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The secrets to our success . . .

Raising African Greys

(*Psittacus erithacus linne*)

by Dona Olsen and John H. Olsen, D.V.M.
Temple Terrace, Florida

We have been raising psittacine birds for eight years. The African Grey Parrot has played a special part in our avicultural experience. Luckily for me, it was the first bird I bred, hatched, and hand-raised. Our birds have been housed indoors in a controlled environment (a basement) and now are enjoying the great outdoors. Successful breeding was accomplished in both situations.

The birds were purchased from a quarantine station, surgically sexed, and paired. One pair, however, was purchased as a pair of "proven breeders." The birds were placed in 5' x 5' x 5' flights made from one-inch chain link and supported off the basement floor. Plywood partitions were placed between the flights to give the birds privacy from one another. 12" x 12" x 24" vertical nestboxes filled with pine landscape bark were placed in the back side of the flights. The birds do break the large bark chunks into small chips for nesting material. Each pair was given one nestbox, with the exception of the "proven pair." They were offered two nestboxes, one placed at each end of the flight. Each nestbox was equipped with a peephole (as would be used in a door) to observe the nest. The peephole was very effective indoors — eggs could be viewed. However, outdoors where the light is so intense, peepholes are not as beneficial. Two perches were placed in each cage, one placed to provide access to the nestbox, the other placed at the feeding station. To discourage perch destruction, 2" x 4" wood scraps were hung vertically by a double-end snap. The birds gnawed at the wood pleasurably. One shoplight was hung overhead per cage. One vitalight and one regular white fluorescent bulb were switched on a timed 12-hour light cycle. Moonlight was simulated by a small night light at one end of the basement. Basement temperature was maintained at 72 degrees year-round.

Other birds occupying the basement at the time were two pairs of Moluccan Cockatoos. The basement was only entered once a day for feed-

ing and watering. Visitors were frowned upon and thorough cleaning was performed once a week.

Within four months, chicks were hatched from two pairs of birds, two chicks from the proven pair and one chick from a newly-introduced pair. The proven pair did keep us supplied with two or three chicks three times a year. Chicks were taken from the nest at three weeks of age and hand-raised. This pair showed no preference for nestbox; eggs were laid from clutch to clutch in either box. Four pairs of birds were producing within two years.

The birds were fed Lafeber's Special Needs pellets from rabbit feeders affixed to the flights. Daily sprinklings of sunflower seeds (i.e., ten per cage) were set on a log stump occupying the bottom of each cage as the daily watering was being done. No other food was offered.

The move to Florida gave everyone a rest. No eggs were produced for a year. The birds are now in 1/2" x 3" welded wire cages 3' x 3' x 6' long. Once again the birds are side by side, with plywood partitions between flights. Two 2" x 4" perches inserted in construction brackets, affixed with stainless steel nuts and bolts, make changing perches an easy task. Essentially half of the cage is protected from the elements. One end includes a perch to the nestbox, nestbox, and



African Grey Parrots are one of the easier of the large parrots to reproduce in captivity and are extremely popular as pets.

feeding station. The back half of the cage with one perch is open to Mother Nature. The same basement nestboxes are being used. Two of the more restless pairs of African Greys were offered two nestboxes. Many of our greys are nervous and immediately head into the nestbox when anyone enters the bird yard. We rarely get to see them unless we peek out of the house through a window. These birds still produce regularly.

Neighboring birds are a mixed variety of psittacines, some of which are directly opposite the row of grey parrots. Although the individual pairs cannot see one another, they do communicate by whistling. Whistling is intensified at night during breeding. Approximately two weeks after the chorus begins, we know to check our nestboxes. It has been unusual to have only one pair of birds on eggs or chicks at a time. In Florida, our African Greys' nesting season generally begins in December and continues through June. During this period, we will get up to two clutches per pair.

It appears that our hens do the incubating while the males provide the hens with food in the nestbox. We do know that we have one hen that does leave her eggs or chicks to receive her daily share of approximately ten sunflower seeds.

We no longer use rabbit feeders for containing the pellets. The humidity and frequent summer rains prevent this convenience from being efficient. Each pair of birds is offered one half cup of Lafeber's Special Needs pellets with approximately one level tablespoon of sunflower seed-based parrot mix sprinkled on the top. No other supplements are provided. Water bowls are cleaned and filled daily.

Again, human traffic is kept to a minimum. Once eggs are laid, nestboxes are only checked at hatching. Initially, nervous parents chewed the ends off the chicks' toes when frequent nestbox inspection was done. After this disturbance was halted, all chicks' toes remained unharmed.

Our lifestyle does not lend itself to incubator hatching at this time. Our clutches most often consist of three to four chicks, rarely one or two. Hens have produced three clutches per year after chicks are removed from the nestbox, at about ten days of age.

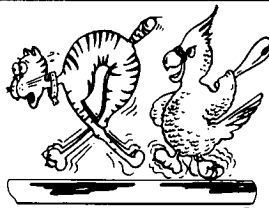
Chicks taken from the nest are fed Lafeber's Nutri Start Formula. We have never had an impacted crop, thin

chick, or calcium deficiency which results in folding fractures. This condition is common in African Grey chicks. At weaning, chicks are offered a variety of fruits and vegetables, scrambled egg, Lefeber's Special Needs pellets, Cheerios, and a small amount of sunflower seed. Cheerios and apple seem to be initial favorites.

Closed leg bands are placed on the birds for identification as they are brought in from the nest. Weights are checked and monitored to help ensure the chicks are growing adequately.

Most of our young greys are sold into the pet trade. If you are familiar with this species, you know that African Greys can have a horribly annoying growl, which is acquired in the nestbox at a very young age. By taking the chicks from the nest early, we hope to discourage this behavior.

We have held back offspring from our most productive pairs of birds and hope that the prolific genes have been acquired. Once these young birds are producing, we feel we will have obtained another avicultural goal. ●



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