

The Fledging of Kiku

by Dale R. Thompson and Eb Cravens
(Part III)

On March 5, 1994, Kiwani and Kaya were observed beginning to work on the inside of their 24-in. long eucalyptus log – the 4 in. thick “tunnel” was mounted horizontally outside their cage with an entrance through the wire. The 6 ft. cage was attached into the limbs of a tree some 15 ft. off the ground (see *KIWANI* Part I, *WATCHBIRD* June '95).

At this time the pair of Sun Conures' daily schedule included one or two regular free flights totaling half hour to three hours duration. One cup of course bark and rotten wood was introduced into the nesting log as dry eucalyptus can be quite hard and we chose to give the Suns a head start in creating padding within the cavity. They had been sleeping in it for roughly two months when breeding season commenced.

For over a week, the two Suns, predominantly the female Kaya, worked on the prospective nest site. Shortly after this activity began, their normal day's free flight time was curtailed at their own choosing. Even their favorite activity of feeding on twig, leaf and plum buds in the nearby treetops interested them little.

On March 12, Kiwani and Kaya were seen copulating on a thin swaying branch 30 feet up in the plum tree. Mating activity increased within and without their cage the ensuing week. March 19, Kaya laid her first egg of the clutch; eggs two, three and four were laid thereafter at 36 to 48 hour intervals. Kaya began sitting with the third egg laid on March 23.

Kiwani's guard in and about the cage increased with his hen in the box. He would still take brief daily flights outside in the woods but seldom stayed abroad more than five minutes. The majority of his time was spent in just sitting! This is a common occurrence with male parrots whose hen is sitting in a captive breeding situation where plenty of food is immediately at hand. It is difficult to get the male to exercise and work off excess energy. On April 4 when I climbed up and opened the

cage door, Kiwani flew over and bit me!

Kaya was not seen out of the log, nor would she take a flight during the first critical 14 days of embryo incubation. All her nourishment was received inside the log from regurgitation by the cock. She could occasionally be seen at the opening to the log for early morning defecation. The third week she would come out to sample afternoon seed feeding, but never had the inclination to leave the cage for a flight with her mate.

On April 12, Kiwani would not come out to fly and was exceedingly aggressive. At this point we left the cage locked as Kaya was due in about eight days. She was seen “belly-bathing” during the last week of incubation – immersing her chest and lower abdomen in the large water dish and returning to the nest with wetted feathers to resume incubation. Obviously this hand-raised Sun hen knew that added humidity in the nest chamber was necessary just prior to the hatching process – a factor which has led us to recommend large bath bowls in cages, particularly during nesting cycles.

April 23, we heard feeding noises inside the log; but it is the policy in all our aviaries to open and monitor our nest boxes as little as possible and observe behavior from a distance as much as possible. With certain pairs we even use binoculars! We checked the hollow log eight days later by removing the round plywood cover on the end farthest from the cage wire. Success! There were three well-fed Sun Conure chicks and one dried out infertile egg pushed off to the side. It was removed and composted.

Increased raw greens were provided since many parents start infant birds out on a significantly greener diet than they normally prefer. Our Suns have also been seen gorging on rotted log material and returning to standard nest boxes to feed it to youngsters – a fact which led us to change to true log nest sites for this and other pairs.

At this time we offered Kiwani and

Kaya their afternoon free flights which they enthusiastically took at one or two o'clock when babies were freshly stuffed and quiet. Once when we could not be around to open the door until near dusk, the two Suns rushed out of the cage, flew to their favorite plum tree, then immediately turned around and returned to the nest as darkness fell. On other occasions, Kaya would retire for the night as the sun's rays sank low, while Kiwani lingered on his favorite lookout limb just outside the aviary as darkness crept through the woods. This is a tendency with all my aviary pairs – males will perch in front of or just outside the box opening as evening falls and “guard” the vicinity well after the hen has gone inside. Whether this activity is a cause or one of the effects, I find my male parrots have better night vision either at dusk or if startled out of the box in the middle of the night (at which time I awake and go to the aviaries with two flashlights to help the birds get off the cage wire and return to the box or a stable perch). Perhaps this is mere confidence and protective behavior which can sometimes be observed in males of other species (humans included) in times of crisis.

May 8, three baby Sun Conures were taken out of the log while the parents sat in a nearby tree calmly watching the noisy screwdriver gun efforts at the raised aviary. All were close-banded and replaced in comfort. Kiwani and Kaya, who were out in the woods well over an hour, showed subtle aggression to the babies when they were held up close to the parents. Neither Sun has even chosen to recognize their own babies pulled from the nest box. The hen especially seems to lay, sit and raise offspring in a near trance-like concentration which does not include comprehension of her own babies once they are pulled from the sound and feel of the nesting cavity. It seems that for Kiwani and Kaya, a pulled baby is a foreign object. We know of instances of Amazon babies who are taken from parents and kept in a holding tub by the aviculturist then placed back in the birds' cage every morning to be fed by the “daddy,” but we have had no such experience.

