

Plumhead Parakeet

Indoor Breeding Tips

by Lynn Rasoletti
Chicago, Illinois

Since I saw my first plumhead parakeet in a local pet shop, I've wanted to breed the bird. The beautiful stained glass colors on these haughty, aloof birds combined with their electronic flute-like calls had me mesmerized. Their flight is a soft, whirring whoosh. They remind me of miniature pheasants flying with those long tail feathers.

But, I've found them quite a challenge to breed indoors, especially if space is limited. After much experimenting and many failures, here's what works for me.

First and most importantly, the plumheads like their privacy. Although they are docile, relatively quiet birds allowing you to inspect their nestbox and work around them, they really don't like it. They'll lay eggs, and then desert the nest. Or, they will sit for awhile, and then break eggs. Resist the temptation to bother them. Keep them in a portion of the room that's most secluded from all activity. Mine prefer to be against a wall, as opposed to being situated in the center of a room. High corners are best.

Second, although slightly larger than a cockatiel, they need more flight space. They may not actually fly about the cage, but they will kill their babies after they hatch if the cage space seems too tight for them. I don't have lots of room to give them, and I started with cages that worked well for my sun conures. After losing chicks, I made room. Currently, my plumheads are housed in flights 2' high by 3 1/2' long by 2' deep.

With my first pair of plumheads, I put up three different sized nestboxes, and let the hen choose. She picked the smallest one; the lovebird box. Well, she looked ridiculous all twisted around



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This breeding pair of plumheads finally felt comfortable enough to get down to business. They wanted their privacy and preferred a high, far corner.

A mixed basket of eight babies — Christopher, approximately 4½ weeks old, in back at right, surrounded by Abyssinian and peach faced lovebirds.

inside. I removed this one, and she refused to go into any of the others. She started making a nest on the cage floor with newspaper shreds! So, I reluctantly put the lovebird box back up, and she proceeded to lay six fertile eggs in it. Sometimes, however, I think their judgement is clouded when in captivity. Dad plumhead removed the eggs, silently and swiftly, one at a time, the day before they were due to hatch. I could hear the chicks pipping in the shells. Mom plumhead never moved from the box until the last egg was gone. I think Dad didn't like the very cramped box, and he wasn't willing to share it with any more birds. (This I reason because he later raised up chicks in a larger nestbox.)

Now my plumheads are given nestboxes measuring 18" high by 9" wide by 12" deep. There's a ladder attached inside the box, which is hung on the outside of the cage. I put pine shavings on the bottom. Mom plumhead will remove some shavings, and maybe add shredded newspaper. The plumheads will chew the entrance hole until it suits them. (Approx. 4'5" diameter.)

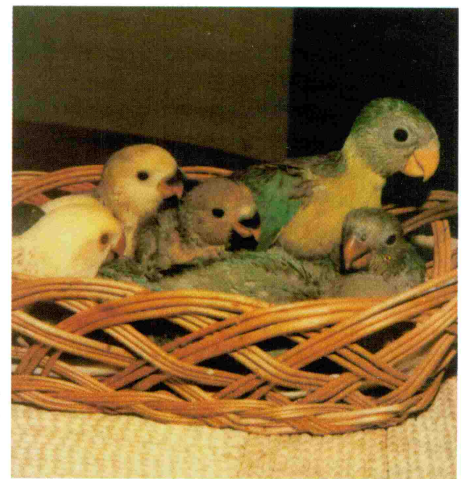
My plumheads eat just about everything, but they love fresh fruits and vegetables, more than they like their seed. Carrots, yams, grapes, apples, blueberries, endive, and pizza are their favorites. They also get parrot mix, cockatiel mix, petamine, calcium grit mix with egg shell, thistle seeds, and an occasional millet spray. I sometimes

treat them to cooked peas, mashed potatoes and a chicken bone.

Courtship begins anytime between December and February. You'll know, because the male starts singing his melodious call frequently, and the female replies with a different song. Dad plumhead struts and weaves around the female, but doesn't get too close, yet. The female dominates the male, and she will get quite vicious if she's not ready for his advances. This singing and dancing ritual can last four to six weeks before anything happens. Eventually, the female allows herself to be mounted. Dad plumhead gingerly steps aboard, holding onto the female's upper wing with his beak.

My birds lay between five and six eggs per clutch, one every other day. The male always sits outside the nestbox during incubation, and he'll pop only his head inside to feed the female.

But with one of my pairs, the male hides inside the box when I come in to feed. He scoots back out when I leave. Incubation lasts 23-25 days. The babies' cries are very loud as they're hatching.



"Christopher T. Plummer" at five weeks of age on shoulder of author.

You can't mistake what's happening inside that box. I pull the babies at ten days old, to encourage double clutching. (Although this doesn't always happen.)

The babies have no fuzz at all, but they have large appetites. They take to my hand feeding formula right away. I use this mix for all the birds I hand feed, and I've never had any problems. (I have had problems when I used a baby cereal mixed with Isomil base formula. One example is sour crop, resulting in a bacteria infection that quickly killed the babies at five and six weeks old. They were fine one day, and dead the next.) I grind equal parts of Monkey Chow, hulled, unsalted sunflower nuts, and "8 in 1" Mynah Pellets with Fruit. Then I sift everything, and regrind. The particles must be small enough to pass through an eyedropper. I keep this mixture in the freezer. At feeding time, I mix several spoonfuls of this mix with warm water and heat. The mixture will absorb lots of water, so you will need to keep adding water until the desired temperature and consistency are achieved. I also add a fruit baby food in the jar, about 1/3 as much as I've made of the mixture. Any type fruit with an apple base is a favorite, although blueberry is a close second. Strained carrots are also good. The babies gobble whatever I give them. I think they enjoy the varying flavors.

I spray the inside of the incubator box with warm water everytime I remove the babies to feed them, because their naked pink skin can dehydrate so quickly. They get sparse sprigs of white down (not many) at about 2 weeks, and pin feathers make an appearance shortly after this.

All the babies enjoy being held and talked to when I feed them. But, they must be separated into individual cages when weaned, so they'll stay nice. If left together, they'll get nippy and cranky when handled.

If I know some of the babies are going to be future pets, I encourage the prospective owners to claim their birds shortly after weaning. They will make wonderful pets, and they can learn to say quite a few things. Their speaking voices are lower, and more distinct than a cockatiel's. They are clumsy, slow moving birds when young, and you must handle them softly. They will never like to cuddle and be petted, like a cockatiel or conure, because they are not pair bond birds. But, they will lightly sit on you, and they'll take an active interest in anything that you're doing. ●

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