

# THE AFRICAN GREY



**A LOT TO LEARN  
ABOUT BREEDING GREYS?**

**BY ROSEMARY LOW**

*Photos Courtesy of Rosemary Low*

**S**ome breeders are consistently successful in breeding Grey Parrots, whereas others struggle for success. They are at a loss to know why their Greys do not even attempt to reproduce. In this article I would like to mention some of the factors that influence good results.

### Compatibility

The Grey Parrot is a highly social, non-aggressive species that congregates in flocks in the wild. It is also very vocal so the presence of others might help to stimulate Greys to breed. But, the main benefit of obtaining a number of pairs is the potential for allowing them to select their own mates in a pairing aviary. Unlike many smaller parrots, most Greys show very marked preferences when given a choice of a mate and even strong dislike when force-paired. There is no point in persevering with an incompatible pair.

### The Time of Year

A well-known breeder in the UK had some interesting experiences with his Greys. Out of the breeding season they were kept in an aviary that measured 6m (20ft) x 3.6m (12ft) x 2.1m (7ft) high. In October or November he placed nine pairs in their breeding aviaries. Five pairs had bred with the same partner before. The other four pairs had never bred or one or two birds might have bred with different partners. Within six weeks all nine pairs had laid. Twenty-seven eggs were laid, all fertile, and artificially incubated. All the females laid again and some were allowed to rear their young.

In December or January nine more pairs were placed in breeding aviaries. Only one female laid! Why should the results from the two groups have provided such a total contrast? It might have been that those paired up soon after the moult were in peak breeding condition or perhaps the weather in December and the reduced hours of daylight were not conducive to peak condition.

Or could it have been connected with the natural breeding season of the birds in question, which were probably all wild-caught? However, breeding in Africa has been recorded in various months of the year and may be more aligned to the wet season than to any particular month. Rainfall could exert a strong influence on breeding condition and the desire to breed.

### Diet and Environment

There is no one diet that promotes breeding success because so many other factors influence this, thus good results are a combination of factors. One of the best-known Grey breeders in the U.S. had greatly improved breeding results when lack of time forced her to switch to a pelleted diet. Her best results were achieved when each pair was screened from the others.

I attributed the highly successful breeding results of a close friend to the time and care that went into daily food preparation for Greys and other African parrots. They were kept in 3m (10ft) or 4m (13ft) long wire cages in a light and spacious building and each pair could see the others. Only the area around the nest-box was made private. Versele-Laga Nutribird P15 pellets formed the basis of the food, together with chopped fruits and vegetables. The rearing food contained pulses (beans: mung, butter, black-eyed, haricot and chick peas) that had been soaked with maize overnight, and then washed well. They were brought to the boil in a saucepan, just covered with water and then simmered for 10-15 minutes. They were then mixed with fresh or frozen vegetables. The frozen vegetables used were packs of mixed vegetables, peas and/or sweet corn that had been thawed. Fresh vegetables included freshly chopped carrot, celery or green or red peppers. When in season, green beans and courgettes were also used.

*Photos Courtesy of Rosemary Low*



To this was added sunflower seed kernels obtained from a health food store; these were soaked or just allowed to sprout, plus a little white millet. This appetizing mixture was varied with chopped dried figs that had been soaked and fruits in season, such as pomegranates. It was sprinkled with eggfood and a calcium and trace mineral supplement. (There is usually no need to add a vitamin supplement unless the diet is lacking in items high in Vitamin A, such as par-boiled carrot, fresh red bell pepper and oil palm nuts or palm fruit extract.)

**For in-depth information  
on Grey Parrots, refer to  
Rosemary Low's book,  
*A Guide to Grey Parrots  
as Pet and Aviary Birds.***

(Published by ABK, 2006)

Some owners of pairs are at a loss to know why they have not nested. One letter I received went like this:

"I have two pairs of African Greys, both bonded, with one pair using the nest-box. They are kept inside, due to a surfeit of dishonest people and local cats in the area. Below my house are two very large cellars, with one pair in each. Each aviary is 8ft (2.4m) long and 5ft (1.5m) high; one is 8ft (2.4m) wide and the other is 4ft (1.2m) wide. They can hear but not see each other. The lighting is fully balanced daylight tubes and ventilation occurs through 9in (23cm) air bricks. I feed the Greys a mixture that contains safflower, striped sunflower, white sunflower, hemp, clipped oats, cedar nuts, peanuts, chillies, peanuts in the shell, tiger nuts, buckwheat, barley, paddy rice, white pumpkin seed, white dari and red dari, plus a high protein easy-sprout mixture, also nuts,



cheese, grapes, apples, etc. One pair is proven and the other hen laid from a perch in a communal aviary."

