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# The Natural Choice



by Eb Cravens  
Santa Fe, New Mexico

## Once a Gray, Always a Gray...

*"A cat made her lodgings in one of the nest boxes and brought up her kittens in it, and two of the gray parrots who had not been industrious enough to lay eggs and have a family of their own were seized with the idea that these kittens were their children; they kept up a constant warfare with the old cat, and whenever she left the box one of them used to get in and sit with the kittens, and they were constantly in attendance even when the mother was home."*

*Charles Buxton, England, 1880s*

It has been over 270 years since the first documented breeding of a pair of African Gray Parrots by a western aviculturist. Millions of hookbill keepers have maintained a lasting love affair with this intriguing old-world psittacine.

Demand for these vulture-looking gray parrots with the perceptive eye and the virtuoso voice seems to become only stronger with the years. Locating new sources for handfed baby grays in a market never saturated is like trying to obtain male canaries in September. "Sorry, all sold, thank you!"

With recent breeder success amongst hundreds of Timneh Gray Parrot pairs set up during import booms the past ten years, one would think things a bit easier. Not so. We have customers in our area who own two or three parrots, yet still come in declaring, "I've always wanted a pet gray. I'm only waiting for the prices to come down."

It may be a long wait. Even handfed timneh prices have risen the past few years to a level comparable to red-tailed birds. The last lingering criticism of timnehs as "junk parrots" among unenlightened dealers near southern quarantine stations has all but disappeared. It's about time.

"Timnehs were always considered the poor man's gray," ventures Don Wells, one of southern California's most experienced hookbill breeders. "Yet we find our timneh chicks can be the nicest gray babies. They are outgoing, comical, more voiciferous than our red-tailed grays — less likely to just sit there."

"I find the timneh personality calmer, less neurotic," said Bonnie Zimmerman, owner of a small, impeccable facility near Los Angeles. "Half my

breeders are domestic bred, half wild-caught. The domestic birds may not produce as many babies for me, but there are no thrashings in the nest like during an earthquake."

Though it is too early to present concrete evidence, some aviculturists characterize the Timneh Gray as less likely to turn to feather picking in unhappy situations. Picture this: baby gray comes into his new home, is cuddled and fawned over by the family for weeks. Then begins a transition. Routine settles back to normal; perhaps the kids go back to school. The new gray is like a toy whose first attraction has worn off. Extra food, treats and attentions are lessened. He spends more time in his cage. Presto! Boredom and frustration followed by feather picking. We've had adorable red-tailed gray babies who are sold into seemingly agreeable pet homes return with plucking habits barely 18 months later! Why grays, everyone is asking? And why the larger red-taileds in particular?

Randy Snow, a reputable breeder and aviary consultant in the Willamette Valley, Oregon, explains the situation this way. "You have to remember there are a tremendous number of grays out there" he said. "In Amazons, if one bird in ten plucks, we think little about it. But, in grays, if ten birds in 100 pick, or 100 birds in 1000; then we call it a problem." These psittacines have been under scrutiny so often and so long that pet owners and breeders are constantly debating their habits and propensities.

For example, are African Grays more intelligent than many other parrots? They certainly have been given opportunity to display talents. Irene Pepperberg's test gray "Alex" is only one of a host of grays with suspected cognitive powers. The truth is, had scientists chosen to work with Yellow-naped Amazons, Green-winged Macaws or Black-capped Lories, the continued years of training would probably bring the same exclamations of intelligence in these species. Since their first "discovery" by Frenchmen traveling to the Canary Islands in the 1400s, the African Gray Parrot has been given the best of chances to strut his stuff!

The past three years, Feathered Friends of Santa Fe, New Mexico has made a conscious effort to specialize in Timneh Gray Parrots as pets. It all

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began with a perhaps five-year-old imported timneh named "Bingo" whose life had taken him from the wilds of west Africa to the importers, through a quarantine station, to a retail pet shop, to one owner, another owner, back to the shop and on to a third owner all within five years.

Bingo was amazing. He was in perfect feather. He would eat most diets. He stepped up on anyone's hand. He did not tremble, growl or bite. The more we touted Bingo's calm maturity, the more stories we began to hear about the adaptability, playfulness and speech talents of this gray subspecies. Three seasons of handfeeding and raising domestic timnehs has confirmed our hunch that this psittacine is a veritable bonanza as a pet. Being distinctly smaller than the red-tail gray, the timneh is often decidedly more agile. "A very convenient size for a shoulder pet," customers remark. Equally friendly to my husband, my kids and me," another buyer observed.

