

AFA Visits . . .

Jeri Wright

by Laurella Desborough
Martinez, California

Breeding exotic birds in the Northwest can be done in outside flights or inside buildings. Jeri Wright and her husband, Jim, have chosen to set up their mixed collection of breeding pairs in a large building, separate from the house and the nursery building. Jeri has been working with exotic birds for fifteen years, and raises a variety of psittacines from Yellow-collared macaws to Rose-breasted cockatoos.

Since the flights are located inside a building, if an occasional bird escapes from the flight, it will not be lost. Her breeding pairs are set up in suspended flights of 1 x 1 inch 12 gauge wire, except for the larger macaws which are housed in 1 x 3 inch B gauge wire. The flights are hung by chain from



Photos by Laurella Desborough

Feeding time will be followed by clean-up time for this hand fed youngster.



This breeding pair of cockatoos has set up house keeping in a large metal barrel. Plenty of wood is provided for them for chewing but this nest box doesn't suffer.

The Seattle, WA area can be a lot of damp and cold. The Wrights' birds enjoy the protected shelter of enclosed buildings. To aid with clean-up and maintenance of sanitary conditions, all breeding cages are suspended on chains from the ceiling.

beams suspended from the ceiling. Each flight has a privacy panel so that pairs in the next flight cannot observe and annoy the adjacent breeding pair. Perches are 2 x 4 pine which are slipped into metal slots attached to the side of the cage. One perch provides access to the nestbox hole, located at the back of the cage. The front perch allows the pair easy access to the stainless steel bowls containing food and water, hung on the inner front of the cage.

Nest boxes for smaller psittacines or birds that are not heavy chewers are of pine, made in the boot configuration. These boxes are hung inside the

flight, with a wire door next to the access door, so that the birds will not escape if they chew out of the box. For the larger macaws and cockatoos, Jeri uses new metal barrels of appropriate size for the species. The barrels are remodeled for birds, with a rounded entry hole and a metal platform outside the hole. On the opposite end of the barrel is a door with an opening large enough to allow one to reach in and remove eggs or young as needed. This end of the barrel is open to the aisle for ease of inspection. Barrels are packed with pine shavings and pieces of 2 x 4 for birds to chew.

Jeri provides a daily diet of Roudybush pellets. She also provides a soft diet consisting of a cooked mixture of a variety of soaked beans and rice, with chopped fresh vegetables such as carrots, squash, and corn on the cob; and fruits such as chopped green apples and grapes. This mixture is prepared in her utility area adjacent to the large room with the breeding flights. The utility area has sinks, counters, refrigerator, chopping table, push carts to service the cages, and dry foods storage containers. Soft foods are prepared and mixed into a large bowl and then apportioned into clean bowls on the service cart. As she services the cages with the soft food mixture, she replaces water and pellets. For 45 cages, this takes 1-1/2 to 2 hours daily.

Jeri leaves the youngsters in the nest for ten days if the parents are dependable feeders. If not, the eggs are pulled and incubated in a Grum-

bach incubator set up in an enclosed closet without temperature fluctuations. Of course, incubating eggs means raising the chicks from day one. Jeri may be handfeeding several species at the same time: Umbrella Cockatoos, Blue and Gold Macaws, African Grays, and Sun Conures. Each baby or clutch of babies is set up in a brooder in the nursery, housed in a separate building next to the house. The nursery has its own sinks, work counters, microwave, refrigerator and hot and cold running water.

Tiny babies under a week old are kept in brooders (at 95°F) in the house where Jeri can monitor their needs more closely. Each baby is kept in its own basket inside the brooder. Feeding time is also the time to change the wash cloth/diaper for tiny babies. She prepares Roudybush formula to which she adds some baby food, takes a rinsed syringe and fills it, and places the syringe in a container of hot water to keep the temperature up. She feeds formula at 104 to 107°F. In feeding the tiny babies she rests the syringe on her forefinger rather than on the baby's beak so that no pressure is put on the soft beak. She lightly holds the baby's head as it is being fed. After feeding, she dampens the cloth diaper and the baby's back with warm water to maintain the baby's hydration in the brooder. Jeri does her last feeding of tiny babies between 12 midnight and 1:00 a.m. and starts the next day's feeding at 6 a.m. This allows the babies' crops to clear well once every 24 hours.

