

aviary or bird room.

In many cases, *space* in the bird room is as scarce as the availability of suitable cavities in the natural environment. Therein lies the dilemma. Severe aggression between breeding pairs of the same species forced too close together is most evident during the breeding season when for eons of time a considerable distance would have separated them during this period. Unrelieved aggression in the nesting pair can be misdirected toward a mate, often with disastrous results. (During the non-breeding season, most birds re-flock in their traditional social groups and the level of nest-site defense aggression evaporates.)

Competition in nature is most intense between members of the same species. They have the same living requirements and use the same natural resources. Competition is greatly reduced or completely eliminated between members of a different species that do not compete for the same natural commodities.

This natural tolerance of different and non-competitive species can be used to an advantage in the bird room. When space is at a premium, *alternate* species. If you have two or three pair of the same species, space them as far apart as possible with other species placed in between.

Further, provide a visual barrier between nest-boxes. Keep the entrance of the nest-box hidden from prying eyes. If this visual barrier is made of heavy fabric, it will also serve as a sound barrier as well. Keep in mind, the bird's assessment of nest site territory encroachment is both visual and auditory!

I have noted with alarming regularity the violation of *nest site territory* caused by breeders inadvertently placing two nesting birds of the same or *closely related species* too close together and thus greatly contributing to nesting failures. I have even seen breeding cages stacked one on top of the other with no barrier between the upper and lower compartments. The droppings of the luckier upper cage occupants fall through and *on the feathered heads below*.

Variation and modifications of the aforementioned natural spacing scheme can be observed in the captive environment. As might be expected, different species have different degrees of spacing tolerance. To add to this complexity, *individuals* within a species vary greatly in this respect. As a generalization in bird behavior, the smaller the bird, the closer together they will nest (colonial nesting

birds are excluded from this comment). Further, in the captive environment, long-term familiarity between neighboring pairs can reduce the natural spacing requirements to a level of near indifference. However, this level of familiarity may take years.

In addition, placing breeding pairs too close together also greatly increases the opportunity for disease transmission. The breeding season is a stressful period for all participants. Disease carrying birds that otherwise look and act healthy, may shed viruses and other pathogens during this period. The closer the neighboring birds, the greater the chances of infection spreading throughout your flock. Nationwide losses from this avoidable disaster is tremendous. Under natural spacing circumstances, disease transmission is reduced or stopped by the barrier of distance.

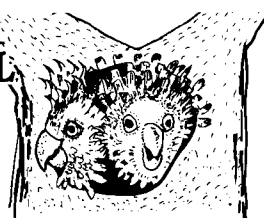
Very frequently, a successful breeder of Amazons (Yellow-napes, for example) will capitalize on their breeding success and bring even more pairs of Napes into their (usually indoor) breeding facility. As the numbers of pairs increase, the chick productions decrease. Just the opposite of what the anxious breeder expected. What happened? The answer may well be that the Napes have reached *Critical Mass* and reproductive success waned. Too many Napes in a given area, with too much energy going toward nest site defense and not enough energy for "romance". Again, keep in mind that cavities are a rare resource in the wild and remarkably few species of parrots flock-up to breed in the colonial atmosphere of a bird room!

The best way to determine if your birds are spaced too close together is to watch your birds' reactions to each other during the breeding season. A male hanging on the wire, continually verbally chastising his neighbor is not a good sign. While strong aggression within the bonded pair is another danger signal.

Methods of observations can be as simple and pleasant as sitting at a discrete distance and noting their behavior. Or using a video camera to remotely record behavioral interactions without a hint of human interference. The video cassette can be played back at speeds much faster than real time and can be re-examined to gain more insight on the details of bird behavior. The video tapes can easily be stored to form of a reference library of invaluable behavioral information for yourself and others. ➤

THE NATURAL CHOICE

by Eb Cravens
Santa Fe, N.M.



A Favorite Amazon

It was nearly 10 years ago that I walked into a friend's bird shop and viewed my first Yellow-crowned Amazon Parrot. She was sitting placidly in a stainless pedestal cage in the corner—consigned by some folks leaving town, I learned, for \$400 with stand.

"Some people call this a single yellowhead," the owner explained. "It is not banded, so we don't know the origin. It doesn't do much, makes no noise at all."

