

Mexican Thick-billed Parrots

(Rhynchopsitta pachyrhyncha pachyrhyncha)

Story and Photos for the AFA
Watchbird by
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Washington, D.C.



Nineteen day old Thick-Billed babies.

Dr. Richard Baer has often said that it should be the responsibility of every aviculturist to take on the challenge of attempting to breed one species that is known to be difficult and to make it a personal project to learn the requirements of that species so that we might one day establish that bird in aviculture even if there is no monetary reward and especially if that bird is likely to become extinct in the wild.

Happily there are some aviculturists today who are doing just that. One of them is AFA member Ray E. Myers and his wife, Mary, of 7807 Chestnut Ave., Bowie, Maryland. Their special project is the Thick-Billed Parrot, an endangered species native to Mexico in highland areas where the pine forests afford abundant pine seeds that make up a large part of their natural diet. They formerly occurred as far north as northern Arizona but the clearing of the pine forests has, apparently, prevented these birds from venturing into the U.S. since 1935 or earlier.

The Myers' successful breeding of this rare and lovely bird is being reported for two reasons. First to make available information on the breeding and rearing of Thick-Bills so that others may compare experiences and hopefully raise more of these birds each year. Secondly, it stands as an example to us all that limited space and cold climates do not preclude the successful breeding of the larger (or indeed the rare!) psittacines. Although Ray and others in the area are experimenting

with housing birds outdoors through the winter (temperatures sometimes drop to 9°F or lower for days at a time), the Thick-Bills have always been kept indoors.

The pair of Thick-Bills was acquired in July 1973 from a couple in Washington, D.C. who had kept them as pets for eight years. These people originally purchased the birds as young birds from Bob Busenbark and Henry Bates at the Palos Verdes Bird Farm. Ray and Mary had them for a year and a half before the first eggs were laid, thus making the birds at least ten years old.

It came as a surprise. The birds had acted like a pair for some time but Ray, like so many of us, was cautious with his optimism about the birds being of opposite sexes. The new breeding flight was not yet ready on that day in February when the hen laid her first egg. Right on the bottom of the cage! The literature says that Thick-Billed Parrots breed May through August. Not February. The egg was removed and an attempt was made to incubate it. The embryo progressed nicely for ten days or so and then died. Five more eggs were laid (one every other day) and removed for incubation before the hen stopped laying. Artificial incubation was unsuccessful although all the eggs proved to be fertile.

The dilemma was clear. A large flight was needed, but large flights have to be outdoors and Maryland in February is too cold to risk valuable birds outdoors. The answer was a large cage in the attached garage which already housed eleven

cockatoos, five macaws, and a wide assortment of Amazons, Greys, Caiques, Lorys, Love Birds, Cockatiels, Budgies, and Finches.

As February approached the next year the Thick-Bills began their expected chewing of everything that didn't move out of their way. This seems to be characteristic behavior at nesting time. They literally turn logs into toothpicks. Three inch perches cut from oak or elm trees disintegrate in a matter of days.

The breeding cage measured five feet long, three feet wide and three feet high. It was located close to the floor so that the birds could not climb higher than about four feet above the garage floor. The nest box was located outside the cage on one end horizontally at the bottom level of the cage and measured three feet long, one foot high and 15 inches deep. A square entrance hole of approximately 10 inches on a side was cut at the end nearest the garage wall and on the front of the box. The end of the box opposite the entrance hole had an inspection door. The box was filled with rotten logs and wooden debris taken from nearby wooded areas to a depth of 8 or 10 inches. The box itself was made out of old, weathered, wood. The temperature of the room was about 55°F.

Ray believes, contrary to much of the current avicultural theories regarding the amount of space necessary for the successful breeding of the larger psittacines, that large flights are really not necessary. To support his contention he points, not

only to the Thick-Bills but, to a pair of Greater Sulphur Crested Cockatoos (true Greaters) and a pair of Molluccan Cockatoos that he put up for breeding for the first time in April in flights that measured 7' high by 7' long by 4' wide. The Greaters were on eggs in early June and the Molluccans in July!

During the month of February the Thick-Bills turned the rotten wood inside the nest box into woodchips and sawdust. They spent most of their time in the nest box, coming out only to eat and destroy their perches and all wooden parts of the cage. They were not observed carrying pieces of the perches into the box but it was almost as if that was their intent. Oddly enough they did relatively little damage to the nest box itself.

