

Lord Derby's Beautiful Parakeet

Psittacula derbiana

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Photo by Linda Weitzman



The Derbyan Parakeet is a member of the Psittacula family which includes ring-necked parakeets, the Moustached, and others. Derbyans in captivity can withstand very cold climates as they originate in the mountains of north eastern Tibet and western China.

I once had the pleasure of owning and caring for a pair of Derbyan Parakeets. My experiences with this species started back in 1988 when it proved difficult to locate a pair of these not-so-common Asian beauties. I contacted a very knowledgeable breeder of Asian birds in Florida, but with males being harder to come by, I had to settle for a year old male with a mature three year old hen. None the less... I had my pair!

In February of 1989, the pair was shipped to their new home in Ohio. Basement living seemed inappropriate for such elegant birds, however, it was the best Ohio and I could offer. They were somewhat flighty after their trip and a visit to the vet, but they'd been handfed birds and were quick to settle down.

They were housed in a 4 x 4 x 8 ft. suspended flight made of 1 x 2 in., 14 gauge welded wire. The double floor provided a grate over the bottom floor that lined newspapers. Note: Derbyans should not be housed in anything less sturdy than 14 gauge wire due to their great beak strength.

Perches were made from natural branches of various hardwoods. I have cut, cleaned & weathered more 4 ft. branches for this pair over the past

five years than most birds go through in a lifetime!. These guys *loved* to chew! All kidding aside, I catered to this need because I thought it not only provided entertainment but was also mentally stimulating as well as excellent beak exercise. Hanging apple tree logs proved to be my pair's favorite roosting spot each night. These 6 in. thick logs were suspended from the cage top, one on each side of one end of the flight. A heavy wire was run through an augerdrilled hole, half-way down and through the middle of each log.

Humidity was controlled at around 70% and lighting was provided from two Vita Lights suspended over the flight as well as other fluorescent lighting in the basement. Two separate timers staggered on/off lighting 1/2 hour apart to simulate dusk/dawn. Summer months ran 15 hours of light daily from 6:30 AM - 9:30 PM. Winter months were set for 13 hours of light daily from 7:00 AM - 8:00 PM.

This pair was not very demonstrative in their affections with each other... living up to their Asian reputation of not being very cuddly. I never saw them preen each other but they did live peacefully together with the extent of disagreements being who could "steal-the-peanut" away from the other. Being true water-lovers... bickering regularly broke out each morning over who could get closest to the stream of water from the garden-sprayer. Since the female was the bossiest... she usually won the water *and* the peanut!

Being only seasonal breeders left much time to enjoy other niceties of life such as toys! They loved swings of all kinds. A variety of acrylic, leather, hard wooden, whole nuts, and hard rubber 'kong' type toys were all considered "safe" choices. Caution was in order because of their great beak strength... and new toys were always monitored.

The Derbyans were easy to feed because they were not picky eaters. Separate containers of pellets, parrot seed (half standard/half Fiesta Parrot), millet (loose or spray), and clean water were available at all times. The 8 ft. long cage allowed flying space and kept this pair physically trim and they were allowed all the seed they wanted. A container of

softfood was also served daily. This was made in quantity, frozen, thawed until warm and served. It consisted of a variety of cooked beans, rice, pasta, raisins, wheat, oats, barley, walnuts, shelled pine-nuts, par-cooked sweet potatoes, cut up dried apricots, a large bag of frozen mixed vegetables, cranberries in season, and anything else that freezes well. This standard mix was served daily and topped off with several items that did not freeze well... such as fresh dark greens, fresh fruits, cheeses, etc. This pair's all-time favorites were fresh celery (high in sodium), sprouted sunflower seeds (especially when feeding babies), corn-on-the-cob, and pieces of Oscar Meyer brand hotdogs. An avian vitamin was sprinkled on softfood several times a week. Cuttlebone pieces were also given several times a week unless the hen was laying... then it was offered daily.

Although not mature until three years of age, pair feeding, copulation, and egg laying began that first year... with the hen three and the male only one. I'm sure the hen being mature stimulated the male's interest in courtship at such a young age. Male courtship consisted of feeding the hen, snaking his head



A pair of Derbyan Parakeets. Note the female's black beak and the pinkish edging that rises behind her "moustache".

Photos by Edye Johnson

around while dilating his eyes, tapping his beak on food dishes, high/low head bowing, and mounting the hen in the usual manner... both feet on her back.

Female behavior consisted of wing twitching while crouching low to a perch, dilating her eyes while snaking her head around also, and making a loud "meow" call to the male... similar to a young Derbyan making a begging sound to be fed.

