

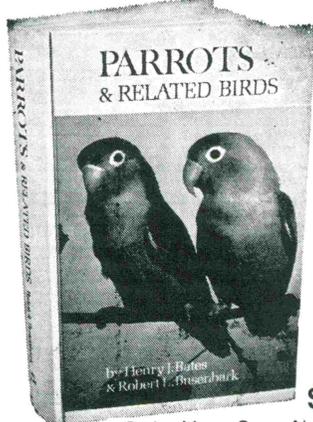
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Photo by Sherry Rind, Redmond, Washington

The males in my group have more strongly marked red and blue on the head than the females.

My Kingdom for A Hen

Mexican Red Head (Amazona viridigenalis)

by Sherry Rind
Redmond, Washington

After watching ads and making inquiries for over a year, I thought I might indeed have to trade a kingdom to find a female Mexican red head (*Amazona viridigenalis*, also green cheek Amazon) until one evening I received an unexpected call. A man introduced himself as Dave Slater and said, "I hear you're looking for a hen." My heart began thumping with true parrot-lust.

Dave is a San Diego resident with connections up and down the west coast through his bird finding service. He had heard from a fellow member of my local aviculture club after I, rather desperately and forlornly, stood up in a meeting to ask if anyone knew anyone who knew anyone who had a Mexican red head hen to sell. I did not want to buy from a total stranger, especially one who lived on the opposite side of the United States where the only red heads seemed to be available. I am too much a novice to risk the long shipping time and unknown dealers.

After naming his references, Dave opened negotiations. "\$400," he said. "I'm not looking for a profit; I just want Skipper to go to a good home."

"The most I've paid for a red head was \$300 and if you look in the Amazonia Society newsletter, you'll see the going rate is \$225 for breeders," I replied. (People being the crazies they are, red heads are not as popular as other Amazons.)

Dave related Skipper's history. She had originally been called Kipper but he thought the name unworthy of a parrot. Having tasted kippers during a trip to England, I heartily agreed. He paired her with a male who, though not much of a talker, loved to do tricks. There Skipper stood at the nestbox door, looking invitingly at her so-called mate who was busy waving bye-bye and playing dead bird to attract human attention. Dave was sure Skipper would breed with a more accommodating partner.

Though I had my suspicions about how accommodating my Pedro would be, I still wanted to give it a try. I said I would think about the price for twenty-four hours and call him back. I thought for less than twenty-four minutes. I would be crazy to refuse. Our mutual acquaintance gave Dave a good recommendation and, I found out later, she

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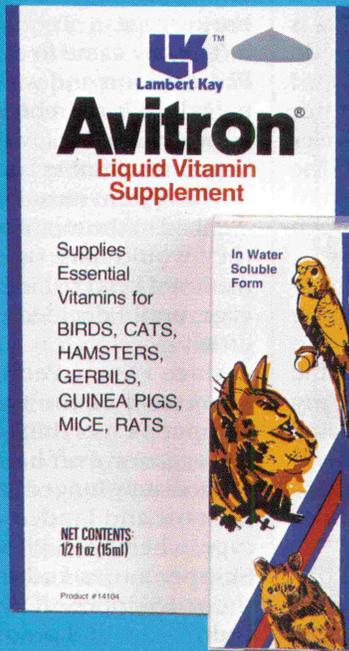
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had given him a good one of me. I was glad that he had checked on me; it meant he was as concerned about his bird going to a good home as I was concerned about finding a good bird.

Before calling back, I steeled myself. I decided to be hard, businesslike, and resolute. I would offer \$350.

“Hello, Dave? Uh, yeah, I guess I do want to buy Skipper. Do you think you’d take—” my resolve failed— “\$375?”

At the same time, Dave was saying, “I thought it over a bit more and decided to let you have her for \$325.”

You can see both of us are destined to get rich.

Not only did he reduce the price, but he also said he would personally drive Skipper to Seattle. He was planning to come up in a few weeks to deliver other birds and visit family in the area. He said he would charge me a small sum for the gas. True to his hard-driving businessman image, he ended up charging nothing at all for the delivery.

