

The Sun Conure Experience

by Alan Lipsig
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So you've decided to try breeding one of the conures. You've had some experience with cockatiels, canaries and budgies, and your next logical step seems to be conure breeding. You've looked at all the conures and, like many people, when you walked into a room full of Sun Conures and they started screaming you thought none of that! Why would anyone want a baby that makes that much noise? You could never hear yourself think.

While breeding rooms can be loud with all of the pairs competing for attention, a handfed baby Sun Conure *Aratinga solstitialis* is not necessarily loud. The Sun Conure, while not a great talker, can learn to imitate sounds. My pet Suns, which are in the

front window, make great watchbirds letting me know when someone is coming up the walk. If a stranger is in the house, they fluff up and let me know about the intruder until they're sure I'm safe. After all, I am part of their flock. As for loud, you can expect the normal parrot calls as they say good morning and good night to the world, and occasionally they do get carried away. But for the most part, they are incredibly sweet.

Suns, if handfed and handled from two weeks, can be loving, cuddly, fairly quiet pets with close bonds to their owners. If taught to socialize early, they become outgoing and gregarious, and will go to almost anyone. Very few things are as nice to wake up

to as my Angel (her name) climbing out of her cage with a loud, "Gimme a kiss" with everybody in the room imitating her kissing sounds.

All right, you're convinced. You'd like to try breeding Suns, but you're not sure just what's involved.

First of all, contact every breeder you can and ask questions. Too many people go into breeding without enough knowledge and in that situation the birds are the ones hurt the most. If the breeder will allow you, check out their breeding rooms, but don't be disappointed if they won't let you in. You'd be amazed at how Suns will react to strangers. I once allowed my sister to look into my breeding area from the doorway, and on later inspection found two dead babies and a broken egg. Be sure and ask questions about anything, but especially about the four most important points which are, in my opinion, breeding stock, environment, housing and diet.

Breeding Stock

Should you start with handfed or parent-raised breeding stock? If the option is available, parent-raised would be best and a handfed female paired with a parent-raised male next. Two handfed babies may provide nothing but clear eggs for quite a while, until the male figures out what he's supposed to do. This can frequently be overcome by placing the pair within view of a proven pair so they can watch and learn. In addition, look for a pair with a background of prolific parents and grandparents as this trait seems to be genetic. Try for a pair about one and a half years old or older. If someone offers you a proven pair, ask yourself "why are they selling them?" Why would anyone give up a prolific proven pair? You might be better off starting with a young pair and watching them grow into maturity. Most important, be sure to look for healthy, alert birds with clear eyes, a strong voice and clean vents, feathers and toes. This may seem obvious but, on occasion, all of us get carried away by excitement and forget the simplest of precautions.

Environment

At California Flights of Fancy, we keep our Suns in a controlled environment in an enclosed building. Walls are insulated with white soundproofing for easy cleaning and happier



Photo by George D. Dodge and Dale R. Thompson

The Sun Conure, due to its brilliant oranges and yellows, is well established in American aviculture.

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neighbors. The ceiling has foil insulation and full spectrum lights are suspended from the beams, as are the cages. To give the birds a more natural environment, we try to provide a "breeding season" of about eight months. We do this by setting the lights on a 12 hour timer for eight months, then reduce the light time by 15 minutes per day until they are set for nine hours. They are left on this setting for approximately a month, then increased at the same pace of 15 minutes per day to give the birds a "winter" during which to recover from breeding. Each pair gets three to six months outside after two breeding seasons, providing time to regenerate under natural sunlight.

Housing

Cages may vary in size from breeder to breeder. Here in California, many seem to prefer what they call a "California breeder," a cage three feet wide and high and six feet long, using 1/2 x 3 inch galvanized welded wire. We prefer a smaller cage, 24 x 24 x 30 inches. The Suns don't have as much room to play, and seem to "get down to business" sooner. In addition, these cages are easier to clean. I know one breeder who has a roll of butcher paper mounted at one end of the room, and simply throws away the previous day's paper and rolls out a fresh one. This gives her the chance to check the droppings each day and will point out any problems in the feces, one of the best ways to spot illness early. An alternative is to provide a sealed cement floor making cleanup easier and minimizing the chance for bacterial problems. In addition, bowls are cleaned daily and soaked in disinfectant, then rinsed thoroughly to remove any remaining disinfectant. Some people feel this may be excessive, but we have had no disease problems. Perches are of natural wood, frequently from eucalyptus trees in my neighborhood. People always give me a strange look when I spot some trees, pull a branch lopper from the trunk and fill up the back seat.