On May 14, we took all three babies out for a photo session, then pulled the two younger chicks (age about four weeks) leaving the oldest which we judged to be the best potential female by upper mandible, beak, head and

pelvic morphology and a least precocious personality.

We named her "Kiku" after the lovely heroine in James Clavell's *Shogun*.

It is of note to those raising handfed parrots for the pet trade that we routinely leave prospective pets in the nest with the parents up to the 28-day mark. Contrary to wide belief, we find these babies make extraordinary avian companions. It takes a little extra time the first few days to develop a calm, loving rapport with the chicks, but once they have been syringe-fed several times, held, petted and talked to with soft gentleness, they quickly learn to trust humans.

Advantages (besides having to feed less!) to this method are sundry. As the birds' eyes have been open some two weeks, they readily see and recognize other birds and the new world around them as soon as they are pulled. They develop a wonderful birdlike demeanor and savvy which in our estimation expresses itself as a complete well-rounded fledgling. There is no tendency to "over-imprint" on humans; such imprinting can often cause neurotic, spoiled or dysfunctional habits in hand raised parrot pets. Witness the myriads of domestically raised male psittacines too bonded to humans to readily accept a mate even years after becoming sexually mature! Our chicks are allowed to experience well the warm, secure feeling of their mother (and hopefully the more staunch father) before they are taken away from them!

Kiwani and Kaya (K & K) now settled into a routine of hen sitting with the baby most of the morning but coming out for fresh food, grains and soak mix. We provide much soft food to all our psittacines especially round-the-clock to parents with chicks to feed. These include fresh corn on the cob which can be left in the cage overnight for an early morning meal to parents who prefer to rise and feed at daybreak. Shelled walnuts, almonds and raw peanuts, are another early morning offering to birds with babies since sometimes our feeding routine is delayed until after 10:00 a.m. Otherwise chicks made to wait can be heard squeaking in the nest with empty crops.

Afternoons, K&K eat a non-vitaminized seed mix alternating a sunflower, safflower, buckwheat and millet base. Seed takes longer to digest, providing overnight ballast and course texture for the crop and digestive tract – some-

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thing not presently available in commercial handfeeding formulas. Sun Conure feeding noises can often be heard in the log at night. K&K feed around the clock.

This is another factor often lacking in handfed nutrition. Many aviculturists are quick to dispense with middle-of-the-night feedings, thinking chicks old enough to "last until morning." Of course they last, but the "down time" – that period with empty crop – is a condition one never finds in a parent-fed or wild bird as long as the food supply is available! Experienced aviculturists are now voicing the opinion that such handfeeding practices affect overall size of domestic hookbills—generation by generation creating smaller birds. This may be true in Sun Conures, Princess of Wales Parakeets, Golden Conures, even Hyacinthine Macaws raised on less than optimum 24-hour caloric intakes with commercial gruels.

As an avian behaviorist, I (Cravens) believe the early experience of empty crop hunger every night is a serious emotional strain on parrot babies. The long-held belief that psittacine crops need to be 100% empty before new food is offered, to avoid digestive problems, needs to be scientifically studied in further detail.

On May 25, the oldest handfed Sun which we had pulled began to flap. Two days later it flew for the first time. It is possibly true that handfed babies exposed sooner to light and activity around the nursery tub fledge earlier than parent raised chicks growing in the dark. How this affects muscle structure, weight and first flight skill is something we hope to monitor in the future.

June 1, Kiku could be heard screeching for the first time from within the log as Kiwani and Kaya were out exercising in the woods.

June 6, Kiku was seen peeking out of the opening of the log. The next day she was sitting in the opening and flapping while Mom and Dad were away. June 8, with a rush following her parents, she fledged into the cage as K&K flew out into the trees. We promptly closed the door to keep Kiku inside.

Kiwani the same day flew full force at my face – claws extended and mouth agape to attack. Whew! That's the stuff of Alfred Hitchcock nightmares! June 9, Kiku was into her cage and back to the log time after time all day long. Practicing and screeching. She was being fed on the cage bottom and on

perches primarily by Kiwani.

On June 10, at 10:00 a.m. like a bullet Kiku followed K&K out of the cage and into the plum tree where she made an uncoordinated crash landing through foliage coming to rest on a 3/4 in. branch about 40 ft. up. A 30-mph wind was blowing.

