

Experiences with "Mac," the Severe Macaw

by S. Marianne McOmie
South Jordan, Utah

It all began one Indian summer day when, at a local outing of our bird club, I met one of the most beautiful green birds I had ever seen.

Our bird club had an annual date at the fall fair to show our birds off to the public and also to each other. I had brought a variety of small birds, parakeets, finch and cockatiels. The people next to me had brought a magnificent Scarlet Macaw, a Blue and Gold Macaw and the first mini-macaw I had ever seen, a ravishingly beautiful Severe Macaw (*Ara severa*).

I overheard Sue and Bob talking about selling this little green bird. I couldn't believe my ears. So I screwed up my courage and approached Sue. Rather timidly I asked how much this bird was worth. My hopes were dashed when she told me that she had just finalized a deal for Mac. Someone was going to trade her some cockatiels and a variety of other birds for her. Well, I asked her to please think of me if the deal went sour because I really thought this bird was great.

Later on that day, my husband joined me in showing off our birds and he also met the Severe. Like me, Jeff also thought that she was a lovely bird, but he wasn't quite ready to jump through hoops to own her. But we did talk to Sue and she told us the price of the bird if her other deal fell through. She seemed to feel that the deal was solid.

A few days after the fair, I flew to Canada to visit my mother. While there, I had a phone call from my husband asking if I still wanted the Severe Macaw. The answer of course was *yes*, so he said he would make arrangements to get her before I returned home.

When I landed at the airport, I could hardly wait to get home and get re-acquainted with Mac. I felt that we had hit it off at the fair.

We got home and Mac immediately climbed up on my hand and from there to my husband. I was a convenient bridge. And so it went from then on.

Mac was Jeff's bird. She was his, he

was hers, and heaven help anyone who tried to get in between them. Believe me, it was heaven help she who tried to get in between, and I have the scars to prove it.

We knew so little about Mac, apart from the fact that she was a wild-caught bird, and that whoever had tamed her had done so with love and kindness. But she was ready for a mate. Even though Jeff knew it was pure flattery when she regurgitated for him, he still found it hard to take. And when she started insisting that he mount her, well sometimes it is hard to explain to non-bird people exactly what this bird was doing.

So the search was on for a mate for Mac. A good friend of ours located a likely mate and we took both birds in to be surgically sexed. Luckily both birds were opposite sexes, although I

think we might have purchased Jamie anyway. He had been a severely trained bird and exhibited some signs of nervousness. He was a sweet bird but easily cowed by Mac. And even though they appeared to be compatible there were never any signs that they were really bonding. Mac did spend a lot of time in the nest box, as did Jamie. But we were never aware of any copulation.

A few months after we had put the two birds together, we moved to a larger house. The stress of moving plus the scant care given to the birds helped to contribute to my overlooking the first signs of illness in Jamie. I had been feeding and watering the birds, but had not spent very much time in observation. Also I had been very lucky in that we had seen very little illness in our birds and when I first observed the diarrhea in Jamie, I

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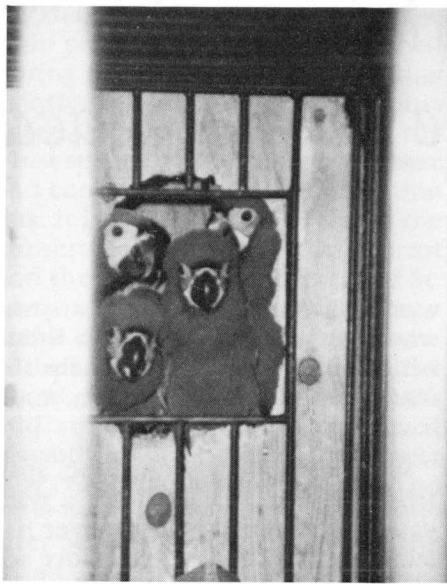
basically dismissed it. By the time I realized that he had become weakened, it was too late and he died a day later. This was all in the space of four days from the first symptom. Our vet at the time tried valiantly to save him. Dr. Sims luckily loved birds and knew what coccidia looked like and began treatment for coccidia, even before the test results came back. Jamie was necropsied and it was determined that he had had a chronic case of coccidia. If we had had tests done on his feces and blood before we purchased him, we could have been alerted and possibly saved his life.

