

What I Did During One Summer Vacation

By Sue Ferrara, PhD., Photos by E.M.Hume

In December 2008, my then 13-year old daughter and I traveled to Washington, DC to hear a talk about African Grey parrots at the Smithsonian's National Zoological Park. My daughter's love affair with birds—especially parrots and songbirds—began at the age of nine.

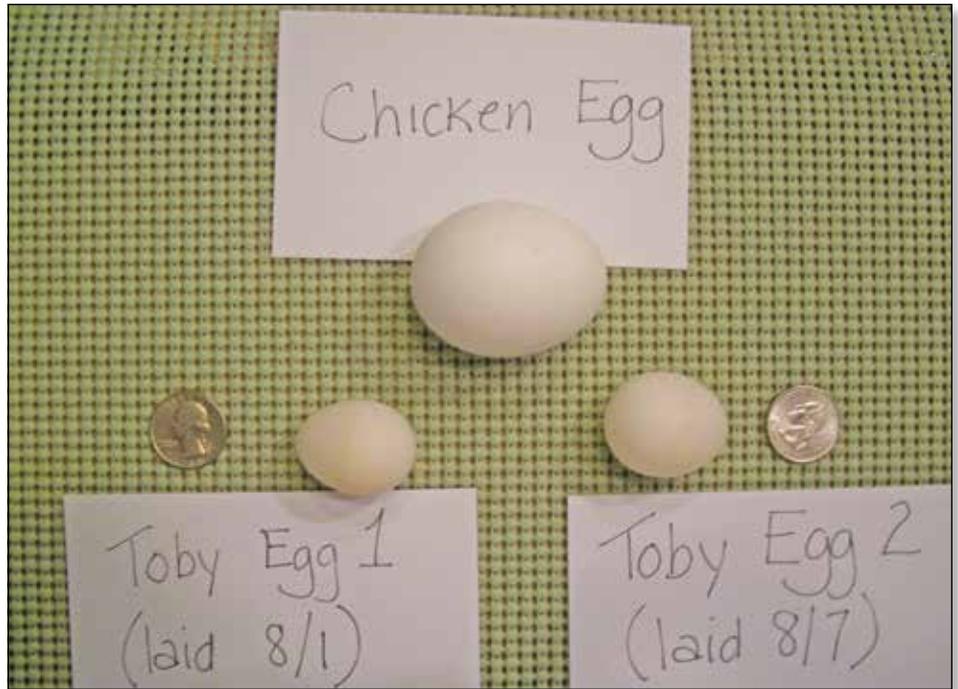
A family acquaintance spoke that evening, as did his African Grey parrot. After the lecture, my daughter and I casually mentioned that knowing the life span of greys, if his parrot ever needed a home in the future, we would certainly welcome her into our flock.

Fast forward to June of 2010, and there I was driving into the District to pick up 23-year old Toby. The bird owner needed the summer to finish some projects, give some lectures, and do some traveling. My own daughter, then 15, had been recently diagnosed with POTS (postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome) and faced a summer of feeling lousy. I knew the Grey would be a wonderful companion and distraction. We dubbed the Grey a therapy bird not truly understanding what would lie or lay ahead.

Toby had already appeared on the pages of the Washington Post. The family thought the bird was male and so it carries a masculine name. The façade was shattered several years ago when the bird laid an egg. And, while the sexual identity was confirmed with that event, over the course of 23 years, the bird had produced a total of three eggs.

The car ride north was quite funny. The Grey, sitting in her cage in the front seat, was wide-eyed for most of the drive. And, she evoked several chuckles at the various toll booths along the way.

Toby then arrived in New Jersey, to a house with two Jenday conures, a Senegal parrot and one, rescued, long-haired



A chicken egg, in comparison to Toby's two laid eggs

dachshund.

Settling into her new camp grounds took less than twenty-four hours. Soon the Grey was on the floor walking around, checking out the territory, and delivering orders.

As most people know from the work of Irene Pepperberg, and her parrot Alex, African grey parrots are skilled talkers. They can mimic language and use it appropriately. It's a talent that is fascinating and unsettling all at the same time.

If someone had food that the Grey wanted, the commands were: "Here!" Or, "You want it?"

Her favorite treat? Chips-Ahoy cookies (she gets reduced fat!). And she'd ask: "Wanna cookie?" And while parrots are not supposed to eat chocolate, this bird had dined on chocolate chip cookies since her youth. Go figure.

Greys also have some sort of attraction or connection to dogs. Stories about Greys ordering pet dogs around abound among bird owners. Our visitor was no exception. She looked at the dachshund and say: C'mere. The dachshund, who

had already endured a couple of bites from one of the Jendays, wore a look of panic. There was not only a beak in front of her, but a beak that could beckon her! The dog ran.

