

THE NATURAL CHOICE

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Santa Fe, N.M.



"Patience and the Handfed Male Eclectus"

Among all the psittacine species we have handfed and sold down through the years, none is as gratifying to correctly raise and wean as the male eclectus. Certainly we promote them as a "Cadillac" of the full-sized pet parrots--considering their unsurpassed beauty, their quiet, observant habits, their friendliness to strangers, and their world-class talking abilities.

Notice I said correctly raised and weaned!

For truly this sensitive hookbill genus is a challenge to any handfeeder. To produce the optimum pet one must employ extra time, understanding, and above all patience. To make a mistake or two with a male (or female) eclectus (unlike with many roly-poly or boisterous parrot species) is to risk creating a grudging battleground between bird and keeper. In some cases, one may as well pass the parrot on to another handfeeder in an attempt to begin anew its socialization.

Our intent is not to sound ominous; we only emphasize that this is by nature an advanced pet species and not one to be lightly considered or rushed home with an enthusiastic new owner who has minimal syringe experience!

First a bit of background. Feathered Friends of Santa Fe has since its founding specialized in male eclectus as pets. "Beamer", owner Darlene Vigil's 12-year-old male Red-sided Eclectus, is a

well-known fixture in the shop and around the state. Beamer is an awesome pet. Raised on healthy people food, he is huge. He talks up a storm but never screams. He ignores other parrots, goes to anyone's hand, will not bite, poops away from humans--even was cast as an extra in a western movie with Madeline Kahn when the second day on the set he began repeating, "Action, roll 'em!"

To have Beamer around is to sell eclectus pets, some years two to one over greys, amazons or cockatoos. We prefer Red-sided, slightly calmer in a subjective poll, but also sell Vosmari and the occasional Soloman.

Our recommendation to customers to buy a male (despite loving red ourselves!) stems from the professional position that grown up imprinted male eclectus are definitely easier to pair for breeding with a baby female than the other way around. In this day and age we encourage new parrot owners not to perfunctorily rule out later purchase of a mate for their pet. A well-bonded eclectus pair is an excellent choice to breed in a spare room in the house!

Furthermore, female eclectus pets more often squawk loudly and tend to bond more tightly to a single owner, sometimes to the aggressive exclusion of other birds or humans. (Not to antagonize red eclectus owners, I admit having raised females that were such gentle loving talkers that I was sad at

heart to see them sold from the shop!)

So what is it that makes these furry looking green psittacines unique to handfeed and raise? For starters, they definitely have an ATTITUDE. Even a recently pulled three-week-old baby still without pinfeathers will guard its nursery tub with near savage determination if approached unwarily or is startled. The young pink critter will strike out and bite with pain-causing strength. "Reptilian" is the term I use to describe these chicks which lie coiled like springs beneath the towel in their tub.

We believe this behavior relates directly to instinctive memories of life amongst predators in the wild. Accordingly, we do not encourage rushing young eclectus babies into glass aquariums or lighted surroundings for fear of quelling such normal behavior. Nevertheless, I have breeder friends who absolutely refuse to raise eclectus parrots because of the nasty bites and the attitude of the youngsters!

Patience, we counsel. One has to earn the trust of this species. Hum or whistle the same way each time you enter the nursery. Place a gentle hand on the outside of the tub towel at the back of the baby and talk him out of the darkness. Above all, do not jam the syringe in his face to feed: it resembles a snake, right? So does your finger.

Secondly, eclectus parrots have not the strongly pronounced bobbing feeding motion of other psittacines. Getting a proper load of formula down the gullet of even a willing chick is a bit like feeding a slug! This takes more time, especially for less-experienced feeders. If the pet's neck is turned or not angled correctly, or if the baby is less hungry than normal, a significant amount of formula could be "gargled" in the mouth prior to swallowing. A timid male baby may pull back from what it perceives as uncomfortable or over-assertive feeding to leave a formula mess upon you and its feathers. Warm washcloths and paper towels are a necessity. Take care to guard against aspiration of food into the lungs.

We try to feed quick little squirts with the syringe in a rhythm the bird will tolerate--never more than he can comfortably swallow. Each eclectus seems to be a bit different; letting the parrot indicate its own feeding pace can pay off in a positive behavior as the bird matures.

"I have encountered eclectus babies who did exhibit a bobbing feeding motion when they were extremely hun-

gry," Darlene Vigil explained. "But this was normally only one or two bobs, then stop. I have learned to feed in a one, two, three succession of squirts. When our male feeds the female, he bobs to bring up food, then gives it to her without a motion."