Mac reverted back into a pet bird and became a total pest. She had to be with Jeff and would even climb the stairs looking for him. It didn't take too long before Jeff decided that as much as Mac loved him, it would be better for all concerned if Mac had a new mate. So the search began again. We looked all over the country and saw very few for sale. Just about the time we had decided to bite the bullet and send away for an expensive bird we had seen advertised in Florida, a call came in from a friend. She had been out at a local bird collector and had seen a Severe Macaw. After determining that it was a male and for sale, she called us.

I went and looked at him a couple of days later, decided that he was all that we were looking for and made Jeff come out a day later to look at him. At first Jeff wasn't too sure, but then Mac decided the matter for him. She became even more obnoxious and finally Jeff gave in and we purchased Soc. However, before the purchase we had a vet take a look at a fecal sample. No serious disease was present and we took Soc home. He was to stay in quarantine for a minimum of 30 days. We had him isolated upstairs away from our other birds. And we tried to make sure that Mac would stay downstairs. It worked for 28 days.

Then Mac managed to outsmart us and found her way up the stairs. I think we can say that it was lust and love at first sight for both birds. Mac reverted to acting like a wild caught bird right away. We could no longer handle her. It really wasn't worth our fingers or face to handle either bird without a pair of welder's gloves.

We had been keeping them on an open stand in the entryway until we could build a permanent cage for them. And they did stay put for quite awhile in their temporary quarters.



Three of four youngsters peer out of the nest entrance along with their mother, Momma Mac. This was just before they fledged.

Then came the day when Mac, who had regained full flight (without our knowledge), decided that Jeff, her former mate, was now a threat to her and Soc. This particular evening she flew at him and threatened him with severe bodily injury. That night we took some fencing material and fenced them in.

A few weeks later they attempted to gain the entire upstairs for themselves by using the sheer volume of their voices to drive us away. All it accomplished for them was to ensure their prompt removal to the laundry room and a smaller cage. It was meant to be a temporary cage. But

when the screaming has gone on for six or seven hours straight, the birds are lucky that they even get a cage and not a box in the closet. We moved them to a smaller cage which only measured two by two by three feet. It was ample as a temporary cage and since we attached the nest box to the cage Mac and Soc didn't care where we placed them. By this time I had built them a new nest box measuring 16" x 16" x 32". Similar dimensions had been suggested in a book we had purchased on the breeding of macaws. I believe that the original dimensions suggested had been in the nature of 15" x 14" x 30". All I did was have a sheet of plywood cut down into equal pieces. On the inside of the box, on the side where the opening would be, we took some fencing material, (2" x 3", 18 gauge) and made a ladder attaching it to the side with 1 x 2's. This ensured that the edges could not be pulled free and we reasoned that this would be relatively secure. We cut a hole near the top, but purposely made it on the small side. After having observed cockatiels personalizing their nestboxes, we thought that macaws might enjoy doing the same. It took Mac and Soc all of one day to enlarge the hole to where they could fit comfortably inside.

In the meantime I was building them a larger cage, but before I could finish it, the birds had laid eggs, and were busily setting on them. We decided not to risk disturbing the birds by moving them into a larger cage. The first clutch didn't hatch.