And, if we did something to offend the Grey, she was quick to respond. Consider this moment:

Location: The family computer space

Scene: My husband is sitting at his computer, flip-flops off and feet up on a stool. Toby, having lowered herself from her cage, is roaming around the floor looking for something interesting to do. She spied the flip flops—ah, something fun to chew!

Our daughter: *Dad, the bird is after your flip-flops!*

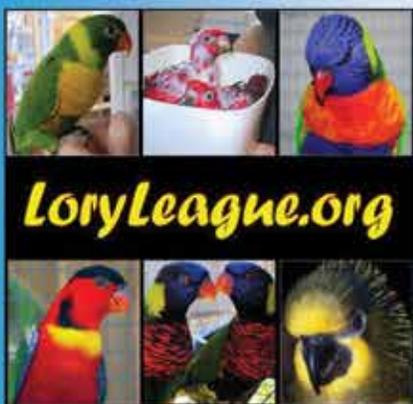
Husband: (Completely lost in something on the screen.)

Me: *Hey, better defend your flip-flops.*

My husband emerges from his computer stupor and moves his feet off the stool. As one foot comes down, it brushes against Toby.

Husband: *Sorry bird.*

The Grey: *Dope!*



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Now, imagine the peals of laughter when we all realized that yes, Toby had just called my husband a dope for hitting her with his foot.

And so the fun and frivolity of life with Toby continued, until the morning of Sunday, August 1st. When I took the cover off the bird's cage, and much to my surprise, there was an egg.

We enjoyed the Easter Bunny-like gift and being the novice bird owners we were, removed the egg from the cage. We didn't think much of our actions because the bird had never laid a full clutch of eggs. Thanks to the great support provided by the membership of the American Federation of Aviculture, we learned removing the egg was a big no-no.

Egg two arrived six days later; and three days after that, we had egg number three. Egg three broke. We gave her egg number two. That one broke also.

So, having destroyed two eggs, we saved egg one and let the bird return to an eggless state. Phew, we thought. Then,



Toby's first laid egg. Toby's second egg laid which broke. The second egg sits in comparison to a quarter.

a week later, egg four arrived. We let her keep it. And, after reading about greys and breeding, we put a fake egg in with her too, hoping she would think that with two eggs, she had finished her job. Yeah, right.

On August 21, egg five appeared. This had to be the end. African Greys normally lay a clutch size of 3-4 eggs. Those eggs are usually laid every other day. The hen incubates for

28 to 30 days. The owner of our local parrot store told us the Grey would roll the eggs around, keep them warm, and then lose interest in them—a process she estimated would last from two to four weeks.

Many of our friends (even our daughter's cardiologist!), when told the story asked: Is there a mate? How is this bird laying eggs??

Our standard response was: Think



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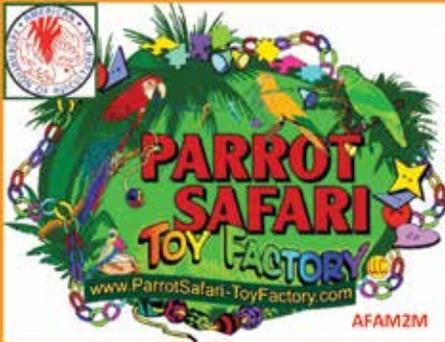
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Pictured left is the rejected fake egg. Toby is incubating and rolling her new egg.

chickens. But that only confused the situation because people believe all chickens live with a rooster!

As we settled into the routine of watching Toby roll her eggs, and seeing her come out of the cage to eat and relieve herself, we grew calmer knowing this would all be over soon and the bird would return to her chatty, bodacious self.

On Sunday, August 29th, egg six

appeared. Clearly the bird must be making up for lost time!

Fortunately, the day after the sixth egg arrived, the bird tossed the fake egg, and one other, out of the nest box. Maybe we were at the end of this cycle?

Eventually, the laying ended and Toby returned to her sassy self. Of course her longtime owner was concerned. But we assured him that female parrots lay eggs and we weren't concerned. When Toby

returned to Washington, DC, she laid one more egg—apparently a very large one. The owner took the egg and Toby apparently didn't care one bit.

In the end, we concluded having our own PBS Nature show in our computer room was a lot more fun than watching a mediated event. In fact, we are already planning for the next breeding season when we would mark the eggs as they appeared so we could see which ones got rolled around and when; and, which eggs got dumped from the nest first.

As we all know, there is just so much to learn about our avian companions. And, as my high school classmate reminds us: Animals in captivity are ambassadors for their wild relatives. Sometimes what we learn by living and watching our companions we help scientists in the wild save a species.

Toby will be returning to our flock permanently. We haven't told the dachshund.

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