And that is where she stayed!

By 2:00 p.m., Kiwani and Kaya had been all over the vicinity of their plum tree while Kiku was still "frozen" in time swaying in the wind and trying to take stock of this new world she had entered. She had not budged but was now hungry enough to beg for food whenever her parents came near. Kaya seemed aloof. Kiwani fed her on the branch.

By 4:00 p.m., still no movement.

Six o'clock and it was beginning to get dark in the woods. K&K flew to the top of their cage and screeched. Kiku screamed back from the treetop. Kiwani flew back to her and landed next to her on the branch. He then flew back to the cage top with a screech. Two or more times he did this. Kiku was nervous and anxious to fly. The fourth time dad succeeded in taking off with Kiku in pursuit. Her 8-hour ordeal (and ours) had come to an end!

Kiku did not make it back to the cage top where her dad had landed, but, out of control, found the right general direction and landed in a dry brushy limb cluster 20 ft. to the right of the cage. Once again Kiwani flew over beside her and took off in return to the cage uttering a screech in flight. It was now truly darkening. Kaya went inside the cage and returned to her nest log.

Two times and Kiwani succeeded in getting Kiku to follow him to the right front of the cage. He then crawled to the open door and went in, Kiku following. She immediately flew up to her familiar log and all three conures gathered inside for much screeching and announcing the return home.

With a thunderous sigh, I pulled the cord which slammed the cage door and went inside the cabin for a well earned aperitif!

In retrospect, we believe that fledging day is the most dangerous in any wild psittacine's life. True, if Kiku were indeed a female, we often see more tentative early flight behavior in hens. But nevertheless, all our work with proper psittacine fledging indicates the chicks are terrified at the speed and mental quickness necessary during fledging. It is a monumental event in every parrot's

life, whether the bird is a pet, a captive, or a wild creature.

Personally, we now feel it changes the young bird so immensely and so positively that we will never again choose to own a psittacine pet who has not been properly fledged!

First flight day a baby is in danger of crashing to injury – tumbling from an unstable anticipated landing spot through loose foliage until a solid hold is grabbed. Fledglings may become fodder for raptors, snakes or other predators since they cannot well control their flight. They may freeze like Kiku did.

While fledging large parrots such as Amazons or eclectus, our early observations are that the chicks screw up enough courage and bolt from the nest with an adrenaline rush of speed, most probably to go great distances before tiring and coming to rest or hitting foliage and landing.

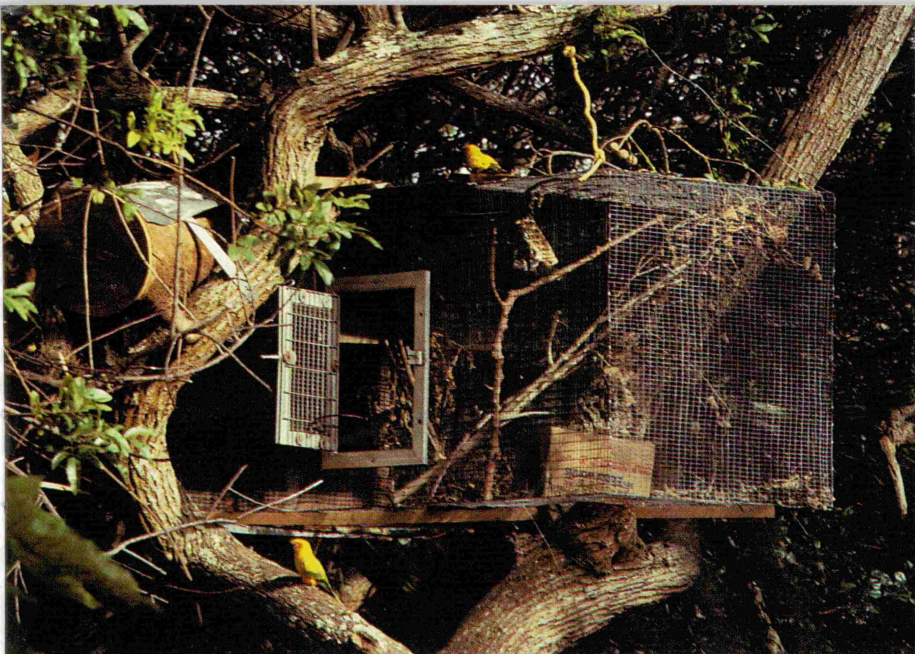
I (Thompson) used to have to put burlap covers on the end of cages when expecting parent raised eclectus to fledge into 12 or 16 foot enclosures because of the number of birds which broke their necks on their maiden flight.

