

Flying Merkel, a Young Amboina King Parrot

by Susie Christian
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What do you do when you have a three week old baby Amboina King Parrot and need to be gone from home for three days to put on an antique motorcycle show? None of your friends who can hand feed want to take the responsibility for a bird so young. Well, you take the bird along with you, by golly! In the process, he does well, gets a great name, and I learned a lot about improvising.

I had Merkel for five days before the show, and was taking him to work with me for his daytime feedings. He was already in a double box situation with a heating pad. Merkel is an Amboina King Parrot which species is exceptionally easy to hand feed and deal with even at two weeks old. For the work situation, I put his "baby cradle" box, which was about 8" x 12", into a larger box, about 18" x 24", with a heating pad on low, under his "cradle box." The remaining room in the larger box was used to transport his formula, teaspoon, thermometer, feeding syringe, extra towels, and tissues for wiping his chin. I happen to like tea towels as opposed to shavings for use under my baby birds, and change them often. At work, we are lucky enough to have a microwave oven, making formula heating easy.

Suddenly, Friday was upon us, and I had no takers for baby bird sitting. I got creative in a hurry! Grabbed a two foot high stack of towels, a large plastic bag to serve as a "diaper pail,"

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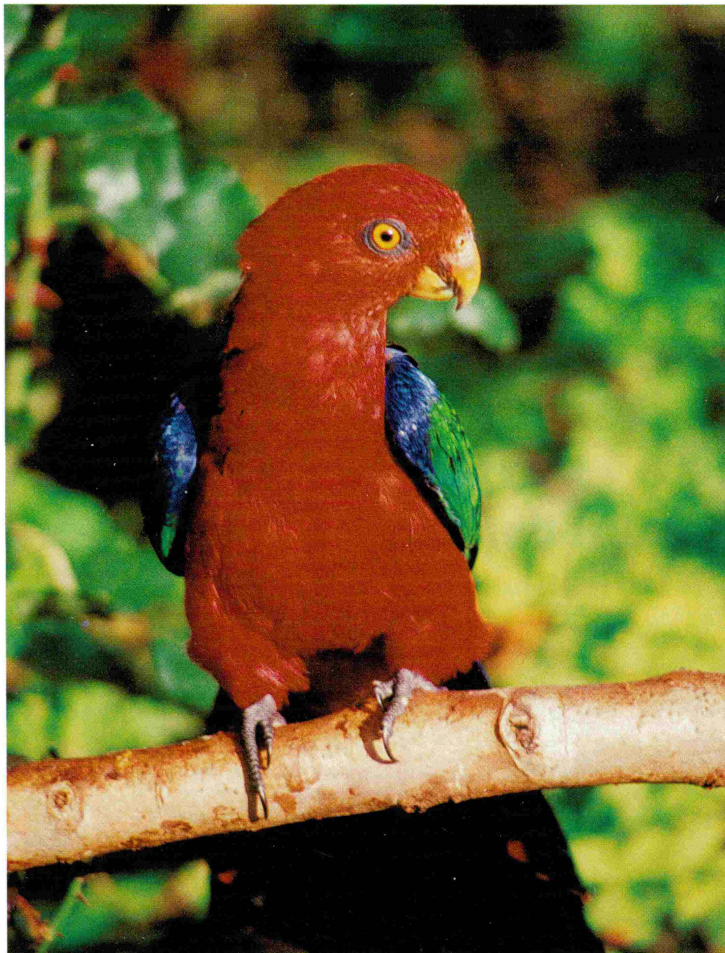
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enough food for him, but forgot to bring a jug of purified water. So guess what? I used our bottled water we drink — the fancy stuff, with pictures of Alpine mountain peaks on the labels. That's got to be good water to mix with hand feeding formula! But how would I heat water for him in a camping situation at the fair grounds in Hanford? I bought what is called a "stinger" at the variety store. About

A vintage motorcycle provided the inspiration to name the formerly unnamed baby Amboina King Parrot.



Merkel, a five month old Amboina King Parrot.



Merkel enjoys fanning his beautiful tail feathers to catch the warm sun on his back.

\$7.00, it is a coil that heats up, on a cord, when plugged into an electric outlet. Perfect, because I always use a glass candy thermometer to make sure of the temperature before feeding, anyhow.

Merkel traveled well the three hours it took us to get to our destination, right beside me on the seat, where I could keep an eye on him. By the time we got there, it was already dark and time for bed. I found a power source and plugged his heating pad in on medium for the night. He needed his last feeding so I put the stinger in a little water in the bottom of a cup. Apparently I didn't leave it in long enough and had put the powdered formula in already, so when I put the stinger back in to get it hotter, lots of formula baked on the coil part. It was messy and wouldn't come off readily. I quickly learned how hot to get the water, then take the coil out, *before* adding the powder. Maybe even over-heat the water. It only takes a few minutes to cool down to feeding temperature outdoors.

