

Breeding and Rearing African Greys

by Barry Wold
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The first thing one learns when breeding African Greys is that they are all so different. Each pair will act, react and do things differently. There is not a common denominator such as is commonly found in Amazons, macaws, etc. We have several pairs of greys. Some exhibit the stereotype behavior of greys, of being shy and retiring. Another stereotype is that they will shake from fright when approached, try to hide, and certainly growl. Fortunately we have none that exhibit fear but this may be because of the physical situation of the birds and their cages.

The birds are kept in the same cage, with the nest box attached, year round. The cages are suspended off the ground, and are made of 12 gauge, half by three inch wire. The cages are eight feet long, four feet high and 30 inches wide. They are high enough so that the perches are at least six feet from the ground. This allows the birds to look down on me. The metal nest box is boot or L-shaped. Box dimensions are 18 inches high and long by 11 inches wide. The access hole is four inches square near the top of the L. The boxes are hung on the outside of the cage. There is an inspection door with wire screen so that when the door is opened the birds cannot escape. I feel this is important because several of the pairs will not exit the box when I inspect. The inspection

door on the boot (leg) should also be higher than normal because of the greys' tendency to scratch and pile the nesting material up against the door. I use one inch thick pine boards for flooring and pine shavings above that. The entire inside of the nest box is painted with a flat black paint. The birds seem to feel more secure in the darkness.

The perches are tree branches, usually eucalyptus, located at each end of the cage. At the opposite end from the nest box is the feeding area. A 12 inch square attachment, the width of the cage, holds the water and food dishes. This area is covered. There is a six foot solid divider between cages. At the food end of the cage, two feet are open to adjoining cages. Four feet of the cage is covered on top, including the nest box. At the nest box end, I have hinged plywood that is raised in the summer for ventilation and put down in the winter to protect from the cold winter winds.

The cages are located in an Emu pasture under deciduous oaks. In the winter, the birds get the benefit of the sun, in the summer they are shaded. The Emus do not disturb the greys. Our birds generally sit out in the open during the most inclement weather. They love bathing in the rain and will play in the snow when it is fresh on their cage. Where I live it can get down as low as 15° to 20° F and as

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high as 116°. Generally during December through February the low will be 28°F and in August and September the high will be 105°. No heat is furnished to the birds in the winter.

Greys are fairly consistent breeders. In northern California we have had eggs year round except when the temperature is consistently above 95°F or so (July, August and September). In southern California we had eggs year round. A clutch generally is from two to four eggs. Seldom will a pair raise four chicks though. One can get two to three clutches per year without stressing the birds. I have read of pairs that produce more than three clutches a year, then may shut down and not produce for as long as two or three years afterwards. Therefore, over the long haul, production is not increased by pushing the birds. We pull the babies between 14 and 21 days of age. This allows the parents to give the babies the best possible start and still have multiple clutches. The babies can still be banded at this age and the wear and tear on the hand feeder is much less.

When hand rearing chicks for pets it is not enough just to feed them. They

need to be socialized. We put them in fish aquariums as soon as possible so they can see us. They are put in a playpen when they no longer need heat so they can be with us without walls between us. When we are not in the babies' presence, they are kept in cages. We have received numerous comments on how unusually friendly our greys are. We attribute it to the socializing system we use for all of our birds.

We do not consider greys hard to breed. Because individuals vary so greatly, one may experience great difficulty when dealing with only one or two pairs. Greys do not accept change readily, especially older birds. It is generally accepted that greys do not breed well if housed near or among noisy birds, although I know of breeders who have success even though their greys are housed with Amazons and macaws. We acquired all of our breeders as adults and feel they didn't present any additional problems just because they were older. We found when we separated the greys from the rest of the collection, production improved. We have also been told hand-fed tame males do not breed.

We have no experience to comment on that.

There is a lot of information in print about African Grey Parrots. I will relate some of our experiences (and it may contradict what you have read) so that you can see how differently the birds react. All our birds love to sit out at the open end of their cage, even in inclement weather. They use the perch and do not hang on the wire. Most pairs fly from perch to perch, although a couple pairs climb on the wire unless frightened. They do not react when the Emus come up to their cage or walk by. Usually the dogs (Doberman) can run under their cages without upsetting them. Only when the birds are unaware the dogs are present, will they be startled by them. One pair of greys never use their nest box, including in winter, except when on eggs or feeding babies. A couple pairs will always hide in their box whenever I am present. Others will remain on the perch, at the open end of the cage and talk and whistle at me. Half of my pairs will exit the nest box when I inspect, the other half will remain in the box. None of them will growl at me unless I put my hand into the nest box. The newest birds were added to the collection four years ago so they have had plenty of time to acclimate. There are older breeding birds that are not easily frightened, or that hide all the time or growl. We can view our greys from the house and we have enjoyed watching them. They are active birds and something is always going on. They do not just sit on the perch. I believe this is mostly due to the environment they are in. It is open and natural.

I do not consider greys to be especially quiet. While they generally are not loud and noisy like macaws or cockatoos, they continually chatter most of the day with intermittent whistles. In the country the noise carries but fortunately is not objectionable. The greys are highly intelligent and their antics will continually fascinate you. They are strong, sturdy birds and generally not susceptible to diseases if you get clean stock in the first place. Their value has remained constant even during the recessionary period.

While I do not recommend beginning with greys, with some intensive reading and a little luck it would not be an insurmountable goal to breed African Grey Parrots. ●



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