One suggestion I offered to encourage the pairs to breed was to raise the protein level of the diet, as this can stimulate breeding, and prior to the period in which the pairs were expected to breed, to offer the easy-sprout mixture daily instead of every other day. A useful addition to the diet would be a good quality eggfood or, better still, a home-made mixture of hard-boiled egg, carrot and wholegrain bread, for its animal protein. Greys have a high calcium requirement and would benefit from adding a small amount of a calcium supplement to the eggfood. There is little point in adding such supplements to the water as those in syrup form are heavier than water, and sink to the bottom of the container, and unless fed exclusively on pellets Greys drink little, anyway.



*Photos Courtesy of Rosemary Low*

A little mashed banana and finely chopped orange segments can be added to the eggfood. The moisture from the fruits means that it is not necessary to add water. You can add whatever food items the Greys favour most. If they are dry, such as walnuts (finely chopped) you would need to add a very small amount of water.

It is also worth considering adding the nuts of the African oil palm to the diet of Greys. These nuts, which are an important item of their diet in the wild, are highly beneficial for their high Vitamin A content. They might provide elements that are missing from the normal captive diet.

My second suggestion was to darken the area in the vicinity of the nest-box and/or to ensure that the box is facing the part of the aviary that receives least light. One female had laid from the perch in a communal aviary. This is not uncommon in females laying for the first time ever. On the other hand, it might indicate that she did not like the nest-box perhaps because too much light entered or because the whole area was too light. Ensure that the entrance hole of the nest-box is only just large enough for the birds to enter or it will admit too much light.

It is worth bearing in mind that some parrots, especially Greys, can take months to settle down when moved to a new location. This could be the only reason why these two pairs had not yet bred. Patience is a necessary attribute of the parrot breeder! On the other hand, some pairs are stimulated by being moved and go to nest immediately!

*Photos Courtesy of Rosemary Low*



## History

When searching for a Grey to make up a pair, the suitability of ex-pets is sometimes questioned. Many former pet birds have produced young. However, I think one needs to make a distinction between wild-caught birds, and hand-reared birds that have had a close bond to one particular human. The latter might be very unhappy in a breeding situation.



## Breeder's Lack of Experience

There is a good demand for hand-reared Grey Parrots and some understanding among non-parrot-keeping people that these birds fetch high prices. This leads some people down the path of breeding them for profit, even although they have no previous experience in birdkeeping. It never ceases to surprise me how many think they can breed these intelligent and sensitive birds as though they are as prolific as Budgerigars.

Like most long-standing parrot people, I receive countless calls for help and information (indeed, writing this article was interrupted by one) and the caller will describe their set-up and ask what they are doing wrong. However, often their inexperience causes them to omit vital information. I try to help them but I cannot see their birds or the way they are kept. If I or another experienced breeder could do so, they might instantly identify the problem—something that might seem insignificant to the owner of the birds. Hardly anyone will follow the advice to rear easily bred species that mature early in order to gain experience. Breeding Budgerigars and lovebirds might have no cachet but it is the best way to acquire the experience that will produce a successful bird breeder. 🐦



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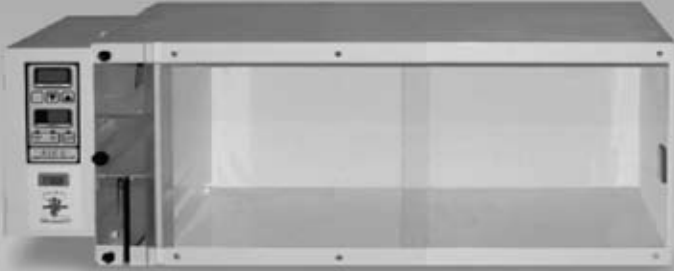
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