He saw Skipper installed in her temporary cage in a room separate from my other birds. I said I would give her a week or so to settle down, then take her to the vet for a check-up.

I have brought in new birds before. I know the routine. Some settle down and eat right away. My other hen, Pita, chomped away during her plane trip from Oregon, the car ride home, and was ready for a little snack as soon as she got here. By contrast, a young budgie a few years ago had not eaten for two days. Skipper did not eat that day. She did not eat the next day. I was offering her the seed diet she was accustomed to, along with the fruits and vegetables Dave said she ate reluctantly. The next day she took a few seeds from my hand but that was all. Panic! Dash to the vet!

She weighed in at a comfortable 333 gms — obviously not starving to death for a medium-sized Amazon — and tested out fine in the lab. I took her home and she promptly began eating. Maybe she just wanted another car ride?

Now for the challenge. Dave had said he had not been able to get her to eat many fruits and vegetables, certainly not pellets, and not the corn-beans-rice-kibble I gave my birds every morning. As soon as I was sure she would eat at all, I began to wean her from seeds. Aware that some birds are particularly stubborn, I prepared myself to offer these new foods every day for as long as it took. I knew some birds have to be offered something for years before they finally recognize it as food and take a

nibble.

By the time her month’s quarantine was up, Skipper was eating her corn mix daily. She practically grabbed grapes out of my hand. All the birds adore grapes. I suppose grapes are to them what chocolate chip cookies are to me. She even ate some green vegetables, though she was about as thrilled with them as some six-year-old humans are. How did I do it? Judicious use of hunger.

I wonder if some of the people who claim they cannot get their birds off seeds are afraid to let them go without food for more than four hours. This is not to say the genuinely hard cases do not exist — I am sure they do and hope I never meet one. But for many other birds, a little hard-nosedness (i.e. sheer beakiness) in the owner might do the trick. While you want to allow the bird to get hungry enough to eat its green beans, you do not want to stress it.

I never kept exact records of how long I waited for Skipper to sample something, how much she ate, and so on. I went by gut feel. I have learned the hard way that my observations of my pets *are* to be trusted. I know when a bird is droopy or happy, even when I cannot explain how I know. People who spend lots of time watching their birds become this kind of observer.

For a few days I dropped some corn mix over her seeds in the morning. In the evening I replaced whatever remained in the dish with fruit, vegetables, and whole wheat bread, again with some seeds mixed in. For a week, the only non-seed food she ate was grapes. I began reducing the amount of seed in the mix so that she was gradually forced to sample other foods.

From observing my other red heads, I had some idea of how much to expect her to eat in a day; and, of course, I kept an eye on her general condition and activity level. The regimen worked, and by the end of the month I had her off seeds. Did my weaning technique differ from that of her previous owner? Was I more rigorous about it or did I just get lucky? Getting her by herself may have helped because two picky eaters can reinforce each other’s behavior. Skipper is still not easy to please — she has yet to eat pellets — but her eating habits are better than they were.

Since Skipper had been in someone’s home for several years, as opposed to being fresh from a quarantine cage, I waited only a month before introducing her to Pedro. The general consensus, however, says to wait forty-five days for any bird. As readers of a previous article

may recall, Pedro is attached to me more than to birds, so I proceeded cautiously. I moved Skipper’s cage into the bird room and placed it a few feet from Pedro’s cage. I put a towel over the back of each cage so that the two birds would have to stare at each other all day, unless they wanted to turn around and stare at a blank towel. They did not exactly call longingly back and forth but at least they had a chance to recognize each other as fellow birds. Meanwhile, Pita and Pico, the other red head pair, were happily ensconced together in a neighboring cage.

The day came to open Skipper’s and Pedro’s doors and wait to see what happened. Pedro climbed out immediately, as he always does, while Pita and Pico began to clamber around their cage, obviously envious. Eventually Skipper climbed to the top of her cage and there they would have sat forever in phlegmatic red head fashion, each on his own cage, until I decided to stir things up a little.