African Grays can be hesitant to jump onto the shoulder of a former handfeeder after months in a new home. Some seven out of ten red-taileds may refuse to get up on a previous keeper's hand without urging from their owner. Reluctant timnehs are fewer. Gregariousness seems to run in this group.

Let us not mistake the purpose here. This is not a subjective "better or not" comparison between African Gray subspecies. In my estimation the red-tailed gray parrot may well be the finest long term pet psittacine available in the U.S. marketplace today! What we are examining are subtle dissimilarities — tendencies that may prove desirable for a hardworking, preoccupied '90s pet owner; or a reclusive, studious owner of a single parrot or an active, high-energy, social night-life bird owner; etc.

A gray is a gray is a gray, right? Well, not quite....

Take the rampant misuse of the word "Congo". Even experienced aviculturists fall into the trap of calling the large red-tailed *erithacus* imported the past few years as the noble Congo Gray. In truth, few if any true Congo (i.e. Belgian Congo, now Zaire) parrots have been brought to the U.S. in nearly ten years! Today's red-tails are shipped from the Cameroons and originate northwest of the

Congo river basin. They are smaller by 100 to 150 grams than the true Congo and males are often darker in coloration unlike the silver/white of both genders in the real Congo. "Once you see a true Congo you will never again be fooled," explained noted aviculturist Dale Thompson. "Most persons say WHAT IS THAT? I mean, they are HUGE!" African Gray subspecies tend to be widely separated by geographical boundaries; larger red-tailed birds from Ghana east into the rainforest; smaller birds west to the timneh's range in Sierra Leone, Liberia and nearby areas.

For centuries red-tailed grays have been valued as house parrots — first by the nobility, the clergy and the wealthy and today by almost any hookbill lover taking the time to locate and purchase one. It is their talking ability and stately behavior which set them apart.

In this, the red-tailed parrot is a near perfect perch psittacine — able to live happily in a wire-free bird room or on an atrium tree without undue noise-making, chewing on woodwork, or venturing beyond its boundaries. Given a peaceful setting, pet red-taileds tend to stay put once out of the juvenile stage when most pet birds go "exploring". A plate of interesting foods, a large water dish, a variety of branches and perches to teach climbing skills and keep feet and beak trim; toys for diversion, perhaps a window or view of life beyond their space and some nice music. Voila! A perfect parrot.

Perhaps another reason this subtly-shaded psittacine fits in the pet market as a companion to young and old is the little recognized fact that African Grays develop very loose pair bonds. During the 1800s, observers in the wilds of Principe Island described colonies of red-tailed grays in various stages of nesting, sometimes using two or three holes in a single tree. Domestically, grays are successfully colony raised; and some breeders note solid results when hens are moved in rotation from cage to cage amongst male birds every year or two. Certain facilities breed row after row of African Grays in close quarters completely shielded from neighboring cages precisely because a bird in one cage may become enamored of a nearby gray and lose interest in producing clutches with its designated

mate.

Such social habits among grays seem to contradict widespread conclusions that grays are "one person" pet parrots. Yet social interactions in a wild state are not necessarily comparable to social needs in a home environment. Many African Gray pets tend to be insecure. In the absence of siblings or colony, the easiest way to cope with insecurity is for a parrot to cling tightly to a preferred human.

Only in the last few years have we begun advising pet gray owners to expose their babies to new and interesting situations, introduce them to congenial people for handling, and teach them words and sounds of scary or dangerous things in their lives (i.e. a pet dog, horse, automobile, bicycle, flag, airplane, flashlight, stereo, etc.). Indeed this is the way to create a more adaptable well-rounded pet gray — not by protective routines, avoiding of all stressful growing situations, or giving in to early habits of a "one-owner parrot."

Grays can be quick to take routine environment and consider it security. Deny your pet access to the bedroom or garage for months at a time and you may end up with a gray frightened to enter either without jumpiness or stress at the new surroundings. Accordingly, to clip a young gray's wings and toenails before it has learned agility skills, hopping and the strength to climb or hang upside down is to risk turning your parrot into a trembling, timid dodo.

The secret of getting the most out of these marvelous psittacines as pets is patience and awareness that they will continue to learn year after year. The sky is the limit for this species.

It is still too soon to assess long term benefits of such extrovert training; but early results are favorable. We have grays who love to ride in the car, for example; others who think nothing of climbing upon a stranger's hand. Truly, this *Psittacus erithacus* is a hearty challenge to any aspiring aviculturist. Above all else, the African Gray Parrot is his own parrot. To get him to do something he must want to do it; to get him to like someone, he must be enticed and his trust earned. Remember, as birds, these parrots are neither black nor white. They must have it like this. As psittacine lovers and scholars, we should want it no other way. ●