When she has several babies to feed, she prepares a syringe for each one. For the larger babies out in the nursery, this may mean a hot water container to maintain temperature on several 60 cc syringes full of formula for the larger macaws and cockatoos. When babies are feathered out and on two feedings a day, they go into baby cages in the nursery. These cages have low perches about one to two inches off the cage floor. These cages also contain toys, a bowl for veggies: defrosted cut corn and mixed vegetables, chopped zucchini, apples, bananas and grapes, sometimes papaya. Grapes are always cut in half because baby macaws will swallow them whole and then it will take days for them to digest. Babies have a separate dish of seed, Roudybush pellets, Cheerios, Fruit Loops or Trix (because they are bright and colorful). She doesn't wean babies onto pellets only, as some new owners might not

feed pellets and weaned babies need to know how to eat a variety of foods. New owners are provided with a page of instructions on the care of their new bird and a sales contract.

In discussing disinfection and sanitation, Jeri says that she doesn't set herself up to do something she can't maintain. She organizes her work so that she accomplishes the maximum in results with the least effort. For instance, she washes all her syringes well in hot soapy water, rinses them and stores them in a Nolvasan solution. If she suspects that there is a potential disease problem in the nursery, she washes the syringes and then places the syringe barrels in Roccal-D. She hesitates to place the rubber-tipped plungers in the Roccal-D because of potential absorption of the toxic Roccal-D. She leaves the barrels in that solution for ten minutes to fifteen minutes, then rinses them and stores them in the Nolvasan solution.

Jeri tries to keep her babies clean, but not sterile, because she feels babies that are kept practically sterile are unable to adjust to life in the real world when they leave the brooder. She does keep her handfeeding formula and equipment as clean as possible. Every bird is fed with a separate syringe. She starts with a small syringe, similar in size to a diabetic syringe, for the tiny babies. Babies are fed according to their age and size. When the babies take more formula, she moves to a 5 cc syringe, and then the 10 cc, and then two tens, then to the 30 or 35cc syringe, and after that to a plastic squeeze bottle (similar to a plastic ketchup bottle). These bottles are great for large babies like macaws. In mixing the Roudybush with water, she makes the formula to a consistency similar to that of runny pancake batter. Jeri believes that no one diet can be all things to all birds; she adds baby food applesauce or ground Zupreem for some species.

Jeri weighs the babies daily to track their development and make sure they are healthy. When the babies are quite large and taking formula twice a day and eating a bit on their own, she weighs them once a week. They are weighed prior to their morning feeding. She keeps a record of the daily weight. If she does not see a weight gain or finds crop stasis, she cultures the babies to see if they have a bacterial problem. She routinely cultures babies about every two weeks to learn more about them. Unless she

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finds something more exotic than staph, strep or E. Coli, she doesn't do anything about it as long as the bird is digesting its formula, gaining weight, thriving, and appearing normal in development. If the bird's digestion slows down, she will try other solutions before medicating the bird. As long as they continue to digest food and gain weight, she believes it is better for the bird to overcome a mild E. coli on its own, and to build up its own immunities. Medicating kills off the good bacteria as well as the bad. She doesn't think providing lactobacillus after medicating repairs the damage done through medication. Jeri swabs the birds and uses culture plates to grow bacteria. If something grows and the bird shows clinical signs of illness, she will take the culture plates to her veterinarian and ask him to run a sensitivity test on the bacteria to determine which medication will be appropriate and effective.

Jeri brought out an interesting aspect of being involved with exotic birds. She says that a serious interest in birds "consumes you." She has had many hobbies and interests including exotic fish and specialized gardening. "It wasn't enough. I couldn't involve myself enough. With birds, I could be 110 years old and I won't have quit learning. I don't see an end to it. Every new baby is a new challenge. Every new species is a new challenge. I can remember how excited I was with my first finches and my first cockatiels. I still get excited over new species of birds and their babies. I find the development of new veterinary techniques and new problems to solve, such as the Psittacine Beak and Feather Syndrome, very exciting. As long as there are things to learn, I will be interested in birds."

"One of the things I notice about being involved with birds, is that you go through stages in your interest. You start with pet birds and move to trying to breed birds, and with each success you feel confident enough to move to a new stage. You breed cockatiels and then go to conures. With each new species, you are learning. The only thing I know for sure is that the more I know, the more there is to know. Aviculture has held my interest for 15 years, while other activities have only lasted for one or two years. I can't wait for my husband to retire so he can work with me. I look forward to raising birds when we are ninety. That's my goal." ●

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