Since I knew Pedro to be the more aggressive of the two, I put him on Skipper’s cage, thinking he would act less aggressive off his own territory. He immediately lunged at Skipper. Skipper flew off and landed on the Pico-Pita cage, whereupon Pita made a lunge for Skipper’s toes and missed because I shooed Skipper off. Skipper landed on Pedro’s cage and promptly went inside. Pedro was already inside Skipper’s cage investigating her food dish and clearing up any choice morsels she had left. That was enough excitement for one day. With maneuvers worthy of a U.N. meeting, I transferred Pedro and Skipper to their respective cages and let them stare at each other some more.

The next day when I let them out, Pedro went into Skipper’s cage as soon as she vacated it, thus proving his intelligence in remembering a food source. Again discovering she was not welcome on top of Pico and Pita’s cage, Skipper went inside Pedro’s cage and there they stayed when I shut the doors. Since I did not have a third cage to put them in together, letting them alternate cages might have helped reduce any notions of territoriality.

For the rest of the week, the birds repeated these musical cage activities, threatening each other with open-beaked lunges whenever their paths crossed. I was afraid to lock them into a cage together, since each seemed to regard the other as an enemy. Interestingly, the introduction between males Pedro and Pico a few years before had been quite different. They took to each

other right away; and within minutes Pico, the less dominant bird, was preening Pedro atop Pedro's cage. I had thought it would go similarly with Skipper and Pedro, Skipper being a shy bird. Birds often know what you expect them to do and that is why they do not do it.

I was the first to tire of a routine the birds would be happy to continue indefinitely — they love routine. Finally I simply put the two birds together in Pedro's cage because it was the larger. I stood by, heart thumping, muscles tense, spray water bottle in hand, ready to leap into action to break up a fight. The birds stood at opposite ends of a perch and looked at me. I looked at them. A redhead can stand still far longer than I can. I left the room and dashed in (if a woman in her eighth month of pregnancy can be said to dash) ten minutes later. No action.

For the rest of the day I kept checking on them. While they were not exactly perching together, nobody was biting anybody either. Not one to take chances, I separated them for the night. They were hardly likely to fight in the dark but confirmed worriers will understand my motivation. I put them back together the next day and they took turns eating out of the same food dish even though I put two in the cage. Pedro ate first, as he still does. When Pedro turned his attention to me, Skipper was able to quickly sidle over to the food dish, keeping a wary eye not on Pedro, but on me. Trust a bird not to know who its friends are.

They spent the next few weeks pretending the other bird was not there. They remained apart, not even looking at each other. At last I knew victory was at hand when they stood on the same perch, even though a discreet distance apart. More often, Pedro occupies the front perch while Skipper stands in the back. Whereas Pita and Pico are happy companions, the relationship between Pedro and Skipper ranges from tolerance to irritation, like some marriages I have seen.

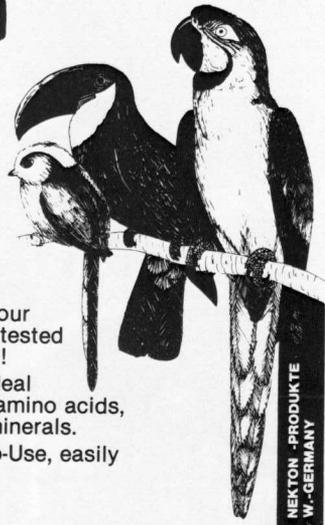
Pedro seems to be in some confusion about who is his mate. A couple of times he has bitten my arm when I reached inside the cage and perhaps came too close to where Skipper was standing. If Skipper happens to be standing too close to me, she gets disciplined. All she gets is a threatening lunge. Not fair, just because she is faster at hopping out of the way! The question is, does he consider me a threat to Skipper or Skipper a threat to me? Time and a nest box will tell. ●

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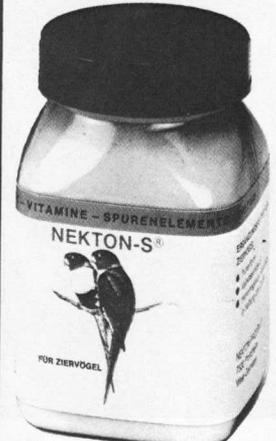
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