Already possessed with a Red-tailed and Blue-fronted Amazon, I had more than enough noise so I opened the cage door, stuck out my finger and said "up." The bird calmly stepped on my hand and began to preen. She was immaculate! As quiet demeanor and pristine grooming can be an early indication of females in Amazon genera, I sensed I had found a hen, and bought her on the spot.

"Tai," named after the Chinese hexagram for "peaceful," was to become one of my most beloved pets. She was so well behaved, I began taking her everywhere. The further we went afield, the more attentive and quick-to-learn Tai became. I have always allowed my pet birds "tree time" out in the back yard; this Amazon proved so careful, observant and intelligent that we soon developed a routine whereby she would spend hours outside in her favorite mulberry tree. She would chew and destroy very little and make nary a peep to attract attention, so I began hanging her food dish up in the tree. Every evening at 10:00

Tai would be found on her favorite branch snoozing—then would be taken inside for the night.

It became perfectly natural to leave Tai up in her tree and go about my daily errands—returning late to find her in her favorite “afternoon spot.” Today I shake my head at the amount of trust and freedom I gave this parrot and I would not advise pet owners to attempt the same things with their birds!

But Tai was special and she proved it.

One afternoon I came home and Tai was nowhere to be found. The “weeooop” squeak I use to mimic and call her finally brought a reply from the front courtyard of the neighbor’s adobe; she had crawled over the wall and was entertaining the children by accepting treats from mom!

A key aspect of allowing liberty to Amazons—no matter how predictable they seem—is to be aware when their territory begins to expand. This episode did precisely that. The remainder of our second summer was spent watching her wander the neighbor’s rooftop where she would sit and watch all the activity on the main street. I did not feel comfortable with this development, so I would climb the roof and bring her back to her yard. At the same time her wings were growing out and she began actively exploring dark shady corners, eyes blazing and tail flared. Drainpipes and downspouts were her favorites!

About this time Tai confirmed herself female by snuggling under morning bed covers, raising her tail feathers from a squat position and making begging squeals to be petted “down under.” Such stroking was unsatisfying to us both as it only served to frustrate her more.

One morning I went out to check her (every 20 minutes or so if I am home and a trusted pet is outside) and found she had traversed the power line from the house to the electric pole, then sidestepped down two more poles where she was perched half a block away screeching like she owned the world. Needless to say, we live in hawk country. Losing

patience I shouted, “Tai birdie, you come down here;” then grabbed her most unfavorable object, the garden rake, rushed over and banged on “her pole.” She took off and flap/plummeted back towards her own yard where I retrieved her.

A few weeks later, Tai would not come down for the night; so I made the mistake of getting the extension ladder to go up her tree and coax her down. She took one look at that ladder and took off across the boulevard into a 60-foot elm. Oops!

All I could do was leave her there for the night, turning on all my porch lights and putting her cage on the patio. I went outside every hour, shined a flashlight and whooped to her to help her recall where she was and where home was. Hearing screeches at daybreak, I went to the tree with a favorite jar of walnuts and coaxed her down the trunk to my hand.

But enough was enough. If things kept on this way, I would eventually lose her in the city.

I approached Dale Thompson about pairing Tai with a second generation handfed Yellow-crowned male who had been his pet and was waiting to be mated. Thompson placed the two birds in separate cages side by side and left them to begin their bonding process. Two months later they were given a single wire wall between them so they could touch but not harm one another. Two months later (in the off-breeding season) after they had been sleeping side by side on either side of the wire, they were introduced into a neutral cage.

With unproven Amazons, each tiny step forward is a success. Tai and “Howdy” 1) ate from the same food bowl, 2) accepted and began preening each other, 3) lost fear of and showed interest in the nestbox, 4) entered the box, 5) the next year laid two smallish eggs, and 6) sat the eggs to term even though they were infertile.

The following season, Howdy was put on a strict diet as Thompson’s research taught him that “90% of the Amazon infertility in this country is due to overweight male birds.”

Voila! Last year these two produced their first two chicks and proved to be fine parents, feeding well up to two weeks.