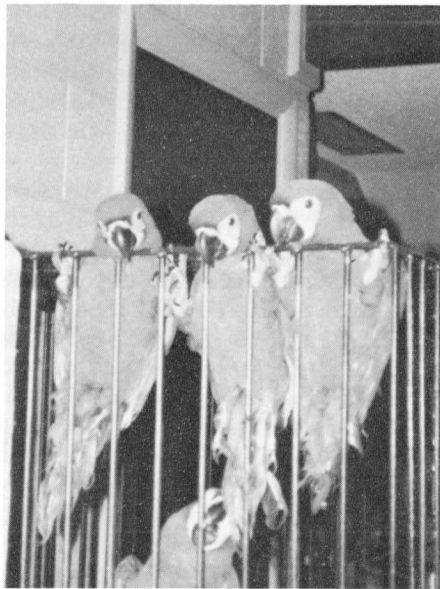
Four young Severe Macaws were successfully reared by their parents in an indoor environment.

Photos by Marianne McOrmie

Both parents sat on the eggs and appeared to share the egg sitting duties although the female did sit on the eggs the majority of the time. A month or so after they had abandoned the eggs we found one of the eggs in the bottom of the cage and Mac busily setting another egg. This time round she laid two eggs and sat on them fully a week past the time that they should have hatched. We decided to take one of the abandoned eggs out and open it up to see what there was inside if anything. Since the egg rattled a little when we shook it we assumed that there was something in it. And there was, a dried up fetus. Well, we were saddened and yet rather elated at the same time. With the way the nest box had been built there was no way of taking the eggs out to be candled. So it was a relief to realize that the eggs were fertile and that there was a good chance of getting baby Severs.

I decided that since Mac had laid two sets of eggs that had not hatched, that there might be some concern about calcium depletion. But before I could get another cage for them, Mac laid again. She didn't look ill, but did look a little depleted. I had been adding crushed oyster shells to their food as well as trying to get them to eat a better balanced diet. It was only now that Mac actually began to try some of the foodstuffs that we had been putting in their cage. She had always eaten the apples and oranges but had shied away from anything more exotic. And of course they had always been given all that they could eat of apples, oranges and grapes. Plus the fact that they ignored virtually every green vegetable I put in their dishes. I also put Blair's Superpreen in the seed.

After Mac had been setting this particular set of eggs for three weeks, she suddenly began acting even more aggressive than usual. A couple of days before the possible hatch date, I noticed both birds taking the slices of apple I had been giving them and heading into the nestbox with them. I just thought they wanted a snack. We had been checking the eggs every couple of days, just to accustom Mac and Soc to our right to look in on them. The next time we checked them, the birds had laid slices of apple around one of the eggs. The apple just barely touched the one egg and there was none around the other egg. We thought that this was a little



Three of the young Severe Macaws attain a characteristic pose at the top of their cage. Their father can be seen below.

peculiar but really didn't pay any mind to it. A few days after the first apple slice had been placed beside the egg, I pecked in and something looked funny inside the box. I could see one egg but the other had disappeared and there was something moving. The interior of the box was so dark that it was hard to see anything. I must have looked down into the box for 5 or 10 minutes before it dawned on me that the little object moving on the bottom of the box was a new hatched baby.

I flew up the stairs to the phone. I had to call Jeff who was on a jobsite to tell him the news. I didn't sound like myself and he actually had to ask who I was. He couldn't figure out who this crazy lady was who was trying to tell him that they had a baby. It wasn't until the crazy lady said macaw baby that he figured out who it was.

After I hung up the phone, I was in an agony of indecision. Had I really seen what I thought I saw? Could it have been wishful thinking, or was there really a little baby in the bottom of the box?

When Jeff got home a little later he did confirm that I was sane and that our beautiful Severe Macaws were now parents.

We did have some concerns about how they would take to parenthood. But both of us feel that our birds should raise at least the first clutch so that they can learn to be parents. We kept a very close eye on the birds the first 24 hours and then the next 48

hours as we had been told that this was so critical. Then there was the next 2 weeks to wait out. And through all of this Mac and Soc performed like seasoned pro's. Every time we checked on the baby, who we named First, his little crop was full and he looked fat and happy. Plus his growth rate was phenomenal. We were privileged to be able to watch Mac feeding First. By her incredible care in opening his little beak and the gentleness she showed in feeding him, I don't think a human mother could have been more sweet with a new born baby.

