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Mark these dates and plan to attend!

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August 10, 11, 12, 1995  
Clarion Hotel, New Orleans, Louisiana  
Exec. Board - all day, Tuesday, 8th  
House of Delegates - all day, Wednesday, 9th

# Kiwani — A Very Special Bird

By Dale R. Thompson & Eb Cravens

**I** Introduction (Thompson)  
I have had the privilege of being involved with a very special and unique bird: a handfed Sun Conure. Kiwani is owned by a very close friend, Eb Cravens, and we will each tell our part of this incredible tale. Though I did not know Kiwani during his early years, I was directly involved with him during the fourth and fifth years of his life. The following is an analysis of Kiwani's early training.

## Early Training Of Kiwani (Cravens)

As far as I can remember I had a desire to own a pet Sun Conure. I suppose any parrot lover who is fond of neon-bright yellow and orange would feel the same. What's more, I had heard certain talk about the captivating personality of Suns — when they choose to be playful, they could keep one in stitches of laughter. Handfed Sun Conures are fluffy little balls of fun and devotion.

The day I walked into that tiny pet store in Aspen, Colorado, in late summer 1987, and spotted Kiwani, I sensed the time had arrived to purchase my first handfed domestic psittacine. I felt he was an \$800 bargain. Indeed, Kiwani turned out to be a bargain at any price. His dozens of friends and acquaintances all across the USA marvel at his prowess.

For some reason (perhaps a lack of close cuddling in the handfeeding period), I soon found Kiwani a bit insecure. Accordingly, I began to keep him with me as much as possible. He slept wrapped in a bath towel next to my pillow (never once messing his own towel). He was taught to ride inside my sweater or T-shirt with his back against my skin, claws out! To this day Kiwani will come flying to my shoulder and bolt

down the front of my shirt when he wishes security or a nap. Many a friend of mine has had the surprise of a lifetime when my little sun bird, unable to find me and seeing dusk falling, flies to his or her shoulder and zips down the shirt-front to be warm and safe.

All this love and attention began to cure Kiwani's insecurity, but as many adolescent conures do, he would still scream for touch and attention when he chose. At this point, Kiwani's formal training began.

"Quiet," I would say whenever he screamed, "Shhhhhh." Then again, "Be quiet, No screeching," accompanied by a gentle grip on his upper and lower beak and a moment of stillness. If the squeaking continued, he would be wrapped in his sleeping towel for 5 or 10 minutes of quiet. These days Kiwani knows what "quiet" means though he does not always choose to obey. Indeed, sometimes we both scream at the top of our lungs for conure-style fun.

Next, Kiwani began to learn "up," "poop" (he calls it "oh"), "water," "cage," "ouch," "kiss," "cracker" (for all food) and "tree." I never taught him "no," for I find it too complex a word for parrots when used for many different reasons.

On my part, I was taught to mimic his shrill whistle screech which he now answers from wherever he is at the moment. This answering is a prerequisite with all my birds: I learn their call as best I can or teach them a short whistle unique to each bird which they learn to answer. This is invaluable training should one of my parrots end up in a tall tree or in strange territory. Twice in his many years I have located Kiwani in the house of a stranger by calling around the neighborhood and hearing his distant Sun Conure answer.



*With patience and dedication Kiwani's owner taught him to fly free. Here he surveys his home from the treetops.*

You see, Kiwani, my beloved sun parrot, is a free-flyer. He likes it better that way.

(I have been involved in training certain parrot species to fly free and return for over 10 years. This is advanced behavioral training and should not be attempted by a novice or with just any parrot species!)

About age nine months, Kiwani's primary flight feathers began to grow in again. As neither the breeder nor the pet store personnel had thought to teach my young Sun to fly--hence to land--before his initial wing clipping, I was forced to perfect his control by means of practice flights. By this age he had had hours of supervised time in the tree outside my kitchen window and when I worked in the garden. But his training hops to my outstretched finger now became increasingly long and meaningful.

"Up, Kiwani, up," I would coax. Four feet. "Up, baby, up." Eight feet. "Up, Kiwani. Cracker." Twenty feet. "Good birdie," I rejoiced. Then a kiss and a treat. By 1990, my flashing orange bird was flying free in a dozen neighborhoods all over America and had two acres or so to roam in at his winter farm house. And he still answered when I screeched and came when I called.