February passed and no eggs. Then, when Ray and Mary had almost given up, the first egg was laid on March 21th. Two days later a second egg was laid. The hen began incubation with the first egg and was never observed outside the box for the entire incubation period. The male sat with her and guarded the entrance hole but never ventured outside the box when anyone was present. He came out to eat when he thought no one was watching and fed the hen on the nest.

The first egg hatched exactly 28 days after it was laid. The second, likewise, on the 28th day or 2 days after the first. On the eighth day after hatching, Ray noticed blood on the wing of one of the chicks so he removed them both for hand

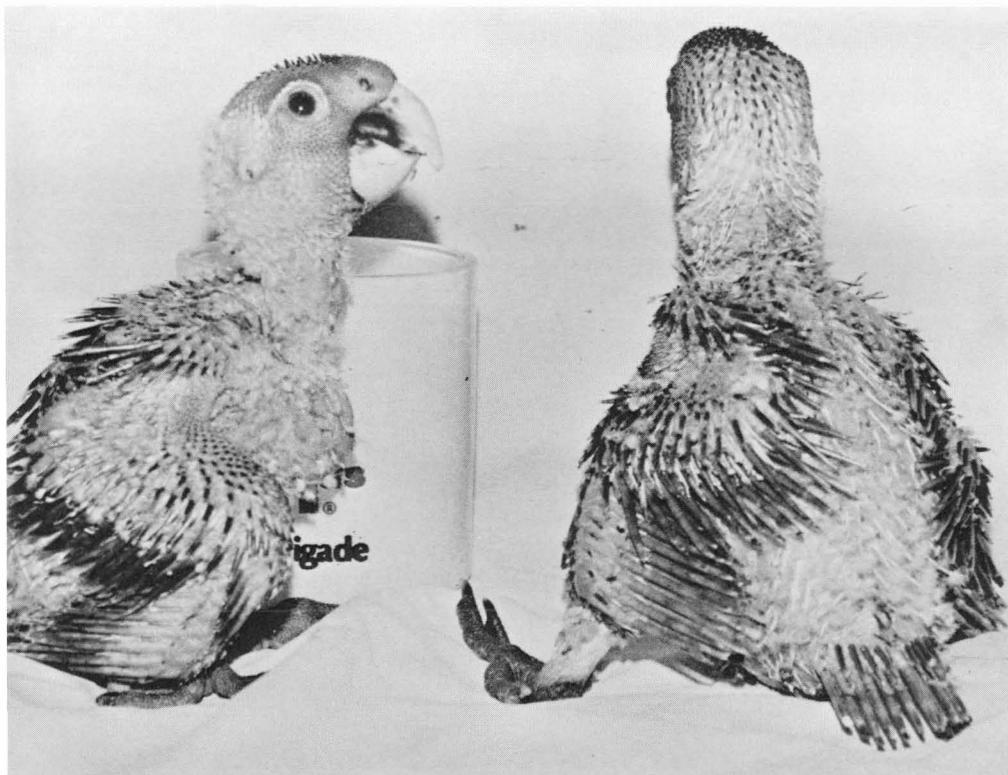
feeding.

At this point I should comment on the diet fed the adult birds. It was always standard parrot fare: a parrot mix of large seeds and nuts, mostly sunflower, prepared by the William G. Scarlett Seed Co. of Baltimore, MD. This was supplemented with fruits and vegetables and vitamins in the water. A Lory nectar and Purina Monkey Chow were given after the babies hatched. No pine seeds were ever used. This particular pair of Thick-Bills, at least, does not require pinion nuts or pine seeds, as is commonly assumed, for breeding.

The diet for the chicks at first consisted of the following: mashed bananas, Hi-Protein baby cereal, hard boiled egg, monkey chow, and water. They were fed every four hours around the clock until they were 30 days old. After that they were given four feedings a day between 7:00 a.m. and 11:00 p.m. Mary, who has fed over a hundred baby psittacines, prefers to use an eyedropper, even for the parrots. The ingredients are run through a blender before cooking and sometimes afterwards to achieve a consistency that will pass through the dropper.

The pictures give us a record of the growth of the chicks. The coffee cup was used as a convenient size reference. Ray weighed the chicks every day at the same time so that we also have an accurate record of the growth rate. This not only serves as a reference, but it tells the breeder if all is well.

The same babies at 25 days of age. The coffee cup illustrates the birds size.