First thrived and grew like a little weed. The first feather follicles were a good reason for celebration. For every first that this little bird did we celebrated. Mac and Soc were fiercely protective of their baby and each other, although Soc did look somewhat confused from time to time. If there was any movement around his cage, he would come boiling out.

We aren't real sure when First actually weaned. We suspect that it was sometime in November, but the little sneak had her parents conned into feeding her sporadically into December. And since she was



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hatched July 25, 1989, that would place her right around 16 to 18 weeks of age which, from what I have been able to find out, would be normal for this species. Another of the reasons that we wanted First to be parent raised, was she will be used as a breeder when she matures. I only use "she", because that is easy to use for the time being. We will be having First sexed sometime in the future.

In the middle of October we had a new cage built and delivered and moved the birds from the laundry room to the family room. All the birds adjusted quite well to the move, and Mac and Soc seemed to revel in the new space.

First was still in with her parents at this point, and we did have some concerns about whether her parents would continue feeding her. But they all adjusted extremely well to their new surroundings.

We decided to let First stay with her parents as long as possible, although we did remove her for a period of time each day to accustom her to being handled.

The middle of January 1990, the parents began to pick on First and we decided that she should be removed from the cage for her own safety.

Mac and Soc began copulating again almost immediately but waited until April to lay eggs. This time she laid four eggs and even though we were concerned about the calcium depletion of her body, she appeared to be in good health. Her diet at the time consisted of all the fresh fruit she could or would eat, plus a lot of peanuts and some sunflower seeds. The regular seed mixture fed to them is Vita-bird Hookbill.

Mother's Day, May 13th, gave us a lovely surprise, a brand new baby.

We observed the birds carefully and they took excellent care of this newest arrival. The following Wednesday, May 16th, another baby hatched and on Saturday, May 19th, the third egg hatched. All three babies were being taken care of. The diet we were feeding the parents changed a little. Luckily for us the earliest corn was just coming in the stores at this time so we relied heavily on that. They began going through an ear of corn, an apple, half an orange, one or two plums and some grapes each day. This was in addition to the increased sunflower seed intake. During this time I also fed some organically grown broccoli, Swiss chard and other safe green veggies. I also purchased some mangos, but the birds weren't too impressed with them. I always feed the birds some popcorn, saltines and whole wheat bread, at all times. Any salted foods are given sparingly, but I have noticed that the birds seem to crave the salt, and seem to do better when given some salt in their diet.

The three babies grew rapidly and it didn't take long for them to double in size, and then double again. We kept on with the routine of checking their nestbox at least once or twice a day and would also pick up the babies to check them over, make sure they were maintaining their body weight and were in general good health. Besides which, it's hard not to pick up and cuddle a baby macaw.

We named the birds in this clutch, Second, Third and Fourth. Second and Third fledged within hours of each other. They were the most aggressive in wanting attention from their parents and us. Fourth fledged several days after the first two. Her

personality was very hesitant and she would hold back from being picked up. The older two would hang on the sides of the cage when my husband would walk by, begging to be let out for a quick cuddle and a treat.

We noticed that, size-wise, these three babies appeared to be a little larger than First. We attributed this to the fact that the diet given their parents was superior to the diet given them during the time First was being fed.

In October the three babies were beautifully feathered out and weaned. The only exception to this was the fact that during their stay in the nest box they managed to break all their primary wing feathers. Plus the fact that young macaws resemble puppies in their play and are not exactly gentle with each other. They also managed to break all their tail feathers off. However, at the age of nine months, they are now molting and growing in gorgeous new tail and wing feathers.

After the babies fledged, they proceeded to eat the nest box so we were forced into making a new one. But we held off placing it on the cage until the babies had been taken away for good.