It was a marvelous feeling to see the joy Kiwani felt as he peeled and dived and swooped and climbed through all kinds of conditions and life experiences--yet loved me enough to return when I wished him to.

This parrot knows rain and wind and

sun and snow. He knows cats and dogs, rats, horses and mongoose. Moreover, I as a parrot owner am much more aware of my pet at all times, realizing his extreme vulnerabilities.

Smart as a whip Kiwani is, sharp-eyed alert, and oh, so fit! Yet in our four years together we have had to learn many a danger like "airplanes," "balloons," and other terrifying flying and floating objects. And things such as "trucks," "motorcycles," "trains" and other types of vehicles that may startle him. Kiwani knows airplanes and trucks. He also knows "doggie," "cat," "horsie," "crow," "boom," (firecracker, gunshot, etc.) and the most sacred and dangerous of all: "pueo," the Hawaiian word for owl and meaning any bird of prey.

The ocean Kiwani knows is water but he wants no part of it so beaches without nearby trees are off limits. He has ridden on a bicycle but distrusts it greatly so I do not force him to travel by two wheeler.

Flocks of pigeons, seagulls and mynah birds present an irresistible urge to fly off and join; so I am ever aware of the signs that he wants to take off from my shoulder. "Inside my shirt you go, little buddy," I say, "These flocks are not for you."

At age one, Kiwani's towel was traded in for a brown cardboard nest box with a fluffy tangle-free cotton lining. His box ("buh" in conure language) was his totally favorite possession. I heartily recommend training all conure babies and other small parrots to sleep in such a box. Not only does it facilitate travel—Kiwani will sleep anywhere his box is: stranger's house, camping in the woods or driving down the interstate—but he will spend endless hours chewing and playing in it. Those few occasions when he is being a bad bird, I will put Kiwani in his box and stuff the covering towel in the exit hole, thus disciplining him in a safe and agreeable manner.

Later, as a four year old, I saw my bright orange sun bird as one in a thousand. Scarcely could I believe how intelligent he had become. Well into puberty, my feisty male conure could be stubborn, sassy, silly, sexy and of course possessive. Sometimes he became frantic for a mate (Kiwani normally cared nothing for other parrots, much preferring interaction with humans) but he once had a strong crush on my Red-lored Amazon and hence any adult Amazon that would tolerate him. But Kiwani was young yet. There was plenty of time to solve the mating puzzle.



Photos by Dale Thompson

*Unlike most handfed domestic conures, Kiwani remains alert to the possible presence of hawks overhead. Kiwani's bright sun colors show up in the tree branches.*

Conure to the core, he could sometimes be destructive. What to chew and what not to chew made little sense to Kiwani. After all, wood is wood, yes?

When indulging in the bird world pecking order, his macho places him right above anything he feels he can dominate with noise and activity--African Grey size on down.

It was sometimes annoying to have a jealous Sun Conure in kamikaze mode dive bomb another fledgling I was training; or have him swoop towards a stranger or guest entering his kitchen territory. But that was the price I paid for Kiwani's devotion, I suppose.

His name is a Lakota word for "awakening," you know. And at 7:30 every morning of the year when I heard that rustling at his box and the flutter of wings landing upon my bed to burrow beneath the covers and play "tickle," I remembered that Indian name.

"Awake. It's me, Kiwani. Time's a wasting," he seemed to say. "I love you," I replied softly. "Live long and prosper, my feathered friend."

### **Kiwani As A Pet Turned Breeder (Thompson)**

I became acquainted with Kiwani when Eb visited me twice a year on his journeys to and from his winter home. He would stay with me from a week to sometimes over a month.

I was truly astonished with Kiwani. With patience and expertise, this Sun Conure was taught to fly free, not only indoors but also in outdoor situations. Many free-flight parrots are controlled by food to keep them close to their owners, but such was not the case with Kiwani. This bird was attached to his owner to the point which many behaviorists call imprinting. Even though Kiwani has complete command of the air and will fly among the trees as far as a half mile or more, a distinct whistle from his owner would bring him flying back to land on a shoulder or hand. Never was a food treat given at this time to reinforce this behavior.