Breeding began in late January and mating gradually increased from once a day to many times throughout the day by April. The hen steadily worked the box until she'd lay... usually around April or May. Once she started sleeping in the box, laying was usually within a week or so away. A 14 in. square x 24 in. deep nestbox of 3/4 in. plywood was eagerly accepted. This remained up all year but was only used during breeding season. The hen made her own nesting material from pieces of untreated 2x4s attached to the inside of the lower wall of the nestbox. New pieces were replaced as needed and gave the hen something to chew at while sitting her eggs. Darkening of the inside/outside of the box was easily achieved by adding to a spray bottle: one 1-oz bottle of brown cake decorating color (non-toxic) with 1 cup of water. Mix well, spray and let dry. (The overspray might stain surrounding areas, so it's best to do this job outside.)

If entering the birdroom in the morning doesn't bring the hen out of her box to greet you... chances are good she's on an egg! This hen proved to be an excellent sitter, although it took several years before the male was old enough to fertilize eggs. My intentions over the next few years were to only interfere if there were problems... and knowing Murphy's Law... my incubator was running from winter through summer.

In 1992 we had our first three fertile eggs. Halfway through incubation an egg was ruined by what appeared to be a beak puncture, so I pulled and incubated the remaining two eggs. Hatching was normal and DNA later revealed we had a male and female baby that first year.

In 1993 there were four fertile eggs, however another beak puncture caused concern... and I pulled the remaining three eggs for incubation. We had two males and a female that spring. Approximately 30 days later, the hen laid two more fertile eggs. I *really* wanted this hen to be successful and felt if I con-

tinued to pull her eggs, it would only rob her of any opportunity to "learn". At the same time... I didn't want to sacrifice the entire clutch to one of them "playing ball" with fertile eggs! I decided to pull the eggs for incubation until they were ready to hatch, at which time I'd give one back to her. In order to keep her sitting eggs, I warmed wooden white quail eggs I'd gotten from a poultry supply and she sat them without any problem. With the first egg in the process of hatching, I waited until she was out of her box and made the exchange. I left the room and watched from behind a 2-way window. She returned to the box but quickly came out with excitement in her eyes! At this point I could tell she could hear the clicking coming from the hatching egg. Within a short time, she returned to the box and was rarely seen out again. Over the next couple of days I kept enough food in their cage to feed an army and just waited... and waited. (That was the hard part!) That was on a Friday and by Sunday morning I could hear a strong cheeping from the box. While the hen was out of the box I quickly peeked to find a dry, strong chick with food already in its crop... now I could begin to relax!

Time passed by quickly after that and the hen proved to be an excellent mother. She tolerated my peeking in the box at least once a day and never showed any aggression. I did try and respect her privacy, however, by checking only when she was already out of the box. The male was also very attentive feeding the hen and later fed the chick as well. He appeared to have great curiosity over the whole family ordeal! The chick fledged from the nestbox at about seven weeks and remained in the flight with its parents until it was about five months old. The chick was extremely steady when I'd approach the flight... but then it had been hearing my voice for weeks. I was very proud of the excellent job the parents had done and felt like they were happy to complete this cycle of life. This offspring was later sexed a hen and would make excellent future breeding stock.

On Incubation and Babies

I found total incubation time to be 23 days, with drawdown/external pip occurring at about 19 days. This was based on an incubation temperature of 99° F and a humidity setting of 80-82° using a wet-bulb hygrometer from Lyon

Electric. Egg weight loss of 16% was charted and weighted for. Egg weights of females ranged from 15-16 grams and males from 16-17 grams. New hatched chick weights for females were 10-12 grams and males were at 12-13 grams. Chicks were easy to care for and accepted a ZuPreem based handfeeding formula with no problems. These dates and weights were collected from only seven chicks.

Babies were very cuddily while young and, if raised with lots of attention, remained tame even when not handled often later. (Their parents were handfed and remained tame even in a breeding situation.) As babies got older, they would seek out human attention. It was very common to have babies leap onto your arm from their cagetops as you'd walk by. They did have a healthy amount of independence. Like all handfed babies, they loved toys and swings. Panting was typical when something stressed the birds. They were saying at least 'hello' by the time they were weaned, around 12-14 weeks. They absolutely adored bathing... which is probably why their feathering looked so nice. By the time the babies were between 4-6 months old, the males displayed role playing behavior similar to courtship (head bowing and feeding young hens). Females also demonstrated role playing such as dilating eyes, cowering low and begging with the same "meow" call the adult hen made. The few males I had, never made that call. Females also started showing a pinkish lavender color edging up into the side of the black moustache by about four months old. The blue coloring on males started to intensify about this time but would not be complete until maturity. All babies were either DNA or surgically sexed when sold. In order to keep bloodlines identified, bands (size 12) were used.

When my time with the birds became limited because of increased family activities, I chose to place the parents with another breeder of Derbyan Parakeets. Being able to sell unrelated young pairs would help ensure this species of becoming more established in the States.

Derbyans make beautiful and wonderful pets with excellent talking ability. As you can see from this article, just because they are uncommon doesn't mean they are hard to care for. I considered myself very fortunate to enjoy their company while I had them. ➤