favorable for nesting.

Merry would probably follow her instincts, choosing life for herself and sacrificing the chicks. We hoped she would at least feed the babies long enough to give them a good start before we had to pull them in.

The best option would have been to foster the babies under another pair. However, the other two pairs of Derbyans were on three fertile eggs each by this time. We didn't feel it prudent to try our luck with an experiment to see if Derbyans would tolerate one or two extra eggs in their nest.

None of our other Asian parakeets

were on eggs at the time. Fostering these eggs with another species in the *Psittacula* genus would be a risky venture anyway. The rest of the members within this family hatch-out stark naked. Baby Derbyans hatch with just enough down feather to irritate any other self-respecting Asian parakeet. And the fostered Derbyan chicks would be swiftly and efficiently done in.

We discussed the possibility of bringing the babies in for hand feeding immediately after each hatched. Neither of us were especially thrilled at the prospect of having to get up every two hours around the clock for fourteen days, hand feeding newly hatched chicks to get them through the first critical weeks. We've had to hand feed from day one lots of times but losing sleep is one of those things that never seems to get any easier with practice.

We decided to let Merry go ahead and incubate her eggs and hope for the best when the babies started to hatch.

Surprisingly, both males made the effort to feed the hen during the first few days of the incubation period. Gradually, it became apparent that the #1 male was the dominant feeder and the younger male was forced to stay in his aviary and take care of the #3 hen. We don't know how he managed to keep up, but the older #1 male fed his hen as well as Merry.

The babies in the #3 aviary began hatching first. About one week later, the eggs in the #1 aviary started to hatch. Merry's first egg hatched three days after the last baby hatched in the #1 aviary. We held our breath . . .

Upon hearing the peeping chicks in Merry's box, the #3 male slipped through the opening he'd chewed in the wall. He gobbled food from the goodie dish at the feeding station and flew up to the entrance hole of the box to feed Merry. She, in turn, fed her babies. Another surprise came when we found out that the #1 male wasn't oblivious to the "trespass" of the #3 male, he actually allowed it. Both males took turns feeding Merry. This truce was to be only a temporary one, and lasted a mere week after the babies hatched. When the time came for the "daddy" to get in the box and feed the babies directly, the #3 male was again driven off.

We brought in each of the clutches of babies from #1 and #3 aviaries for hand feeding when the last to hatch was 14 days old.

A week from the hatch, the decision was made to bring in Merry's babies. We avoided disturbing Merry when the chicks started to hatch so we did not know how many made it. When we opened her nest box, we found two well-fed chicks, and one egg that was partially buried. The third egg had been fertile, but it had stopped developing and died during the latter part of the incubation period. We were, however, still quite pleased to bring in Merry's two roly-poly babies!

The pair in aviary #3 recycled and went back to nest first, followed by the pair in aviary #1. Even Merry was digging in her nest box. We wondered if . . . nah! Wouldn't happen again, or would it?

It wasn't long before we saw both males again seriously courting Merry!

The #1 and #3 pairs were on eggs within 36 and 31 days respectively from the time we pulled the babies in for hand feeding. Merry unfortunately did not get a chance to produce a second clutch. She suspended all digging activities in the box when the July temperature reached 106° Fahrenheit.

During the next three weeks, the mercury bounced up and down between 98° and 104°F. We checked on the new babies often because the nest boxes have the potential to become little ovens. The combination of high outside temperature and the heat generated inside by the babies' warm bodies would likely cook them.

The tension was ended at 9 o'clock one morning when the babies were brought in for hand feeding. Not a day too soon either, because the temperature had reached 112°F by noon and was still rising. The misting system over our aviaries has the capability of reducing the temperature by at least ten degrees, but even that wouldn't have been enough and the chicks would have been lost for sure.

All of the baby Derbyans brought in for hand feeding that season grew up to be happy and healthy (thankfully), and they were placed in a single large aviary after weaning. They spent the summer learning the rules of aerodynamics and working out the pecking order at the food dishes and perches. In about a year and a half (two breeding seasons), these birds will be ready to mate and raise their own broods.

Many experienced bird breeders would be nonplussed by this account of the behavior of our Derbyans

during the 1987 breeding season. Their reaction may be a big "so what?" to a seemingly usual occurrence. This type of behavior is, after all, somewhat common in certain breeding colonies. And there are a number of other species that are specifically set up in trios to maximize breeding results. But this incident is special because it is contradictory to what could be called "typical Asian parakeet behavior".

Asian parakeets are, in general, highly territorial during the breeding season. They can be downright vicious when defending a nesting area. Missing feathers and toes are badges of territorial scraps. Asian parakeets are even more apt to be pugnacious toward invaders of their own species. Occasionally, an invading bird is killed. This may be the work of either the hen or the cock, or by a team effort of the bonded pair. Breeding and nesting is serious business to bonded pairs, and nothing had better interrupt. It has been our practice to set up only single breeding pairs in our flights for precisely these reasons.