I must give my own impression of the education process of Kiwani. He was taught the meaning of danger whether it was hawks, dogs or even trucks. He was taught to defecate on demand so he would go on a paper towel or other throw-away material without making a mess in the house. Kiwani was never caged but trained to sleep in a small cardboard box that had a small hole cut into

the side. A small, soft towel was his bedding and a small stuffed toy was his sleeping partner. Kiwani was friendly to strangers (humans) and was tolerant of most birds. Kiwani had free access to the pet store where his owner worked and would visit with the many pet birds that were placed in tree boughs within the store for the enjoyment of the customers. One of the favorite places for Kiwani to hide was inside a shirt or sweater worn by his owner. Kiwani would sometimes snuggle under the sweaters of other people. He was an incredible parrot and would amaze not only non-bird people but also long-term aviculturists and parrot owners. Kiwani would travel everywhere with his owner and this bird was well known, whether at a flea market or a camera store.

In 1990, life would change for Kiwani. He became quite bossy with some of the pet birds within the pet store. He would occasionally bite as he was obviously in full puberty. With plenty of misgivings, his owner sent Kiwani to me in California early in the summer of 1990. Kiwani was to spend his time with me until December when he would again go with his owner to his winter home. Thus, I had the great pleasure of experiencing the joys of this incredible conure. Having gotten to know Kiwani during his previous visits to my home, this bird now took to me as his noble companion and I experienced a most delightful six months with him. I, likewise, never caged him but instead of a whistle (which for me is a mere whisper) I would simply call Kiwani to me by calling his name. During the first week in my home I made the mistake of unknowingly walking out the front door with Kiwani on my shoulder. He immediately flew into a nearby pine tree. Boy, was I shocked! I had seen Kiwani respond and

return to his owner, but this was a very different situation. My canyon in the high desert of Southern California if full of Red-tailed Hawks and the bird-hunting Cooper's Hawk. Not being able to whistle very well, I panicked. I did not know what to do and called to Kiwani to come to me by using his name. After several urgent calls, Kiwani nonchalantly flew down from the tree to my shoulder. Obviously he was thinking, "Well, I guess I have another newcomer to teach!"

Kiwani would go with me every morning into my aviary buildings while I fed my breeder birds. He would ride on my food cart while I fed each pair and sample the goodies I had set out before him. Kiwani would never fight with any of my breeding parrots, both large and small, even though I had several Sun and Jenday Conure pairs. I also had a single female Sun Conure which I had hand-reared from my own stock. She was then three years of age and I had not found a domestic handfed mate for her as I was quite choosy.

When Kiwani's owner visited me in December of that year, he brought up the subject of mating Kiwani with my lone female. After some misgivings, I agreed. After correctly introducing them together outside the cage, we placed them together. The results were what I expected. Although there was no fighting, they certainly did not have anything to do with each other. Two feeding dishes were supplied and their indifference was endured for two weeks. Even though I wanted this matchmaking to work, I also knew the old adage that birds imprinted to humans would supposedly make very poor breeders, let alone good parents. Sun Conures that are kept together with their own kind during the handrearing, weaning and growing up period, however, were



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known to become excellent breeders. I have this kind of domestic Sun Conure to the third generation. Not knowing Kiwani's background, I was not confident in his ability to reproduce well in captivity. This bird was certain a human imprinted bird.

To my shock, his owner had another suggestion. He wanted to take Kiwani and his girlfriend, now named Kaya, with him to his winter home in the woods. He would try giving Kaya a taste of freedom! Maybe Kiwani would teach Kaya to be a free-flight bird! That winter, at her new home, Kaya was partially clipped and placed in a tree every morning and returned to the cabin every evening. She was also trained to a sleeping box and would automatically go there to sleep. Kiwani was given complete freedom as before. Even though Kaya would climb up to the top of her 60 foot tree, these two conures showed no interest whatsoever in each other. In fact, Kiwani would sometimes dive-attack Kaya in her tree or even in her cardboard box that was near his box within the cabin.