Fascinated with this *ochrecephala* subspecies, I began to notice the behavior of pairs of Yellow-crowned Amazons in breeding situations. Whereas pairs of Double Yellowheads, Blue-fronts, Red-loreds, Tucumans, even Cubans (which I consider close kin to the pionus genus) will aggressively attack keepers and “hit the wire” at full force trying to bite an unsuspecting feeder; Yellow-crowned parents, even on eggs, may be more likely to pace, retreat or merely observe humans in the immediate space.

We have featured Yellow-crowneds as pets for several years and find them less boisterous, not so prone to screech or flash eyes and bite unexpectedly. Of course, an Amazon is an Amazon and any experienced lover of this expansive genus will tell you never take your eyes off their eyes!

I see a strong resemblance between the Yellow-crowned

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This Yellow-crowned Amazon, Amazona o. ochrocephala, along with its mate, has reproduced successfully for 18 years straight. This article is about its second and third generation offspring.

Amazon (sometimes referred to as the Surinam Yellow-crown) with its gray/black beak and nasal area, toenails and feet and the Yellow-naped Amazon which displays the same. Both in demeanor, noise-making and verbal acumen these two species are highly similar. The Panama Yellow-crowned subspecies, however, with its light horn colored beak, cere, toenails and feet in my estimation behaves similar to the Double Yellow-headed Amazon whose extremities are the same color.

When we began handfeeding Tai and Howdy's two chicks for raising as pets, we began to notice a marked dissimilarity between the two. One baby was larger with a blockier head, thicker beak mandible, narrower-sharper pelvic bones and an outgoing curious personality which brought him out of the feeding tub sooner than the sibling. We surmised we could have a potential boy and girl. The smaller bird was less vocal and colorful and would defer to the other when tussling over food or toys.

Both babies were weaned and

fledged in our flight room and developed an active range of jumping and flying skills on free standing trees. Initial wing clips were not begun until well after they were eating by themselves at 16 weeks. At this time I made the decision to not sell the smaller baby, but to raise her with controlled free flight in hopes of having a hen as accomplished as her mother.

I named her Tia.

Early fledging skills in Tia quickly turned into full athletic prowess. Even her muscular build was different than any other Amazon I had raised. She developed a thin wiriness during fledging, though she ate well. Her upper chest was full and hard much like a champion gamecock. Sometimes I would worry that her sternum was too sharply exposed and she might be thin; but the more we work with Amazons and free flight, the more we realize that many of our beloved "healthy" pets are in fact overweight. Tia had a lightness that allowed her to fly from the floor up to a six foot perch—even when clipped of

her 10 strongest flight feathers. Since her feet were so strong and her toenails never modified, she could fly to an upright 2x4 door frame and land on the vertical surface by clinging!

In the woods at our winter home, Tia was a marvelous flyer—able to take off without the telltale "laborious jump" needed by so many parrots who were never properly fledged and taught to take off (as wild birds) with a vigorous downbeat of the wings. Tia would spend hours up in trees; when dusk came and she wished to return to the cabin to sleep, she would fly down to its roof and come inside! If I was out gardening and she wanted company, she would land unexpectedly on a shoulder. If I called her she flew to my hand.

We still believe she is a female, but having grown up with a rough and tumble sibling, Tia plays hard and is not afraid to nip to get her way. At two years she is the most accomplished talking Amazon I have ever owned—having 20 or more phrases which are either spoken clearly or babbled and intermixed in the verbal games so enjoyed by Amazons. "Hello Tia, hello birdie," she speaks, "What doin'?" Then, "Hello birdie bird. Doin-tia-tia-biddy-biddyeeoow!" What's unusual is that she has never in two years uttered a parrot squawk, though her parents live in a cage nearby.

If she wants to scream, she screams "hello," "hey, EB," or "Amber..." calling that little girl in a voice like the neighbor's.

As she grows and matures, Tia is much more cautious—preferring her eight foot flight to the woods and no longer wishing to go out in the car to visit. Amazons definitely are parrots of routine and if a routine becomes broken, they will seek to establish another that is more stable.

They are not easy to figure, the birds in this complex genus. Many a parrot lover contemplating a full range of pet species ends up acquiring "just one more" Amazon! I guess we are all pirates at heart. This is our third generation of Yellow-crowned Amazons and we hope to make it four in the years ahead. ➤