

Handrearing Parrots: Theory and Practice

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It is difficult to sit down and write a comprehensive article on handrearing parrot chicks. One of the biggest problems is the fact that there are so many exceptions to the rules and so many variables that would apply. It might make more sense to write a series of articles dealing with each and every variable as a separate subject. When all of this information is put together into one journal it would serve as a guide to handrearing.

Theoretically, handrearing could be an easy task. The keeper need only fill the crop with nutritious food each time it is empty and in a few short weeks, the chick would be ready for the weaning process. This is, of course, assuming that the temperature of the brooder was right, the chick never became ill during the feeding process, and the food was correct both in temperature and in nutrition. In many cases, this ideal situation is a reality. However, there are times when things do not go according to plan and the entire protocol must be changed.

Let's look at the ideal situation as a place to start. An egg in the incubator has pipped and will hatch in the next two days. Now is the time to get supplies ready for the task of handfeeding. A brooder or incubator will be needed to supply heat for the chick. Syringes, feeding tubes, gavage needles or a spoon will suffice as a feeding instrument and some type of handfeeding formula should be on hand. When researching the proper food to feed, always consult with an experienced breeder who has successfully reared the species in question. Most of the powdered instant formulas available today have evolved into good products and can be used on a variety of different species.

Once the chick has hatched, it must be kept at a temperature of about 95-97° F for the first week to 10 days. When chicks are very young they do not have the ability to regulate their own body

temperature and need the addition of heat if they are to survive. Some breeders use an aquarium and a heating pad to provide this heat. My only caution is that most heating pads are not very stable and may get very hot at times. If this pad is against the glass bottom of the aquarium, the glass often gets hot enough to scorch the skin of the chicks. It is often better to invest in a brooder made especially for brooding young parrot chicks. They are not as expensive as they used to be and are a lot more predictable than heating pads or light bulbs.

A stable environment is very important for the growing chick. If the temperature is allowed to get too hot, the chick may not grow properly. Similarly, if the chick gets too cold, digestion may cease or slow and once again, growth and weight gains will not be normal. To a certain extent, extreme temperature variations can cause illness in the chick. If bacteria are present in the chick, and it is chilled or over heated, the immune system may allow an over growth of this bacteria and the chick will become ill. The first sign of illness is usually "crop stasis" or a slowing or stoppage of the crop motility.

The day old chick requires some special treatment. When it is newly hatched, the chick will have a very small crop capacity. As the chick grows, this crop will also grow and the requirement to feed will become less frequent. The first few feeds should be of a very liquid consistency, almost as thin as milk. Feeding thin formula for a few days or a week is wise as it helps the chick to hydrate its body and to get all the organ systems functioning correctly. If formula is fed too thick, it may remain in the crop and the chick could become ill as bacteria establish themselves in the undigested food.

The first two weeks of life are a very labor intensive time for the handfeeder. Many chicks require feeding about every

two hours around the clock. In the beginning, some may even empty the crop in an hour or less. Whenever the crop has emptied, it is time to feed again. The more food that passes through the chick's system, the faster it will grow and the easier the rearing process will become. Slowly thicken the formula to the consistency recommended by the manufacturer. If digestion stops, or slows drastically, add a little water to the next feed to assist in digestion until the bird's system can accommodate the new consistency.

Although not absolutely necessary, weight data is helpful to monitor the chick's progress. A postal scales can be purchased and the chicks can be weighed each morning to see if they are growing. Generally, chicks should gain weight each and every day during the growing phase. Very small chicks will only gain very small amounts of weight. Do not expect a 10 gram chick to gain 5 or 10 grams each day. If a weight gain is noticed at all, the chick is growing and is probably healthy. At no time should a weight loss be considered normal. If chicks lose weight they are not receiving enough food or are not being fed often enough. Increase the amount and/or the frequency of feeding. If this does not correct the problem, the formula itself may be in question. Make sure the formula is being made according to the manufacturer's suggestions.

Each day, try to increase the amount of food that is being fed to the chick. These increases will not be large amounts. The crop can only take so much food before the formula will spill over into the mouth and possibly cause choking to occur. Always observe the chick after it has been fed. It should resume normal vocalizations within a minute of being fed. If it is having difficulty in breathing or vocalizing, the crop may have been over-filled. Do not be fooled by the chick's solicitation for food. They will continue to solicit more food even when dangerously full. This is a natural mechanism that helps the chick to survive in the nest. If the crop appears to be full and tight, do not feed more food until it has had time to empty.

As the chick grows, the crop capacity will grow. After the first week or two, the chick's crop will hold enough food to maintain it for several hours. This means that the crop will not be completely empty for about three to four hours. This is the stage of development where the handfeeder may be able to get a good

night's sleep. When the chick is on a four hour schedule, it can be fed at about 11PM and will be fine until 6 or 7AM. The short period of time when the crop is empty at night will be of little consequence to its growth. Keep in mind that if the bird is losing weight, it must be fed more food or more often.