After their four month vacation, both Kiwani and Kaya were brought back to me in April of 1991. Both birds stayed with me through the following summer. I again tried to put Kiwani and Kaya into a breeding situation. Their original wooden next box was still attached to the outside of their breeding cage. Kaya used this box to sleep in. Kiwani's cardboard sleeping box was placed inside the cage. Each bird slept in their individual boxes for approximately two weeks. Since his owner disappeared from his life, Kiwani began to change. During their third week together I found both Kiwani and Kaya sleeping together in the wooden box at night. I removed Kiwani's abandoned cardboard sleeping box permanently. Both birds settled in together even though Kiwani was still very friendly with me and would make occasional rides around the aviary on 'his' food cart.

One month after being permanently together, I took Kiwani with me to an outdoor education school in the mountains near the city of San Bernardino. Each summer I teach animal behavior classes to sixth graders and give them a hands-on experience with many animals including a Spectacled Owl, tame parrots and many non-poisonous snakes. Obviously, Kiwani with his brilliant sun colors flying free among the kids was the hit of the program. When I came home, I found Kaya was in the nest

box during daylight hours. As these birds normally entered their box only at night to sleep, I feared that Kaya was sick. Fearing the worst, I carefully checked the nest box only to find three newly laid eggs.

To my utter surprise and dismay, I rejoined Kiwani with his mate. I had unknowingly broken a cardinal aviculture rule by separating a pair of birds during the egg laying process. Sometimes breeders will remove male parrots that destroy eggs, but my situation was different. Hoping that the removal of Kiwani for several hours would not disturb the laying and incubating process, I anxiously waited for 10 days to pass and checked the eggs for fertility. Two of the eggs were fertile and both hatched under Kaya. The babies were fed poorly as this was their first time. I fostered both Sun babies (two and four days of age) to a pair of Jenday Conures that had three two-week old babies of their own. The big Jenday babies were removed to the nursery for handfeeding and were replaced with the two tiny Sun babies. They were immediately fed by the Jenday Conure parents. This pair of wild-caught Jenday Conures have produced for me consistently for nine straight years and fostering foreign babies never disconcerted them. My Sun and Jenday Conure pairs will feed Amazon or Hawkhead babies that have been fostered to them. Most often I will foster a single foreign baby within a group of conure babies.

Kiwani and Kaya produced a second clutch of three babies in October of that year and again three babies in December. With each successive clutch Kiwani and Kaya mastered the techniques of parenting to the point of feeding their third clutch of babies very well for two weeks before they were removed for handfeeding.

Kiwani and Kaya went back to the woods with Kiwani's owner during the late winter and early spring months of 1992. They were later than normal as they had just hatched three babies in December of 1991. They were given a cage that was mounted 15 feet up in a tree. This time Kiwani taught Kaya the ways of free-flying. Kaya was still partially clipped so there would be no danger of her flying away or being caught by a feral cat. Kiwani used certain vocalizations to Kaya to warn her of dogs, cats, hawks and even of strangers. These two conures were well bonded on this trip to the woods, which was actually a farm,

and Kiwani kept urging Kaya to make longer and longer hop-flying jumps among the trees. Instead of inches, Kaya would make hop-flying leaps of three to four feet. They really enjoyed their three month vacation on the farm but they did not nest there. They were very protective of the nest log but simply were not there long enough to lay another clutch of eggs. I am certain that the outdoor environments gave them such great stimulation that nesting was not immediately in their plans. Kaya's strength and flight skills improved immensely.

In April of 1992, Kiwani and Kaya returned to my breeding facility in Canyon Country, California and reared two successful clutches during the summer. Their first clutch of three babies were left with the parents for two weeks and were removed for handfeeding. I decided to leave their second clutch of three babies with Kiwani and Kaya and allowed them to rear their babies through the weaning period. I wanted to see if this pair of Sun Conures could rear their offspring to self-sufficiency as we were now planning a great new adventure of Kiwani and Kaya. Why not try to have Kiwani and Kaya parent-rear young in a free-flight atmosphere. We wondered if their young would stay tame if the babies were handled a great deal during the rearing process. Would they follow the parent birds to the shoulder of their owner. Or could we possibly learn from this pair of conures how to someday have captive-reared birds successfully parent-rear offspring who could then naturally fly free and *stay* in the wild. What an adventure!

