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# Handicapped Pets for Handicapped People

by Trudee C. Langford Longwood, Florida

Aviculture is my hobby (passion). Birds provide not only delight in beauty and song, but an ease in care unequaled by the majority of other pets, making them perfect subjects for someone unable to keep or handle the usual dog or cat (including those who suffer from fur-type allergies). Considering the span of years I have been keeping birds and the number of feathered subjects who have passed through my aviary, it is not surprising that I have encountered an occasional mishap, accident, or injury involving one of these fragile individuals. Unless you are one who adheres to only owning show-quality specimens, such unfortunate incidents should not affect a bird's, or any other type of pet's, suitability as a companion and/or its breeder status, depending on your reasons for wanting it. If, on occasion, you have the chance to acquire an other than "normal" bird or pet, consider that not only will you be providing a home for an otherwise unwanted creature, but you will have quite a unique individual and conversation starter as well!

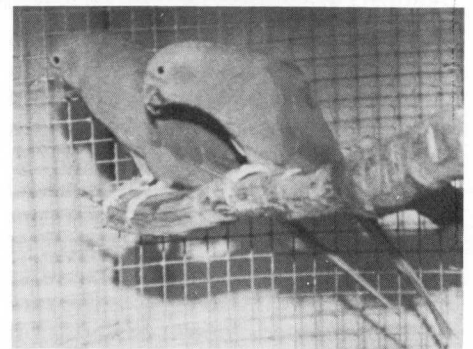
For example, my husband and I once went to an aviary closeout sale in the hopes of adding to our collection at bargain prices, and bargain we got! The seller was emptying his flights of cockatiels and budgies quickly, and by the time we got there all the breeding-age 'tiels we had hoped to obtain had been sold. As we were about to leave, we saw one lone male cockatiel sitting on the floor of a budgie flight and asked about it. The seller told us it had been born with only one foot and, although it got around fine because it had never known any different, he did not think anyone would want it — however, we did! We got it for *half* the sale price and drove home with our prize! We weren't sure whether his one-legged state would affect his breeding performance or not, but he has since turned out to be a proven producer time and again, certainly to our benefit. Many people who have come to see our bird collection never even notice the bird's impairment unless it is pointed out to them. So who cares? We sure didn't!

Another incident occurred a year or so after our procurement of two rare, young female blossomhead parakeets. One of the females developed a growth on her leg. The vet's diagnosis: cancer, probably malignant. It was hoped we had caught it soon enough that immediate removal of the growth

would prevent it from spreading to other parts of the bird's body. The bird was not yet breeding age and knowing females of this species are few and far between, we opted for the surgery. To date, the bird has adjusted well to its now-tipsy balance and shows no indication of any further growths. With her life saved, all she needs now is a mate to live happily ever after!

As bird breeders, we know the consequences of disturbing a nesting pair too often, even just a glance in the box proving detrimental to some highly-strung species, so we refrain from any such action except for a now-and-again check on progress. A few seasons past, one of these checks found a fledgling lovebird with its leg inextricably tangled in some nesting material; an emergency trip to the vet resulted in the conclusion that loss of circulation to the limb required it be immediately removed. Although the cost was prohibitive and the value of the bird certainly didn't warrant it, the surgery was agreed to with the idea that we would keep the bird for future breeding stock as it obviously could never be sold.

Two of my younger sisters are handicapped, confined to wheelchairs, but their physical disabilities in no way prevent them from sharing my interest and delight in birds or enjoying a little feathered friendship. The minute my youngest sister heard about the poor, crippled lovebird, she asked if she could have it as she felt a great empathy towards it, being disabled herself. So, after the bird's recovery, when it was evident it could negotiate on its own and was feeding well, a special cage was set up in my sister's home and was made "accessible" for the unfortunate fellow. The cage was rigged with a variety of branches, accessories, and toys with the aim of providing the handicapped bird an effortless way of moving about its new domain. The bird seemed not to



Blossom headed parakeets. Female at right is one leg amputee.

realize being one-legged was abnormal and got around quite well, hanging from the topmost wires and twigs, and using its beak as an extra grip. We assumed the bird was a "he" as it developed a very aggressive personality, but we later learned our mistake when an egg was discovered on the bottom of the cage. My sister dubbed the bird "Peaches." Peaches, spoiled and catered to, exhibited a very nasty temper and tried to bite anything within range, even to the point of "attacking" and making it next to impossible to clean the cage or replace seed. One of my sister's friends, who had both his legs amputated, said he understood Peaches' feelings of frustration completely and he frequently made offers to buy the bird. Peaches soon became a local celebrity and a

for some time finally hatched two young, one of which declined to emerge from the nestbox even when its sibling had been out for some time. Something was obviously wrong and a trip to the vet determined the bird had fractured both its legs; it had apparently done so quite early and the bones were already healing in place. The vet advised rebreaking/setting the legs and said the bird was not in any pain. Aside from its odd-angle stance on a perch, there was nothing wrong with it. When this was made known, the bird was immediately adopted by some friends of my sisters' (the husband is a quadriplegic) who promised to see to it the calcium supplement the vet recommended for its diet would be adhered to. It did not matter to them that the bird sat "crooked;" could not be used for show, and would have to be tended to with extra caution to avoid future fractures — they had a beautiful pet and the bird had a loving home. Eventually some non-disabled birds were purchased by my sisters' friends when it became too long a wait for the occurrence of another accident of fate. Still other friends said they will wait, no matter how long, till a disabled/handicapped pet becomes available as that is the *only* kind they want.

My sister's circle of friends are still on the lookout for pet birds that may have a disability or impairment of some kind. It's been proven that long-term hospital patients and nursing home residents often show remarkable progress and improved interest in life when they are given an opportunity for occasional contact with pets, such as visits from a local animal shelter.

How many times have you heard about someone finding a three-legged dog or one-eyed cat or other unfortunate creature that the local humane society has had to destroy? Would it be so hard to offer them as pets to those of the public who can empathize with them and would certainly benefit from the companionship, rather than automatically assume they are unwanted? Perhaps *you* could contact your own local humane society, animal shelter, bird or pet club, and volunteer your services in setting up a special "match-making" or visiting-pet arrangement in your home town! Consider running an ad in the local paper offering to find homes for disabled or unwanted pets that others may wish to discard. By placing them in loving homes with sympathetic owners, people and pets will both benefit!

Need we say more? ●

Photo by Trudee C. Langford



Sister Tamee with "Peaches," the terror and entertainer.

great hit with visitors, never failing to vent her screeching anger, perform acrobatics and mimic the kitchen microwave's "beep."

Among my two sisters' acquaintances were other disabled/handicapped friends who would inquire as to whether they, too, could obtain a disabled/handicapped bird for a pet. They, of course, were referred to me as the local bird source and I would have to explain that birds with disabilities were God's decision, not mine. Regardless, I soon had a waiting list of potential owners for such otherwise luckless fowl. In the interim, a pair of white cockatiels who had failed to produce

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