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Breeding Red Fronted Macaws

by John and Cindy Hollingshead
Blackstone Aviaries, Tarzana, California

In March of 1984 my husband John and I bought our first pair of red fronted macaws. We set them up in a 3' x 3' x 6' cage with an 18" x 18" x 24" wooden nest box. This pair had been in a holding cage for over a year with about 50 other sexed red fronts. It was noted by the keeper that they had pair bonded together on their own, and he advised us to set them up as soon as possible. The red fronts were very compatible. We saw the birds sitting closely together on the perch, eating together and preening each other.

In 1984 we were feeding the birds a diet of boiled corn, beans and dog food kibble, with some cut up fruits and vegetables. Since then we have changed our diet to 50% cooked racing pigeon mix, 25% Leach large hookbill mix and 25% fruits and vegetables. Our fruit and vegetable mix consists of carrots, broccoli, celery, apples, pears, and two or three different kinds of melons. At varying times over the last few years we have added a few changes such as sprouted beans and seeds.

The birds were set up in an indoor cage and were placed on the end of a row to give them a little more privacy. These birds were a little shyer than some of our other pairs and seemed to do better when left alone. Our bird buildings are not heated but are insulated and cooled during the summer with a swamp cooler. The lights in the buildings are on timers. We increase the amount of light starting in January, and towards the end of fall we decrease the amount of light to give the birds a natural rest period.

In February of 1985 we noticed the birds had bowled out their nest box and several times we caught the female coming off the nest. On April 10, 1985 they had their first egg. The second egg was on April 13 and the

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third egg arrived April 16. All three eggs were fertile and hatched on May 5, 8, and 11. We noticed with this clutch and in all future clutches that the babies all hatch on the 25th day of incubation.

We had noticed the first two eggs were a little bigger than the third egg and when the babies hatched and grew we noticed the third baby was smaller when compared with the weights of the older babies at the same age. (At a later date when we sexed them the first two babies turned out to be males and the third baby turned out to be a female.)

We left the babies with the parents until the 17th of May, twelve days after the first egg had hatched. We had noticed the mother had done a great job of feeding the babies and the first two babies had been very close in size. However, the third baby, being a little smaller to begin with, soon seemed to disappear beneath her two big brothers. Feeling the third baby might be overlooked, we pulled all three for hand feeding.

Over the next few months we learned a lot about hand feeding and different problems that arose. We were hand feeding a few other birds at this time and had some problems such as: very little or no weight gains, slow digestion, *candida*, *E. coli* and *klebsiella*. My husband and I talked to Dr. Geof Smith soon after pulling the three baby red fronts. After going over everything we found the problem to be the way we were keeping the babies warm. We had been told that putting a baby in a fish aquarium with a heating pad underneath was how many people keep their babies. We have since found out that people who do use the heating pad method put the babies directly on the pad or at least a layer of towels over the pad

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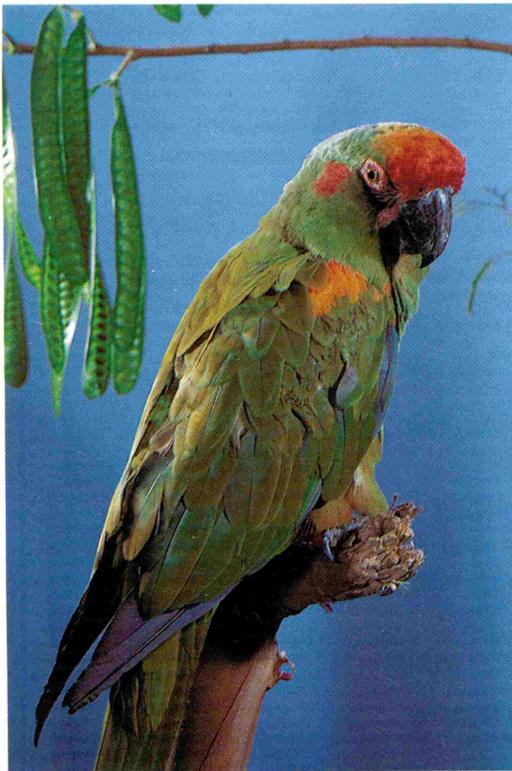
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Four of our 1987 Red Fronted Macaaws.

and a towel over the top of the aquarium. With a heating pad the babies need to be watched very closely, so they do not get cold or overheated. This method turned out to be a very inadequate way for us to keep our birds warm.

Photo by George D. Dodge and Dale R. Thompson



Adult male Red Fronted Macaw.

We have concluded that babies cannot be kept warm enough with a heating pad. When the babies are not warm enough the crop will slow down in digestion. When digestion slows down, the risk is run of *candida* and bacterial problems. An environmentally controlled method was shown to us by Dr. Smith by fixing up a bucket with a dome incubator on top to make a brooder for the babies. We also used this method with a fish aquarium when the babies were bigger and we would cover the uncovered part of the aquarium with

a towel. Since then we have built our own brooders with a temperature controlled area, and we have also purchased some commercially made brooders. We have had good success with raising our baby birds in brooders that are accurately temperature controlled. After our initial problems with learning how to brood our babies properly they began to gain weight steadily.

Over the past few years we have learned that body weights are a very good indicator of the overall general health of baby birds. We keep daily charts of the babies, weighing them (crop empty) at the same time every day. With each clutch and each bird the weights vary, but the gains should be daily and constant until the birds start to wean. Weight charts also help with the weaning of the birds by letting us know if the baby may be losing too much weight. (Weight charts on baby red fronts are at the end of this article).