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*A baby
of 46 days.*

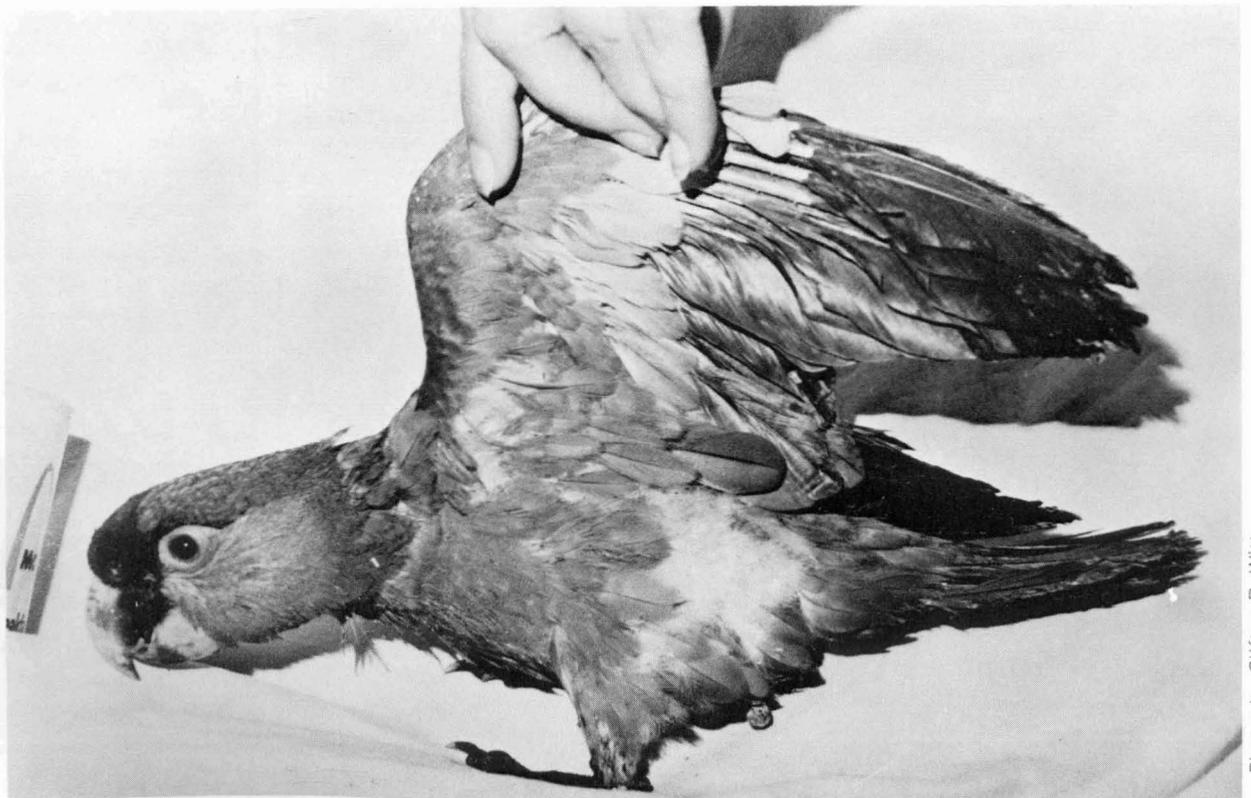
YOUNG-THICK-BILLED PARROTS WEIGHT RECORD

Day No.	Weight in Grams Chick No. 1	Day No.	Weight in Grams Chick No. 2
19	188.6	17	150.0
20	205.4	18	169.5
21	209.4	19	175.3
22	220.2	20	184.2
23	230.3	21	193.5
24	240.6	22	208.2
25	245.0	23	215.7
26	262.0	24	231.8
27	278.4	25	245.8
28	288.8	26	258.3
29	291.0	27	269.5
30	292.0	28	263.2
31	280.4	29	257.5
32	278.5	30	257.0
33	278.0	31	257.3
36	277.3	34	257.4
39	274.5	37	256.0
43	270.0	41	259.6
46	261.4	44	270.0
47	263.4	45	269.5
52	288.7	50	285.0
56	332.0	54	323.5
60	334.8	58	310.7
63	323.0	61	308.0
65	295.5	63	318.0
68	292.0	66	317.0
91	292.0	89	296.0



*Bright eyed fellows
at 52 days.*

*The babies are
well feathered
by 65 days.*



You will notice from the chart that trouble developed around the 32nd day. Without the conscientious weighing and record keeping, Ray and Mary might not have noticed since the chicks' behavior was normal. Chick No. 1 began to lose weight rapidly while Chick No. 2 stabilized at about 257 grams. They decided it was too early for the "slimming" phase to begin so something was wrong.