She added that eclectus are "completely different to feed than most other parrot species. They are the most difficult if you do not know what you are doing."

At about seven to eight weeks or when the young male is well into his pinfeather stage is the absolute best time to ship this species as unweaned babies. I have seen many older or fully weaned eclectus pets who emerged from an airline shipping box with a radically different personality than when they went into it eight hours earlier! A single such trauma can doom the new owners to a mediocre pet or a prolonged rehabilitation process. A seven to eight week old bird is comfortable, warm, not too prickly in pins, well fed, and will most likely sleep away the journey. Take great care and patience when removing him from the shipping box, perhaps with a towel and no exposure to inviting fingers. Eclectus should never be shipped in crates with small doors which make removal difficult.

If the new pet is emotionally distressed or angry, give it time and be patient. We hold them in our laps under a soft towel and stroke their head or back gently for about 45 minutes to relax them. Talking softly helps get the baby used to the voice of the new handler.

As the young male passes eight weeks and begins fledgling behavior prior to later weaning, one must be prepared to encounter obstreperous behavior or stubbornness in the pet. Snapping at hands stuck into his cage or fighting with the syringe as it is placed before him are two common events. Most fledgling eclectus seem to consider their cage private territory! We often merely open the cage door and step back to allow the baby to climb out on his own and be social.

Incidentally, these psittacines as pets are notably sedentary much like many African Greys. We therefore stress that a program of correct flight and fledgling be adopted along with a modern progressive wing clipping method to allow eclectus to learn active movement and hopping skills before they are permanently grounded.

If a fledgling is already sold and the

owner has been talked out of handfeeding, we encourage him or her to visit the parrot at least several times a week, if not daily, to begin the familiarization process. Invariably there are "bad days" when the baby does not want to come out of the cage promptly or will be aggressive towards beings nearby. At this stage we recommend a chewable bell toy towards which the pet may learn to channel its aggressions. Sometimes the young males will spend many minutes striking at this toy and uttering "aargh" noises to ward it off! Once again, the object here is to keep fingers out of the way and not attract normal hormonal behavior towards oneself. Be patient and wait for the next mood.

Long before weaning, some males will no longer permit a hand placed behind their head while syringe feeding. These babies are fed by slowly showing and talking the syringe toward them and squirting formula down their throat as they take the mouthpiece into their beak. A subtle pushing motion as the baby food is squirted will help prevent the pet from pulling away from the syringe, causing gruel to spill out on his feathers.

If one does receive a bite there are several ways to react. Above all, we feel it inadvisable to strongly discipline the baby. He is only doing what young males do in the jungles of New Guinea. Pulling away suddenly and showing dismay at the bite has also proven to be a faulty course of action. This is an extremely intelligent and observant parrot species; they must not be shown that biting gets them left alone! One most successful method is to pretend that nothing at all has happened—leaving one's hand calmly in the bird's mouth while the bite is going on, or by laughing and nonchalantly taking back your bleeding finger as the pet lets go. Seriously, they seldom draw blood! Have patience, this too shall pass.

In order to facilitate weaning, it is important to introduce mixed fruits and vegetables, and an assortment of foods into the eclectus cage early. One way of dispensing with the syringe feeding is to mix mushed up monkey chow or soaked pellets with formula for a week to get him used to the taste. Then feed plain mush in the syringe a week. Next begin offering the warm mush with a hand to his beak from a cup which can be hung directly in front of the parrot's perch. Such a progression usually entices the fledgling to switch from for-

mula to mush in a cup.

This is a significant time for any young eclectus; they can be the sweetest of pets and cranky literally within the same half hour.

Marguerite Winn, a noted Northern California Solomon Island Eclectus specialist, stated that she weans her parrots at about three months. "We place more than one together; when one eats they all begin to eat," Winn explained. "At three months old we begin to pair them. I like to sell mostly pairs. We ship at about five months."

She added that the eclectus parrot does not usually pick up food with its claws, but has "devolved" perhaps to eating from a food source in front of it.

One thing you can count upon if you choose a handfed male eclectus as your next pet psittacine: he will lead you to levels of sensitivity and patience you never thought possible with a parrot of perhaps lesser "nobility". But believe me, every step of the way will be worth it.

I had a male Red-sided who used to crawl under a towel after nighttime feeding and let me stroke him to sleep. As he matured, this habit went on without the towel. He would simply come over to my hand as I watched TV and push his head into my cupped palm to sleep. Wonderful!

Indeed the one fast rule with eclectus as pets seems to be "the older they get, the better they get."

As our beloved Beamer would put it in one of his favorite phrases, "I can talk ... can you fly?" 🐦



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