We also keep charts on how much we feed them and how often we feed them. Keeping track of how often and how much food has been fed helps let the next person know what amount to feed. Both my husband and I feed the birds and this eliminates any mistakes or guessing. We also feed "around the clock" when the babies are young, as we feel the babies have much better weight gains when kept full of food. We do, however, let the babies go completely empty once in a 24 hour period as this helps keep the

Photo by Cindy Hollingshead



The full colored male on the left is the first chick hatched of the '85 clutch. Younger bird at right is also a male, our only bird of the 1986 clutch.



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babies from getting *candida*.

In 1986, our red fronted macaws went back to nest April 23, laying the second egg on April 27, and the third egg on April 30. Only one egg was fertile in this clutch and it hatched on May 20.

At this time we also had a pair of blue and gold macaws on three eggs. Their second egg died part way through incubation, and since there was a chance the female blue and gold might overlook the smaller baby, we decided to pull the blue and gold's third egg and put it in with the red fronted macaw mother. We put the egg in with the red fronts and pulled their remaining infertile eggs.

On May 20 the baby red front hatched, followed four hours later by the baby blue and gold. A blue and gold baby is much more vocal than a red front baby and, not wanting the red front mother to overlook her own baby, we decided to help it along with a couple of feedings while it was still in the nest. After that the red front mother fed both babies with no problems. The babies were pulled at ten days of age for hand feeding. The blue and gold baby was larger than the red front baby but this was normal as the blue and golds are a much bigger species. (1986's baby red front turned out to be a male.)

In 1987 our red front made up for her slow previous year as we got four eggs this clutch. The eggs were laid April 9, 13, 15 and 19. All of the eggs were fertile and hatching dates were May 7, 8, 11 and 14. At the same time we had a lilac crown that had gone to nest for the first time that year. The lilac crown had only one fertile egg out of three and her baby was ten days old when the fourth red front egg hatched. Feeling four babies were a lot for the red front mother to raise, we decided to pull the lilac crown baby for hand feeding and put two baby red fronts in its place. The lilac crown female proved to be an excellent mother. She never missed a beat when we pulled her older, larger baby and replaced it with two smaller babies. She raised those baby red fronts as if they were her own and when we pulled the babies at about ten days for hand feeding they looked great. As it turned out, the first two babies were females and the second two babies in this clutch were males. (PLEASE NOTE: Fostering babies should not be taken lightly or done without realizing the risk of foster parents not feeding and/or killing a baby.)

Red fronted macaws are one of my favorite birds. They were overlooked as a good pet for awhile as there were

Red Fronted Macaw Weight Chart (in grams)

1985 - 1987

	1985			1986	1987			
Chick	#1	#2	#3	#1	#1	#2	#3	#4
Day								
6			29					
9		66	31					
10		66			85	92		82
12	67			113	118	116		100
15	67	85	63	146	158	166	141	158
20	107	136	104	203	269	266	252	250
25	168	181	123	273	367	367	375	377
30	208	196	135	361	468	474	442	452
35	235	215	175	448	528	516	500	535
40	267	250	231	512	536	524		
45	325	324	313					
50	425	403	380					
55	477	496						
60	490							

not many around, but they do make excellent pets. All the baby red fronts we have raised were talking before they were four months old. Red fronts have a higher pitched voice than the larger macaws, but they are very clear talkers and can pick up lots of words and full sentences. They are very friendly birds and love lots of attention. One of the interesting things about the babies is their flying ability. Most macaws' or Amazons' first flights are done with a lot of crashing and running into things. However, the first flight of most of my red fronts were of beauty and grace in motion. The babies can hover like a hummingbird, just before they land on your head, or any other place for which they aim. The red fronts are very at ease on their backs, often rolling over if they trust the person handling them. Also, when the babies are playing together they will roll around on the bottom of the cage.

Following is our hand feeding diet and weight charts on the red fronted macaw babies:

Blackstone Aviaries Hand Feeding Diet for Baby Birds

- 1-1/2 cups Zupreem monkey chow
- 3/4 cup shelled raw peanuts
- 3/4 cup hulled raw sunflower seeds
- 1 jar carrots (4-1/2 oz.) baby food
- 1 jar oatmeal with bananas & applesauce (4-1/2 oz.)
- 1 jar spinach or creamed corn baby food (4-1/2 oz.)
- 1 jar applesauce or other fruit (4-1/2 oz.)
- 2 tablespoons natural peanut butter
- 1 teaspoon bird vitamins
- 1 teaspoon D Cal Fos by Fort Dodge
- 3/4 teaspoon Mycostatin
- 1/2 cup Gerber's Hi-Protein cereal
- 3-3/4 to 4 cups water

1. Put all ingredients except Hi-Protein cereal into blender and mix on high speed until well blended.
2. Pour food into bowl and stir the Hi-Pro cereal in by hand.
3. Store in refrigerator until needed but do not store more than one day.
4. Fill syringe with food and place in 105 degree water.
5. Test temperature of food before feeding.

NOTE: The consistency of the food should be about the thickness of pancake batter. Adjust the amount of water if the mixture is too runny or too thick. ●

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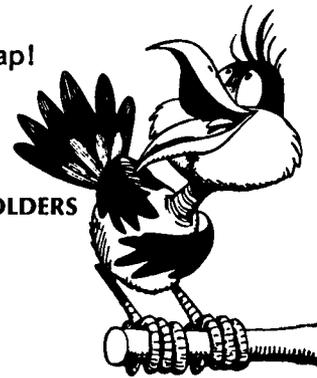
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