The only other situation close to this adventure was told to me by Joanne Abramson, a very accomplished macaw aviculturist. She related that she knew of a couple in Costa Rica that have a producing pair of Blue and Gold Macaws in a large aviary in their back yard. The natural forest surrounds their home. When this pair of macaws have young in the nest, they will open the door of the aviary in the morning. The male Blue and Gold Macaw will then fly free in the surrounding forest, forage for food and will come back to its mate and young and feed them. The female never leaves the nest during this time.

In January of 1993, again at their winter home, Kiwani and Kaya began working their nest box that was placed inside the 3 ft. x 3 ft. x 6 ft. tree cage. From their behavior, it was estimated that Kaya laid her eggs around March 15th. Because

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their owner had to leave in April, it was decided to move the tree cage to a friend's aviaries to be cared for.

It must be mentioned that the nest could not be inspected. A narrow hollow log had been attached to the wooden nest box as an entrance. There was no inspection door as this complete breeding operation was 15 feet high in a tree. So on April 19th the cage, along with nest and parent birds, was lowered to the ground and placed in the back of a pickup truck. It was transported 20 minutes along a rough gravel road to a new back yard that contained other aviaries nearby. Among the new aviary inhabitants were Amazon and non-related conure pairs. Both Kiwani and Kaya were out of the nest box and screeching during the drive in the pickup truck. After arriving, it took Kaya only one hour to settle down and re-enter the nest box!

May 3rd was the projected date to remove the babies from the nest. The person living at the new home was not experienced with handfeeding from day one so the conure babies were pulled at what was expected to be three weeks of age.

Since there was no inspection door to the nest box, the parent birds were netted and the log and nest box was removed from the cage. Lo and behold, three tiny babies and one fertile egg were discovered when the box was opened. And one of the three tiny babies had just hatched! Since the bird's owner was gone, it was then decided to place the nest box containing the babies and egg back into the cage in hopes that Kaya would tolerate this second serious disturbance and begin to feed her young. This time it took longer for her to settle in. She would repeatedly enter the nest log entrance only to back out again. Perhaps the log entrance had been skewed slightly, changing the interior lighting. By nightfall everybody had settled in and feeding sounds were heard from inside the nest box.

One week later, the nestlings were removed. There were four babies with an extreme difference in their ages. The youngest was only five days old while the largest was in pin feathers. Certainly Kiwani and Kaya are a remarkable pair of conures. To take this much disturbance is almost too much to ask for. But these two special birds did!

Because of the hope for free-flying of their youngsters, Kiwani and Kaya stayed at their winter location property instead of being returned to me in Cali-

fornia.

In January of 1994, this pair of conures raised four babies at their original winter home high in their tree. Because of the terrible disturbance during their last clutch in April of 1993, it was decided that the babies should be removed for hand-feeding at three weeks of age. This time the process worked perfectly. Both Kiwani and Kaya were allowed to fly free when their cage door was opened. They promptly flew to the top of their own cage where a pile of cracked pecan nuts had been placed for them to feed on. Kaya was especially interested in the four healthy young conure babies when they were removed from her nest box right in front of her! They were held up for her to see. Kiwani, on the other hand, showed very little interest in his offspring. He looked wan and haggard for he was exhausted from feeding the babies. He seemed to say that it was perfectly alright with him that he did not have to feed anymore. Upon re-entering the cage, Kiwani flew over to the perch next to Kaya, put his head down as if to say, "Now give me some attention!"

Three weeks later, the cage was again hoisted up into their tree and a four inch thick eucalyptus log placed outside their cage with an entrance going through the wire. It was planned that the pair be trained to fly completely free during the incubation and feeding process of their next clutch. Instead of removing all of the young or leaving all of the babies to be parent-reared, only one baby was to be left for Kiwani and Kaya to fledge into the wild state. It was planned that this single baby would be handled during the rearing process but not supplementally fed by humans.

It will be very interesting to observe what kind of pet qualities this parent-reared chick will maintain when it experiences human handling within the nest box and on the shoulder of humans when fledging begins. It is not known now if it will follow the characteristics of Kiwani and Kaya and come to its owner's hand or later nestle within his shirt or sweater.

Kiwani is truly an amazing bird! He seems to have a split personality. Even though a highly imprinted bird with free-flight knowledge, He still successfully reproduces young. An enigma of bird behavior to say the least. He seems to have broken every rule in this regard. ➔

PART II (to come)  
 "THE FLEDGING OF KIKU!"