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THE MAGIC OF PARROT BREEDING

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My fascination with Parrots has taken me thousands of miles to obtain first hand information. I have become aware that much that is written about birds is incorrect, having been copied or lifted, then doctored to suit someone's hobbyhorse.

Central and South America, together with its nearby islands are the home of so many fascinating species, some alas, nearing extinction. Australia, that great almost unspoiled land mass, home to so many majestic Cockatoos and Parakeets, is easier to explore and now enjoying a boom in tourism. But beware, Eco-tourism has arrived and tourists anxious to see rare parrots, are on their way. Hopefully some control will be exercised to prevent interference in the breeding season. Field scientists are fearful. So let us consider the short and long term future of these exotic creatures we hold in our trust. We must protect them from man's iniquities by all the means in our power.

My love affair with parrots goes back to the 60s, when they were being taken from the wild in large numbers but rarely bred. Parakeets accepted captivity and bred so readily that my interest waned and I sought a new challenge with these exciting creatures. For a few years we introduced Cockatoos to our collection with their extrovert, noisy and boisterous personality. Often the male was aggressive towards the female and like so many parrots, they were given the reputation of being bad parents, so few captive cockatoos were successful in the perfectly natural function of raising their own young. Today we are more enlightened and understand their needs. Give them a large enclosure with no visual contact with others of their kind and all is well.

Just consider nature, once a pair have courted and established a pair bond they then seek a territory and a nest site, which is to be defended against all comers. Small wonder that in captivity where the aim is often to see how many pairs can be crammed in, these delightful birds become confused and stressed. Stress does not just cause avians to feather pluck, it affects so many aspects of their life. Many avian diseases are opportunists, just waiting to prosper on a host that is less than 10% fit.

Observation often reveals that a pair of birds are unhappy with each other, but as they are the only two available to the breeder, they have to suffer. In nature they enjoy self-selection. Ideally, I believe, most birds would benefit from a mating enclosure. This needs to be a large unit, with divided sections to enable a group of birds to court and select a partner. They will then defend a section which can be closed from the group or the bonded pair removed to a breeding unit. For those who do not have the space for a pairing enclosure, or a group for selection purposes, housing the two parrots in adjacent enclosures with visual contact, is so much better than thrusting them on to each other and starting a hate match, as so frequently happens. With birds in adjacent flights one can observe their demeanor towards each other. When one feels they are ready to share, a hatch can be opened to connect the flights.

In an ideal world perhaps, one would like to house avians in a large planted aviary, but in reality that can bring problems to those of us whose climate is uncharitable. Birds foraging on the floor are at risk of infections such as Aspergillosis. This extremely serious respiratory disease can result from birds consuming food stuff that is not fresh. Aspergillus caused so many deaths in our early years. There is also the risk of Ascarid infection and contamination from rodents. We have therefore, over the years, experimented with many aviary designs. Our cold damp climate finally made us build a fully insulated building. Many years in the building industry stood me in good stead when we planned our first unit. I wanted a well insulated, light building with low maintenance. We decided to put in suspended cages which I feel offer so many advantages that, for us, they are unbeatable, providing one has the space to offer good flight length. An overhead sprinkler system is a must. It is a delight to see our birds bathe, the water also softens the birds feces from both wire and floor. The epoxy coated sloping floor is scrubbed with a rotary scrubbing machine, and washed down under pressure.

Natural daylight during the short winter days gives insufficient time to take enough food to supply the extra calories needed in the cold weather. To extend the daylight during our dark winter months, fluorescent light tubes provide economic lighting with a good spread to give a minimum of 15 hours of daylight. The purpose of artificial lighting is to enable birds to be active and take enough food to maintain good body condition in the darkest and cold winter months. Extension of lighting helps to give our parrots a similar daylight pattern to their natural habitat. The lighting also enables us to illuminate the buildings following snowfalls that block the light. Ventilation is achieved by opening louvers at ground level and extracting air at the apex of the roof. These large units give us some control of our birds environment and seldom do we have to provide any heat to keep our charges above 32 degrees F. The tranquil environment provided, free from freezing winds, has great advantages for both keepers and stock. It is also far less wasteful food wise.

Parrots in their natural habitat feed to meet their energy requirements. The captive bird becomes obese by overeating simply because the wrong diet is offered or, to relieve boredom, it eats compulsively. Unfortunately there is a lack of basic knowledge of the requirements of the psittacines' diet. There are the tree top feeders, those that find food on or in the ground, and those that feed in between on scrub or bush. Many seek fruit in order to eat the kernel, berries, pollen or nectar together with buds or shoots and whatever insects or grubs are present, so a great variety of choice pickings are sought. Where land has been cultivated the parrot has learned to feed on crops, but cultivated land only provides its main source of food where natural habitat has been completely destroyed. The people farming the land will often resort to destroying the pests threatening their livelihood. Field studies had made me aware that feeding a sunflower seed based diet, was not the way to breed parrots. Mixed pulses, fruit and vegetables with some added calcium, not only made the birds look magnificent but produced far more fertile eggs.