It was decided to change the diet, and on the 42nd day they began using Velma Hart's diet as printed in Bates and Busenbark's, "Parrots and Related Birds," pp. 470-476. Monkey Chow was still included but in much smaller quantities and was finally discontinued. The effect was seen almost immediately. The birds began to gain weight slowly at first and then a dramatic gain occurred between the 47th and 52nd day of 25.3 gr. for Chick No. 1 and 15.5 gr. for Chick No. 2.

The young Thick-Bills progressed well after that. Much of the duty of hand feeding at this point fell upon Ray's daughters, Donna and Chris Ann, since Mary was scheduled for surgery and Ray could only feed them in the pre-dawn hours before going to work and then again late at night.

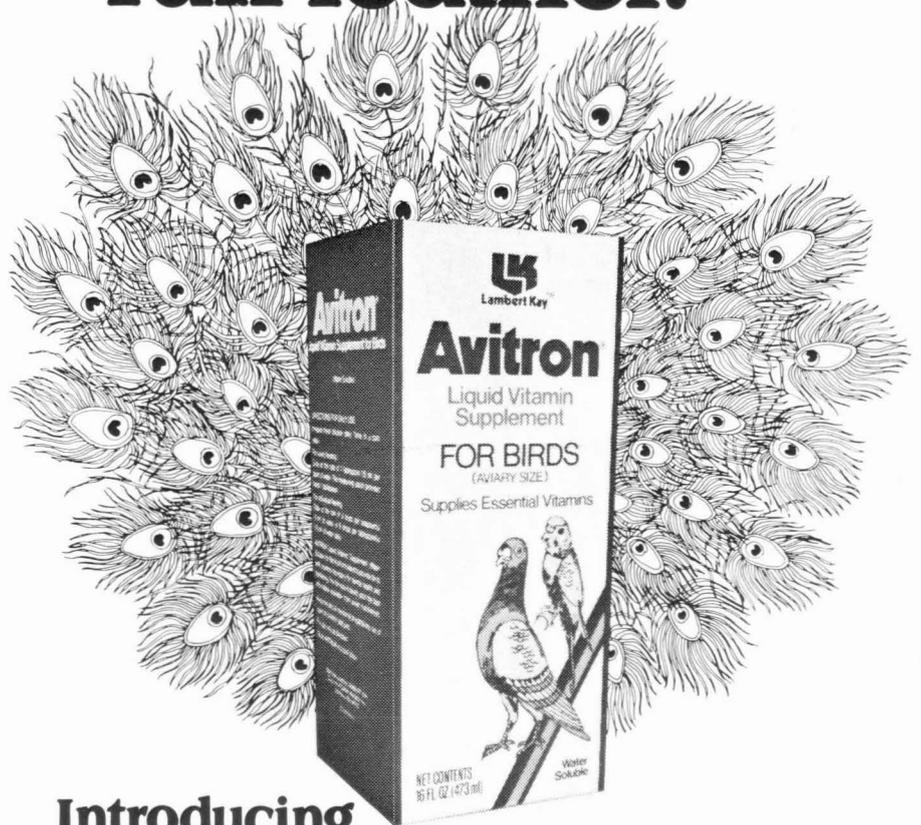
The "slimming" phase began at about 56 days. The birds were now being fed three times a day. When Mary returned from the hospital this was reduced to two times a day. The birds were now 60 days old. The weaning process took a long time and the young birds were finally on their own at 90 days of age. Chick No. 1 weighed in at 292.0 gr. and No. 2 at 296.0 gr.

The juvenile Thick-Bills were somewhat duller green than the adults and lacked the red stripe above the eye that extends back to the middle of the head as well as the red at the bend of the wing. The beaks were a whitish-cream color with black marks on either side of the upper mandible. When the birds were about six months old, the red above the eye began to appear and the beaks slowly darkened so that by 14 months old they fully resembled the adults with black beaks and bright red superciliary stripes.

A comment on sexing these birds: the adult male has a few red feathers on either side of the face near the beak. The young birds, now 18 months old, act very much like a pair and one of them also has these same red feathers on the face. When the spread of the pelvic bones was checked on the adults, it was found that the male's bones are close together and the hen's spread wide. The young birds show

continued on next page

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At 65 days the babies stick close to home.