The nestbox is a standard deluxe cockatiel box, 10 x 10 x 12 inches high, filled to about six inches deep with pine shavings. Don't worry if you put in too many shavings because no matter how hard you try to give the eggs a soft cushion, the parents will

still throw out shavings until they reach the bottom of the box, then lay their eggs on the bare wood. All we can do is try and hope for the best.

Diet

Diet is probably the most important thing in breeding any parrots. When I started to breed parrots, I read enough in the different books and magazines to totally confuse me and most of the authors make excellent points. The logical thing to do, therefore, is to take what works for you from each of them. Keep in mind that while some seed companies say their seeds or, for that matter, their pelleted foods are "complete" diets, in our opinion there is no such thing. Vitamins which are added to seed are usually on the shell which is the first thing to hit the floor when the bird starts to eat what's inside. Pelleted foods, while containing the basic vitamins and minerals, can't take into account the weight, eating habits and health of a particular bird.

Our standard diet can be divided into two main parts. The first part is a combination of a soaked bean mix combining dried soybeans, peas, popcorn and red wheat. This mix, along with lentils, red beans, black-eyed peas and barley, is soaked in a crock pot for four hours, then cooked for four hours. Using a crock pot and a timer allows you to do your cooking overnight. Fifteen minutes before the mixture is done, we add an equal amount of frozen mixed vegetables. This gives the vegetables time to defrost, but not enough time to cook away the nutrients. To this mix we add some pellets and seed. This combination totals about 50 percent of the daily feeding.

The balance of the daily feeding is fresh produce including green, leafy vegetables such as collard greens, Swiss chard, Brussel sprouts and broccoli, all of which are high in vitamin A and calcium, two vitamins frequently lacking in birds. We also add what are commonly called yellow vegetables such as squash and carrots. (Can someone tell me how a zucchini or carrot is yellow? But I digress.) Some people hold back the fruit in the diet for the afternoon, but I find the birds eat more if they find some of their favorites mixed in, such as tangerine, pomegranate or apple. If the weather is cool, we sprout sunflower, saf-

flower, red wheat, corn and millet to add to the mix.

Keep in mind that bacteria grows quickly in these food combinations, so be sure and remove the food after a few hours. We leave a bowl of seed, a combination of large hookbill, cockatiel mix and pellets, in the cage at all times. For feeding the daily fresh mix, each bird gets about two tablespoons full and we use the small cardboard tray you get French fries in at a fast food restaurant. They are biodegradable, easy to clean up and the birds have a ball ripping them to shreds after they eat.

During breeding season for outdoor birds and all year round for indoor birds, we add calcium with D3 to the food. This is especially important for indoor birds because even with full spectrum lighting their systems cannot manufacture enough D3, essential for the breakdown and absorption of calcium. We also provide a mineral block and cuttlebone at all times, and add a good multi-vitamin twice a week.

Finally, a point we feel is important enough to save for last. If you don't have a good working relationship with a qualified avian veterinarian, please find one before you start. Most veterinarians are not really experienced in the treatment of exotic birds and if you wait, you may wind up with both an expensive bill and no bird to show for it. Remember that birds instinctively hide their illnesses so the other birds won't pick on them and by the time you notice something is wrong it may be too late. Better safe than sorry.

So you want to breed Suns. Good for you. They are absolutely wonderful birds, in great demand in the pet industry and are a delight to watch. Hopefully, we've given you a few pointers that will help but before you try, do some more investigating. Read everything you can and talk to everyone possible. Most areas have a bird club or two and there are usually qualified breeders at the club meetings who will be glad to share some advice with you.

Good luck, but you'll have to excuse me now. Angel and Bedlam (her mate) have just let me know that one of the babies I'm handfeeding (we pull them at two weeks, but that's another story) has just flown out of its weaning cage. Now, where did I put those scissors for clipping wings? ●