A lesson we had learned after the first clutch was that an abrupt removal of the baby increased the noise level in the house for a few days, mainly because the parents called to the baby and vice versa. This time round we started removing the babies for a couple of hours at a time and increased the time of separation until one day we simply didn't put them back. And this seemed to work out very well. There didn't appear to be any kind of anxiety at being taken away from each other.

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After placing the new nest box on the cage, we observed an increase in copulation. This went on for several weeks. At the end of November we went out of town for a few days. During the time we were away Mac laid two eggs, with a third one laid the day after we returned. The one egg hatched on December 26th. During the month of December the humidity level in the house was very low. We think this is why only one egg hatched.

This single chick grew and thrived for several weeks. We checked the nest box one day and one leg was sticking straight up in the air. We'd never seen anything like this before. And not wanting to make a bad situation even worse, we elected to do nothing to this bird until our veterinarian could check him out. Luckily for us, Dr. Corey Nebecker, our vet, is also a bird lover and quite knowledgeable about avian matters. Dr. Nebecker also practices not too far from our home and was able to come by within the hour after we called him. Again we were lucky that we happened to call him when he had an open spot in his appointment book. At this time we elected not to remove the baby bird from his parents until such a time as was needful to do so. After Dr. Nebecker arrived, we retrieved the baby from his nest box and Dr. Nebecker examined him. He determined it was a left Femuro Tibular Joint Luxation. Basically, his knee went out of joint. Cause, possibly a genetic malformation, malposition in the egg, a developmental problem or most probably, a parent caused injury.

At any rate, the treatment was reasonably simple. We had to put the joint back in place and keep it there. To keep it in place a hobble was put on, in effect making the good leg hold the bad leg in place.

This was to have been left in place for a period of two weeks. However, it did need to be checked every few days to make sure that all was proceeding normally. All of this took place on a Friday. The following Wednesday I took the baby back to Dr. Nebecker to have the hobble changed and check on the joint. Because of the fact that we did have to hobble the chick, I had started to hand feed him. The hobble was changed and a new one was placed on the legs. All appeared normal. The following day I noticed that the hobble had slipped a little. On Friday, I

was to take the chick back to have the hobble checked again. Friday morning I noticed a discoloration and a slight swelling in the leg. We were already scheduled to go in that afternoon, so I kept the chick as quiet as possible for those few hours. In the afternoon, when we went in Dr. Nebecker determined that the leg was broken, and took x-rays to see exactly where the break occurred. We discovered that there were breaks in the proximal and distal of the Tibiotarsus. We then splinted the leg with a Hexalite molded splint. This was to be kept on for a period of four weeks and then the leg was to be x-rayed again. With any luck the splint could be removed at that time.

The splint was removed and the leg x-rayed after four weeks. The leg had healed beautifully, but because of the nature of the breaks and the location, a total immobilization of the leg was not easy to effect. So the leg had what is called a mal-union. However, because of the age of the chick (just barely past nine weeks of age) we all believe that the leg will straighten itself out. For the moment, the knee appears stiff and the muscles somewhat wasted. But since, the leg has

only been out of its' splint a few days, there is still plenty of time.

The parents were observed copulating a few days after this chick was pulled and had laid three new eggs within three weeks of us pulling this chick. The first egg hatched right on schedule with the second egg hatching a couple of days after the first. The third egg did not hatch. Barring any unforeseen circumstances, we will allow them to raise any more babies on their own.

We made a choice when we allowed Mac to follow her natural instincts. She was ready to mate and wanted to do so. I am sure that we could have kept her as a wonderful pet for many more years. But it would not have been fair to her or to her species in general.

I would like to urge others who have a single bird who is exhibiting mating urges, to allow it to breed, whether by setting the birds up yourself, having a breeding loan with another like-minded individual, trading the bird or selling it outright. Aviculturists have a responsibility and a duty to ensure the continuation of all avian species in the best way we know how. ●

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