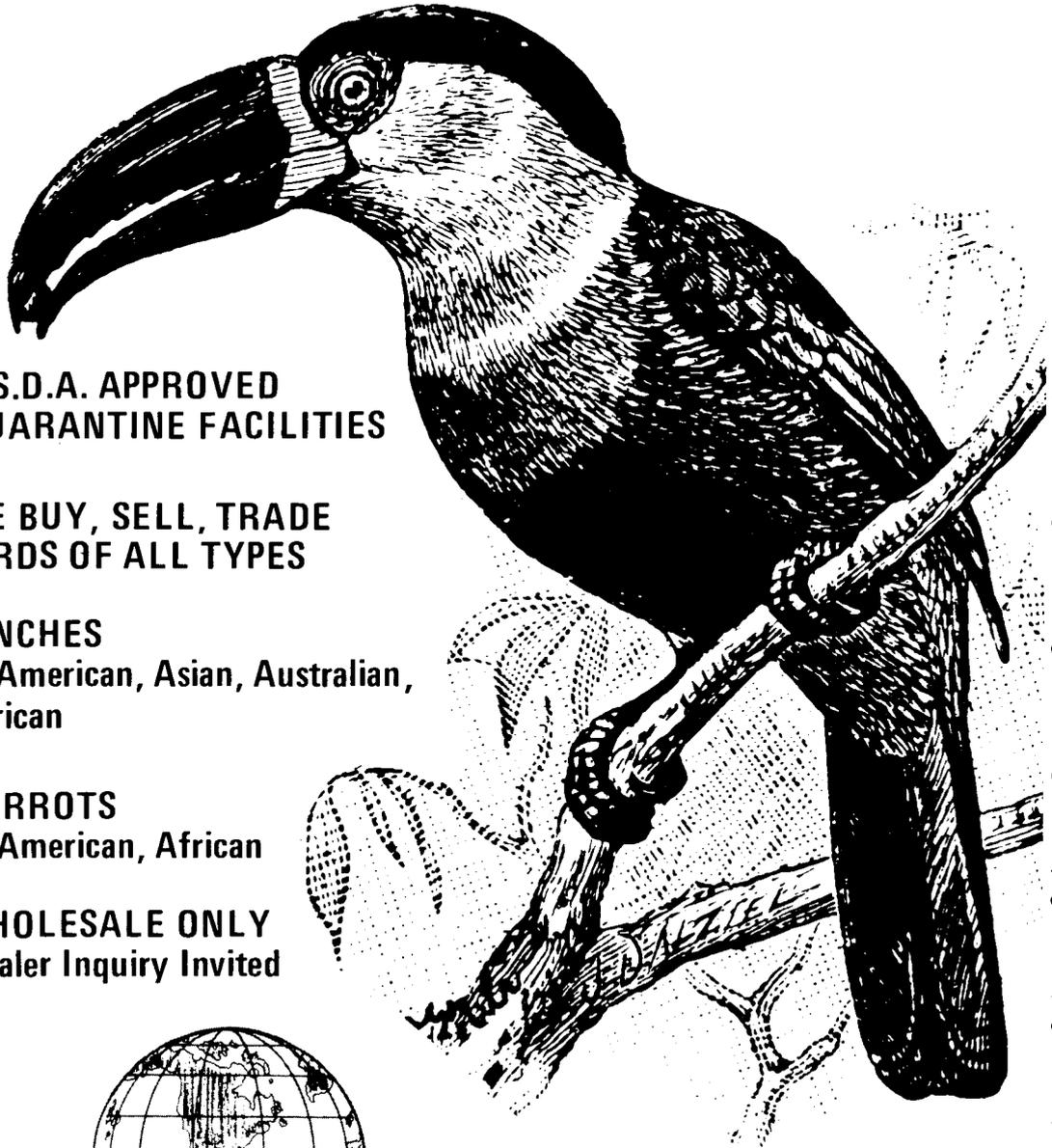
By their 91st day the breeder, Mr. Ray E. Myers can hardly hold them down.

no differences. If you own or know of a proven pair of Thick-Bills, it would be of interest to check for similar red face markings on the male and report your findings (whatever they are) to the Watchbird editor so that we may pursue this means of sexing or discount it.

The following year the adult Thick-Bills failed to go to nest. Their behavior of chewing up logs was as exaggerated as usual, but no eggs. They are now housed in a larger (5' long, 6' high, 30" wide) all metal flight and as we approach this

Winter and Spring, we will be anxiously awaiting another nesting of the Meyers' Thick-Billed Parrots.

And what about your "special project?" Important breedings happen all over the country, not just in the warm climates of the southwest and Florida. They also occur in environments and situations that would make the California breeders shake their heads in dismay. If Aviculture is to progress in this country, we need to know about as many unusual successes as possible ■



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