

The Indoor Flight

by Joanne Abramson
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In the fall of 1988 after a particularly busy breeding season, we had reached a new plateau. Our success with the largest of the parrot family (Hyacinths, Buffons's and Greenwings) was creating a space problem. These species require 16 to 24 weeks (four to six months) to wean. Weaning is the process by which birds learn to eat on their own without the assistance of their parents feeding them. Once a bird reaches its peak weight, it begins to eat on its own, perch, fly and finally wean.

The younger babies are fed in our nursery, a heated room behind our kitchen that allows easy access for those two to six a.m. feedings. This room was originally added on in 1986 so that the birds would have their own area. By 1988, with six Hyacinth Macaws straining our capacity along with the many other species of macaws we raised, we began planning an addition. By the spring, we had finalized plans for the newest addition — a room that included a large indoor flight.

The interior walls were lined with laminate panels. These are the same plastic coatings that commonly cover sink areas of kitchens and bathrooms, making our clean up easy. The sloped floor was covered with a



Large L-shaped indoor flight for macaws measures 22 feet long one way by 16 feet long the other, nine feet high and eight feet wide. Note white, easy-to-clean walls and plenty of light sources.

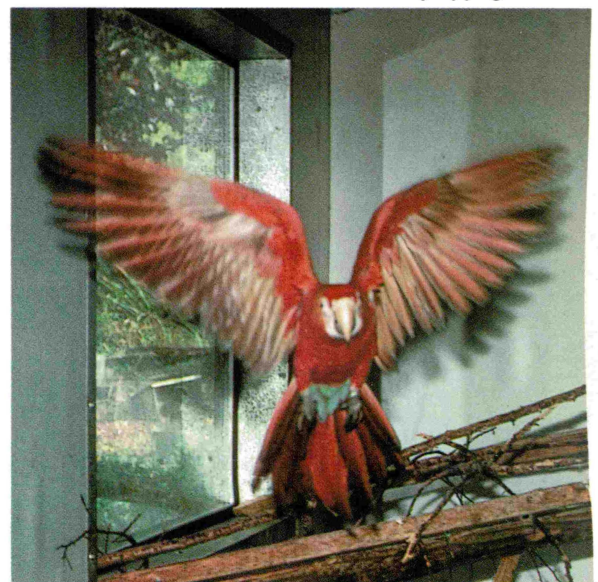


"Nest" siblings enjoy snuggling together in large, heavy duty plastic tubs which provide a protected area for clutch-mates.

What a pleasure to watch a young Scarlet exercise its natural ability — the beauty of flight.



A young Green-wing and Buffon's enjoy social interaction meeting at the large, dump-proof drinking bowl.



heavy, non textured linoleum. The floor also included a drain that allows us to hose down the room and clean out daily debris from fecal matter, leaves, bark, twigs, etc. which gathers on the floor. A curb 18 inches high stops the water from reaching the floor outside of the flight aviary. The flight can house up to 30 birds in it during the peak summer and fall months. This is when the birds are being weaned and are still not ready to go to their new homes. We need a significant amount of space. An L-shaped flight 22 feet long one way by 16 feet the other and nine feet wide by eight feet high was welded in place in the room. Welded wire two inches square and ten gauge thick was used to minimize destruction to their tails, allowing them to climb easily without damage to their delicate beaks and, of course, to keep them in. Natural perches are provided frequently in addition to a jungle gym-like free standing structure that facilitates their climbing.

Natural lighting is provided by a large, four foot square, domed, white skylight and several large windows. One sliding glass door is also included and will soon lead to an outdoor flight for use in warm weather. In the three years of use, we have not had an injury due to the large windows. The birds really enjoy seeing out and watching other birds and animals. For night time lighting, fluorescent fixtures with Vitalites are utilized.

During the weaning period, birds lose their body fat and replace it with muscles. Allowing captive birds to fledge as they would normally provides the opportunity for them to experience flying. Though flying may not be ideal for parrots kept in homes as pets, it certainly is helpful initially for birds kept for breeding. In breeding birds, flying keeps the hen in good muscle tone which helps prevent egg binding.

Probably the most important advantage of the indoor flight is how the birds socialize. Now in our third season of using the indoor flight, we have found two major advantages over the more common cage concept.

First, it allows the birds to experience flying. This is helpful for two reasons. It allows them to lose their baby fat, and at the same time gain their breast (flight muscles) quickly. When their wings are clipped or they are put into a cage and not ever allowed to fly, these muscles take a long time to build up.