Allowing the crop to completely empty between feedings is a good idea. It is not, however, absolutely necessary. Sometimes it is appropriate to "top off" the chick's crop for one reason or another. If the food is fresh and the chick is digesting on a regular basis, this practice will be of no consequence. At least once a day, the crop should be allowed to empty completely. This will assure the handfeeder that no old food still remains in the bottom of the crop to cause sour crop or bacterial problems. From a management standpoint, the morning feed should be fed on an empty crop. This allows for accurate weight data to be collected and provides the chick with a fresh new start for the day.

Cleanliness is another important factor when handrearing parrot chicks. If the brooders or the brooding dishes are allowed to become filthy, bacterial problems are sure to affect the growing chick. All feeding utensils should also be washed between feedings. Sterility is usually not suggested or necessary if there is no history of problems with the chick. This is not, however, an invitation to keep the chick in filth. Dirty environments will eventually cause a problem.

In the wild, the nest cavity of the tree is a miniature "bio-system". A sort of self-cleaning tree cavity, so to speak. The feces and other waste products of the chicks are consumed by harmless insects and microscopic animals that live in the wood. The warmth of the brood keeps these creatures alive and they all work together to benefit each other. In the home brooder, this bio-system does not exist, as such. Therefore, the filth builds up and harmful bacterial agents move in to consume waste products. This often results in the chicks themselves being invaded by harmful microbes. Once a chick becomes ill, it should be treated by an avian veterinarian. Treatment usually consists of antibiotics and/or antifungals.

It is difficult to find the optimum substrate to place under the chicks. The use of tissues or towels is fine as long as they are changed and washed frequently. Be sure the chick can grip this substrate with its feet. Slippery substrate can result in a chick with splayed or displaced legs.

The use of wood shavings or recycled paper products has fallen in disfavor of late. It appears that many chicks will consume these substrates and may die as the foreign material becomes lodged in the digestive system. Food products have also been used as a substrate material. I caution you that bacteria grow rapidly in a food source that has become tainted with feces, water, or moisture of any kind. No matter what substrate you choose, change it frequently to maintain a clean environment for the growing birds.

Temperature requirements change as the chick matures. After the first week the temperature in the brooder can be lowered a degree or two. Species with a large amount of down feathers may not need to be kept at such high brooding temperatures. Observe the chicks when they are sleeping and not being disturbed. If they are restless, pant, or flap their wings, they are probably too warm. Chicks that feel cool to the touch or are slow at digesting their food may be too cool. In most cases, once the chick has developed its down feathers, it may be kept at a temperature of about 85°F. Do not make sudden adjustments to the brooding temperature. Slowly decrease the temperature a few degrees per day until the optimum has been reached. After the actual feathers erupt, most birds can be kept at room temperature as long as they are not subjected to a draft or air-conditioning vents. If birds are getting chilled their digestion patterns will usually change indicating the need for some type of heat source or protection from draft.

When is it time to start weaning a bird? This is a difficult question to answer when you consider the many species that are now being reared in captivity. Some species are weaned by six weeks of age while others may require hand-feeding for five or six months. Each bird will be a little different depending on what species is being reared. Once the feathers are open on most of the body, it is wise to place the young birds into cages and offer them "normal" bird foods. They will often ignore this food for a while but will, one day, begin to nibble. Many species will actually begin to wean when their tail is about half of its adult length. Some lorries and lorikeets may even wean much younger. When dealing with non-aggressive birds, the introduction of a newly weaned bird to the cage may act as a teaching tool for the young birds. Be sure the older bird is not aggressive and that it is healthy before making the introduction. If in doubt, cag-

ing the already weaned birds next to the ones that are just weaning may suffice.

Once chicks begin to nibble on the food that is placed in the cage, it is time to decrease the amount of handfeeding that it receives. If the chick is constantly filled with formula, it may not have an interest in eating on its own. Be sure the bird is actually eating food and not just playing with it. If food is being consumed it will be present in the crop. Feel the crop several times a day to help assess how much food is actually being eaten.

When decreasing the frequency of feeding, the morning feed is usually the first feeding to be cut from the schedule. Make sure a bowl of food is present when a formula feed is eliminated. As the birds learn to eat on their own, gradually eliminate more formula feeds during the day. Make sure the bird has something in its crop before the last feed of the day is removed from the schedule. Once there is no longer a need to feed formula, the bird is weaned. It is a wise to check the bird's food consumption and weight every few days to make sure it eats enough to maintain itself.

Young parrots do lose weight during the weaning process. This is considered normal. Weight losses should not exceed about 15-20% of the total weight just prior to the start of weaning. Always assess the weight or health status of a young bird that is trying to wean. They should not be allowed to get thin or emaciated. If it appears that the bird is not eating sufficient quantities of food, a formula feed may need to be added to the protocol. Generally, this feed should be late in the evening, just before it is time to retire. If a feed is added, the cycle of trying to eliminate that feed starts all over again.

Keep good records and band or identify the young birds that you produce. The day has come when aviculture must be responsible for its actions. There are many organized groups of anti-animal people who seek to regulate or stop the breeding of parrots in captivity. The only way to prove that we are doing our part is to provide the requested data on each and every species that is bred in captivity. Captive parrots have bred to many generations. The only way to prove this is through good record keeping and permanent identification of our young. It will be a sad day when the keeping and breeding of parrots is illegal throughout the United States. We must all do our share to demonstrate the effectiveness of aviculture and captive-breeding of our parrots. ➤