Typically, Asian parakeets in California begin the pairing and bonding process in the month of August, and it extends throughout the following three to four months, depending upon the particular species. Pairs can be set up as late as December (or January in some cases) for breeding.

For most of the year, the hens "have a headache" and can't be bothered with the males. The males are rightly intimidated by the hens and make an effort to give them all the quarter they desire. However, when the breeding season gets underway, the hens become more receptive to the males' advances. It's almost comical to watch the males approach, back off, and re-approach many times over, each time getting just an inch or two closer to the hen on the perch. Finally, he gets quite brave and struts up to her with his wings outspread and pupils dilated. His wings are gently fluttered, he bows his head and "flashes" his eyes. His head moves from one side of hers to the other. If the hen moves too quickly and startles the male, he jumps or flies back and slowly works up the courage to approach again. The hen will finally let him approach and mate after many displays. All of the species in this genus have a similar courtship display, but each has developed its own special signature. We've also noted

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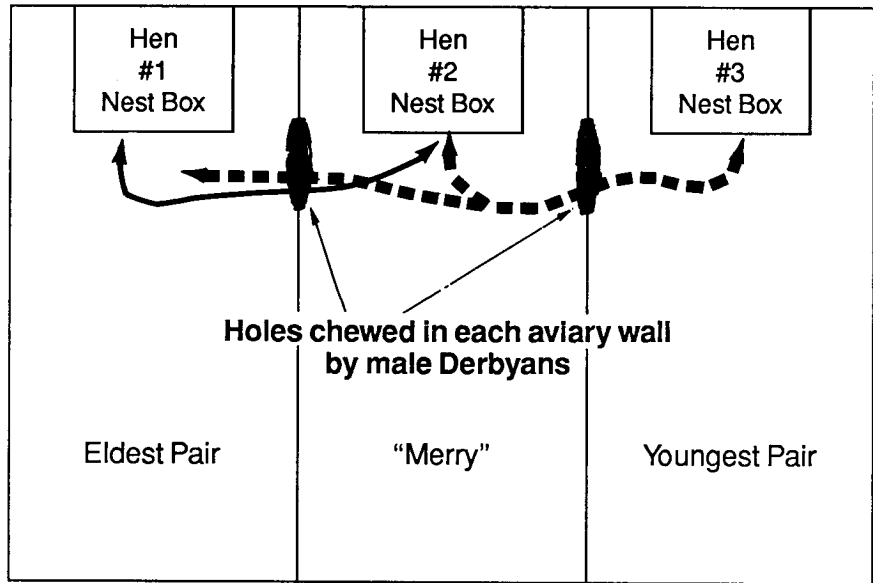
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**TRAVEL PATTERNS OF MALES:**

Male # 1 = —————

Male # 3 = ■■■■■■■■

**AVIARY MEASUREMENTS: 10' high x 8' long x 4' wide**

that each male may use a slightly different display or approach with each female.

Even though our birds are set up one pair per aviary, we generally don't place birds of the same species next to each other. We've found that better breeding results with all of our Asian parakeets were obtained by alternating set-ups of different psittacula pairs in the flights.

Almost paradoxically, we believe our great success with the psittacula genus is precisely because we did specialize, concentrating a large number of these birds in one area.

All birds can hear their own species' breeding calls, and other similar calls. Some may even be able to see courtship displays of other pairs. This seems to have a powerful, stimulating effect on all of the birds, and breeding activities of all members of the genus in the area increase.

Some breeders have working colony set-ups with plumheads (*Psittacula cyanocephala*), slatyheads (*Psittacula b. finschii*), and occasionally Indian ringnecks (*Psittacula k. manillensis*). To date, we've only heard of marginal successes with these colonies. But certainly this may be improved with time.

Our group of Derbyans functioned in a manner somewhat like a colony.

It is interesting that the #1 and #3 males crossed the territorial lines expressly to share the responsibilities of feeding the widowed hen, after all three birds had bonded with other birds previous to nesting. Both males continued to feed their own hens and babies while taking care of Merry. Additionally, both males wanted to feed Merry's babies, although it was the older male who finally dominated.

While we're not exactly converts to the idea of regularly colony breeding Derbyans at this point, this season did show us that it may be possible. Considering their cost and somewhat limited availability, it may be too risky to try to duplicate the circumstances and set-up with any other individuals, so we're not recommending that others try it. Our particular birds may have a special "group chemistry" which set the stage for the events that followed. Or it may be that we have only just now witnessed something that is, perhaps, common in the wild. In either case, these birds have shown us they are intelligent, fascinating creatures . . . and they are full of surprises! ●