Dedicated, savvy parents are necessary to coax babies home again. Kiwani was lucky he had only one baby to take care of; what about wild parrot parents with three, four, five fledglings all of different ages and varying levels of courage?

Truly this is a very sensitive aspect of parrot behavior which needs lengthy future study of avicultural plans to release captive-bred birds back into wild habitats are to realize optimum success.

One of the most obvious dangers is that captive raised chicks are released into a jungle flock devoid of any parents! Thompson and Cravens both hope that work with Kiwani and other such pairs may provide a technique whereby captive psittacine parents trained to free flight may be placed into habitats where they will hatch, feed, and fledge young parrots into the wild environment.

To be sure, Kiku was ten times the wild hookbill her parents were during the first six months of development. Kiwani and Kaya were dependent upon us, the keepers. Kiku was dependent upon them the parrots. By June 17, she was cruising regularly with her parents. Her size seemed nearly as muscular as her mother and father, but



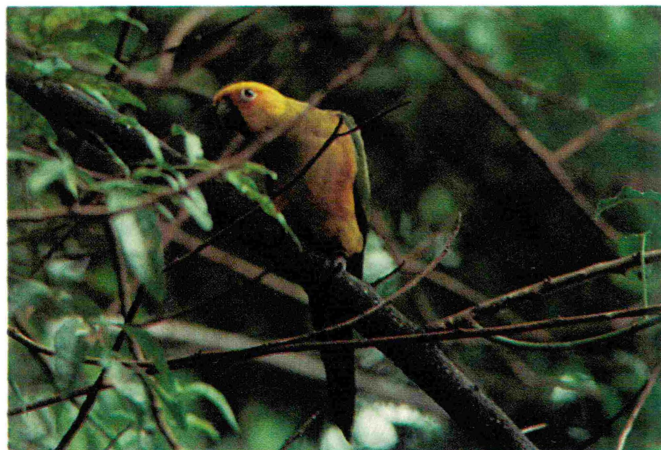
The Suns' cage is of 3' x 3' x 6' wire mesh mounted into tree branches some 15 feet off the ground. The eucalyptus log nesting cavity is attached on the outside of the wire with an entrance through to the cage.



Kiwani and Kaya relax in the sun on a favorite perch as baby Kiku fills up on food from the swing out feeding cup on the open door.

Two of the three healthy baby Sun Conures were pulled at approximately 28 days of age leaving only Kiku to be raised by her parents. The wood shavings shown here are near perfect chips and spirals made by the mother and father from the inside of the nesting log.

Photos courtesy of Eb Cravens



Kiku proved to be 10 times the wild parrot her parents were during the first six months of development.

Mom, Dad and Kiku gather for an afternoon feeding on the mounted cup at the open woods feeding station. While the adults pay little attention to the camera, Kiku proved to be wary of any such intrusion.

of slimmer build. In a few days she was learning to pick a spot and fly to it, whether it was a bouncy twig to hang from upside down, or the trunk of a tree to grasp with her claws to perch. On June 20, Kiku found the cage door by herself and returned to the cage at dusk. The same day she accepted the first shelled walnut treat from a hand. She landed on a shoulder with her father but would not allow any touching. Even the photographs taken show K&K blandly ignoring the camera while Kiku stood up straight, warily on alert! It was this last week of June that an unexpected transition came into the experiment. Kaya was discovered to have laid two more eggs in the eucalyptus log and began sitting. Kiwani and Kiku thus became a father/daughter (?) exercise team. By June 30, Kiku was flying sharper and faster than her father or mother. She was a typical teenage driver and would go out of her way to take an especially difficult and winding path from here to there!

By the beginning of August, age about three and a half months, Kiku was beginning to fly further afield than her parents had ever gone in four seasons of daily freedom in the woods. This worried the keepers as Kiwani had little experience beyond a quarter mile in all directions. When Kaya's new clutch of babies (4) hatched, Kiku began hanging back at the food dish and there was some aggression at feeding time. We introduced another smaller food dish for her and that seemed to solve the problem. All the baby Suns were pulled for handfeeding the first week of August and the aggression of Kiwani against keepers so evident before then disappeared. For the final two weeks of the hatching and feeding, Kiku had become quite the "Mama's Girl," hanging out much of the day in the log where tiny feeding and baby noises could be heard. It was obvious she was enthralled with the whole mothering process and perhaps even helped to sit with Kaya and became involved with feeding when all three were in the log. It is hoped that a future cycle can be photographed with a video camera to observe some of this more private behavior of a group of Suns.

Until then we would have to be content with the many things we are learning from Kiwani, Kaya and Kiku. As these captive parrots stretch and grow and develop, so does aviculture as we know it. ➤

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