Second, and perhaps the most important reason of all, is socialization of the babies. If we have multiple babies in a clutch, these are kept together as they would be in the wild in what we call "nests." These plastic tub nests provide a protected area for the clutch mates to interact. They snuggle together for warmth, roll and play on their backs, and eventually learn to fly.

When birds fledge, a whole new being emerges. Similar to a butterfly which evolves from egg to caterpillar to butterfly, the bird evolves from egg to nestling to fledgling.

Three years of observation have shown that the babies are aware of what macaw species they are. Many times a single species of macaw has been raised in the nursery mixed in with other species. When released into the indoor flight, they are immediately attracted to their own species. Interspecies communal sharing of food and water dishes is normal. The birds readily play with one another regardless of species. They will also sleep together in 50-gallon drum "nests" which we provide for that purpose. When we look into these nests, a rainbow colored quilt made up of the babies is seen.

When roosting and during an alarm response they segregate by species. An alarm cry might be initiated when a strange cat, dog or a low flying hawk is spotted. Birds on the ground will look up to find their own spe-

cies. If that group is too far away, they will fly up, then leap frog over to their group. If there aren't any of their own species in the flight, they will congregate with the nearest group for protection.

When roosting at night, they group together by species, almost touching one another in groups. Though other species might also roost on the same branch, a larger space of perhaps one or more feet will separate the two species. Clutchmates will frequently remain together socially until mated with another unrelated macaw or sold. By observing which babies are naturally attracted to each other, we have been able to pair young together for future breeding.

Socialization as nestlings as well as fledglings is important. Looking at the captive bird's wild counterpart, there would be continuous socialization with parent and siblings. As they fledge a whole new world would evolve. Not only would they be associating with the relatives, they would be exposed to others of their own species in flocks. Many other birds, mammals, insects and even fish would be part of their daily adventures.

Many breeders shudder at the thought of weaning their babies. Once you have the facilities to make this an easier process, you will find it quite enjoyable. We love having the babies fly to us to get attention. The more common species that will be pets enjoy interacting with other birds and wean quicker when exposed to birds that are already eating. They also learn not to bite. The babies will not tolerate a bully or any one bird that bites hard. They will simply bite him back just as hard. The bird quickly learns that biting is not socially acceptable.

Rarer birds that will be kept for breeding purposes learn to interact with other birds, an advantage for future mate interaction. We have seen other birds that were housed separately prior to mating that had problems adjusting to life with a mate. If raised separately away from other birds with no chance at interaction, potential mates sometimes become a great threat.

It is very enjoyable to watch the babies cavort with each other, dangle from twigs and prune leaves from their branches. The games they play in this "captive" setting provides a wealth of insight into their possible behavior in the wild. ●

Deadline Schedule

Oct / Nov '91

Featuring **SOFTBILLS**

Aug. 1 - editorial copy

Aug. 15 - display ADS

Dec '91 / Jan '92

Oct. 1 - editorial copy

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Feb / Mar '92

Featuring **FINCHES**

Dec. 1 - editorial copy

Dec. 15 - display ADS

Apr / May '92

Feb. 1 - editorial copy

Feb. 15 - display ADS

June / July '92

Featuring **SHOWING BIRDS**

April 1 - editorial copy

April 15 - display ADS

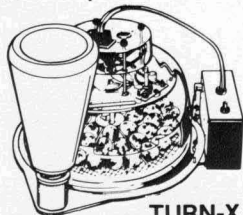
Aug / Sept '92

June 1 - editorial copy

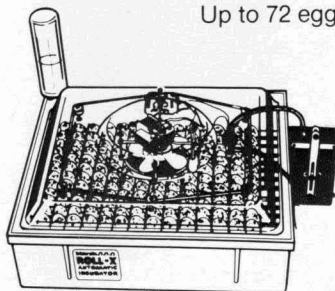
June 15 - display ADS

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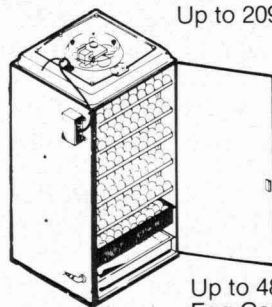
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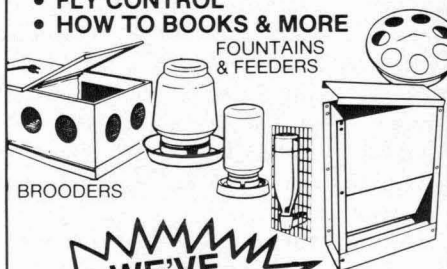
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