Because it was early May and the evening was mild, I slept on the ground under the stars with Merkel right beside my head so I'd hear him if he stirred. I put a light cotton towel over his box to retain the heat for him. We slept very comfortably; however, one of my friends who was patrolling the show bike area that night reported that two cats were within a few feet of us at one point during the night. I was glad I had Merkel so close to me. That would have been an expensive meal for two undeserving stray cats!

Short term baby sitters to keep an eye on him were plentiful and watched him faithfully when I had to be off taking photos, etc. I fed him on his regular schedule, and it was really only a little more trouble than at home. As the day warmed up, I turned the heating pad off and kept him in the shade. He became a little over-warm in the late afternoon and I noticed he didn't eat quite as enthusiastically for the latter half of the day, either. I fed him smaller amounts and oftener during this time, and I made the consistency of his food more watery, figuring it would slide down better. He probably needed more moisture, anyhow. I took him out of his box occasionally so the air could circulate around him. We even took a walk around the swap area of old

motorcycles, Merkel and I, being careful to stay in the shade when we could.

As yet I hadn't picked out a name for the hopeless looking little guy with beads of pabulum clinging to his whiskers, resembling an over-ripe fig with fuzzy mold all over it. While we were strolling amongst the vintage iron, we found a beautiful old motorcycle called a "Flying Merkel." The name just jumped (flew) out at me. Flying Merkel! It was a perfect name for the bird, too. So we took a photo of the newly named bird, with his wings obligingly extended, in front of his motorcycle namesake.

That night we got to stay in an air conditioned motel room with no hungry cats to threaten our existence. It was all down hill from here! A motel room is a cinch compared to roughing it. I had a handy electric outlet, a proper level table to feed him on, controlled room temperature, and a close sink to wash out feeding utensils in.

Of course, the trip home went smoothly too. I've found that taking baby birds in a car is not a problem at all. A three to five hour trip bothers us more than it does them. They are good travelers as long as we have them in a suitable size cardboard box, big enough for them to move around in just a bit. Then I make a "nest" of towels tucked around them for warmth and security. I put another towel over the top of the box, to hold their body heat in, regulating the temperature in the box by how much of the box the towel covers. By watching the baby bird, I check to see if he looks too hot, beak apart, wings lowered. If he is, I remove the towel for a bit.

"Flying Merkel" proved to be a very easy to please, not demanding baby bird, and weaned himself very promptly at about eight weeks old. The first foods he ate were Roudybush Crumbles, softened with fruit juice, apples and oranges. Since then, he now eats everything put in front of him. He's like a garbage can with feathers. He also really devours the tender young blooms of our flowering Eucalyptus.

I have found my Amboina King Parrot to be a very unusual bird, indeed. I can't pigeon-hole him or compare him to anything I've ever seen or had before. Maybe, vaguely, he has some rosella habits. Merkel is

dazzling in his feather color scheme of red, blue and green, with the longest tail I have ever seen. He looks like a stretch limousine, and I swear it takes him five minutes to get all of his tail through the cage door. His legs look like they belong on a Kangaroo and his thighs look like he's wearing red pantaloons, with these too-tiny little feet peeking out underneath. Merkel's whole head shape is more elongated than most birds I'm used to looking at, and his brilliant orange eyes seem to literally snap out of his face. Of course, his most outstanding feature is his incredible tail, which he takes great pride in. Merkel loves the sun most of all, and he'd rather live outside than indoors during the day. As soon as the sun hits his cage, he turns his back to the sun and fans his tail out, remaining motionless this way for hours. It looks to me like he uses his great tail to soak up sun's rays and energy like a solar panel.

Flying Merkel is the quietest bird I have in my large bird family. I don't know if Amboina Kings ever talk, and it really doesn't matter. It's nice to have a *quiet* bird for a change. He has a cute little whistle that sounds like a button quail, and at night if we don't let him out of his cage to watch TV with us he makes a mournful cry that would move anyone to tears.

A helpful technique I've discovered to tame down a hyper young bird is to spend evening TV hours with them in a darkened room. I lie on the sofa with a light blanket over me, put the bird on my chest, with its body under the blanket and the head peeking out, and rub its head while I cuddle it. The darkness, blanket, and body contact calms the bird down. I did this several years ago with my "Rosella from Hell" and saw excellent results. To this day, the rosella, not usually a cuddly bird (as most rosella fanciers know), still comes over on her own to crawl under the blanket with me. Needless to say, Merkel loves his "blanket time," too.

Everything tends to work out exactly as it should. Because I had to take a three week old baby bird with me to a motorcycle show, I gained lots of new knowledge about being creative, resourceful and improvising. I have no doubt I'll use what I've learned with future baby birds, and I'm glad to have the opportunity to pass what I've learned on to others. ●