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# Age: a factor in successful breeding

by Herbert W. Helm Jr.

Among the important aspects to consider when you're hoping to breed parrot type birds are: making sure you have a true pair, a good nutritional diet, a healthy bird, and the age of the bird. While there are other factors involved, these are among the most important. While quite a few articles have been written lately about the first three aspects, the age of the bird is often not given enough consideration.

Individuals often pay for the sexing of their birds to guarantee they have a true pair. While this is an excellent idea, you should be able to get more information from the procedure if you will just ask the examiner. For example: Do the sex organs look normal? Is the bird sexually mature or is it immature? Knowing these three aspects will help you decide if this bird will be useful in a breeding program or whether it is of appropriate age.

Another important consideration is whether the bird has just come through quarantine. The process of being caught, imported, caged, and moved around is very stressful for the bird. When people go from one culture to another they often experience what is known as "culture shock," and for awhile find some aspects of coping difficult. When we look at quarantined birds we need to realize that not only are they being moved from one culture (environment) to another, but probably being caged for the first time. One can see how these changes could disturb the bird for a time period. While there is no hard rule on how long it will take a bird to settle down, a two year settling down period seems appropriate. Of course, one needs to realize that each pair of birds is different and the time period has flexibility. One also needs to keep in

mind that the two birds need to be sexually mature. Related to this stress factor is the amount of commotion occurring around the bird's breeding area. As a rule, the less commotion the better your chances of the birds deciding to do some serious breeding.

So how old does a bird need to be before it will breed? This, of course, depends on the type of bird we're talking about. Parakeets seem to mature the quickest of the hookbill type of birds. Here there seems to be two schools of thought. Those individuals who breed parakeets commercially often start the birds breeding when they are five to six months old. Those who breed parakeets more for quality and show typically wait till the bird is a year old. While it may make sense that the extra time is beneficial to the bird, there does not seem to be any solid research behind this. One must realize that there are other factors involved. The biggest of these is that commercial breeders of parakeets often do not limit their stock to two or three clutches a year. This continuous breeding eventually wears down the quality of babies produced.

Love birds and cockatiels will typically start to breed when they are between nine months old and a year-and-a-half old. Generally, on most hookbill type birds the first attempt at breeding may not be the most successful. If some of the eggs hatch one should consider this a success. The pair is likely to do better the next time around.

With medium size hookbills, such as Indian ringnecks, one usually has to wait even longer. Ringnecks typically take two years before one is able to sex them visually. The males develop the



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ring around their necks at this time. Looking at the two year rule of thumb for a species like this, one might wonder which is better to do: 1) buy sexually mature birds and wait two years, or 2) buy young birds and wait two years for them to develop. While it may look like a toss-up (and probably is) there are points to consider on each side. First, you cannot visually sex immature males from females (both lack the ring around the neck) when looking over a lot of imported ringnecks. Of course, you're no better at visually sexing what you know are immature birds. One advantage in getting domestically raised birds is that they have probably been raised on a diet close to the one you will be providing them. Also, domestically raised birds are less frightened of humans.

The larger hookbills, like cockatoos and macaws, are typically around five years old before they become sexually mature. Since a large portion of these birds are imported, they seem to breed better the less humans bother them. A general rule of thumb is the bigger the bird the longer it will take to become sexually mature. In my opinion, if you're purchasing medium to large hookbills and not willing to wait at least two years, you will probably become impatient with your birds and abandon the bird hobby soon.

If you like success, you need to keep with the more common breeding hookbills — parakeets, cockatiels, and love birds. However, if you like a challenge and have a lot of patience, take a look at the larger hookbills or those with a poorer breeding record. Just keep in mind that in this experience you're waiting on the bird's time table and not visa versa. ●

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