The getting together of the different ingredients is time consuming, and during hot weather the food spoils and of course must be replaced. This breeding season we put 23 pairs of South American parrots onto Harrison's Bird Diet. Our willingness to experiment with diets has always given us extra interest, so whilst attending the Association of Avian Veterinarians 4th European Conference in London, Greg Harrison and I agreed that I would run a trial.

My curator Kathy our daughter and I selected the participants. The cubes appealed to most of the trialist. Initially a few cubes were placed on top of the normal mixture and as we increased the Harrison cubes so we decreased the pulses, fruit and vegetable mixture. Kathy took responsibility for the food change over. At times like this good observation is paramount if one is to be successful. Recommendations made by Kathy were always taken seriously, and in most cases acted upon. In most instances a complete changeover was made in 10 to 14 days.

The cubed diet surely is a time saver and of course there is no spoiling if it is kept dry. A few birds, the xanthops in particular, take their food to the water dish and need a water change two or three times a day. They do this regardless of the type of food offered. We got over this by putting them on Fine Grind which we sprayed with

water, ideal for these smaller parrots. We are also giving Fine Grind to parents feeding young, along with some fruit and vegetables. The young so reared are tremendous, having good deep bodies and bone.

Over the years we have managed our collection with the aim of parents rearing everything. On occasions we have used fosters, and still do. This year to evaluate the Harrison trials, we have hand raised a few babies. I must say it was far easier than in the 1980s when everyone had their own brew. Some unfortunate individuals would guard their brew with their life, rather than share as the progressive amongst us did. It has been an interesting time for us evaluating our friend's brand. Some years ago an enormous amount of man-made parrot diet arrived at my home quite unsolicited. We just could not get our birds to show interest at all. That has not been the case with Harrison's. We have been please with our effort and suggest the progressive minded give it a trial. This year's youngsters are taking it in their stride not having known anything else. I have confidence in this well researched product knowing the nutrition has been professionally balanced and I feel its time to use organically produced ingredients. We have for some time followed this line, as only the best is good enough for our psittacines.

It has always been our policy to release our young stock into a large flight, thus enabling them to develop their bodies by flight and socialize. A walk-in aviary is ideal, enabling one to check that their crops are full before night fall. It is a delight to release young Macaws and birds of Amazon and Pionus size into the same enclosure. Social order is soon established and we have not witnessed any bullying.

The whole question of breeding and captivity is a contentious one. The continuous demand for pet or companion parrots shows no sign of easing. It is a thriving business and provides an outlet for surplus stock. Hopefully breeders of appendix one birds will not sell endangered species into pet situations, but instead behave responsibly and only release these important birds into breeding establishments. There are today, reactionary groups that are totally opposed to the keeping of birds in captivity, unfortunately the distorted and biased views put forward are being accepted by the public as authoritative. We can bury our heads in the sand and do nothing to correct views on bird keeping or, on the other hand, we can endeavor to put across our views, point out the need for conservation in captivity, and highlight the plight of birds in the wild and their habitat destruction. If we are going to keep the right to work with birds, then our public relations must improve.

For the discerning aviculturist a reasonable return can be made in breeding parrots for the pet market. I am unhappy to see young parrots not yet weaned being sold off to inexperienced people. We all know that in spite of written instructions on how to care for their purchases, sadly many will perish. Something that bothers me is the total clipping of flight feathers to prevent the birds born right to flight. I would not like to have a leg chopped off, to restrict my mobility. A thought provoking subject.

At our sanctuary large numbers of Macaws have been bred, but now I am cutting down as I find it impossible to justify these giants finishing up in a small cage or on a stand.

On reflection my many years as a parrot enthusiast have brought their highs and lows. One is entitled to feel great satisfaction when young birds leave the nest raised as nature intended and say, "WE GOT IT RIGHT". On the other hand, if we have, on nest inspection, found a youngster not prospering and had to withdraw it for hand raising, we would feel disappointment and ask, "What have we done wrong?" With hindsight, if the chick is warm it is often better to bring some food to the chick and feed it. Hopefully when it demands to be fed, its parents will respond. Alternatively, it is often possible to introduce it to another nest with youngsters of similar size. Once the immediate crisis has passed we should consider why we had this failure, as there can be no doubt that a parent raised chick has more resistance to disease and in most instances is better developed, not having suffered from all the deficiencies that can occur in poorly hand raised youngsters. Many parrots have never seen their parents or shared in the learning process of being part of a family group. I do believe naturally reared young are hardier and less prone to problems such as Candida, a problem of the hand raised. Obviously some situations

call for the incubator and I was delighted that my work with it helped the very successful Condor project. During a recent visit to Australia, Graeme Hyde, a highly regarded Australian said, that two paths lay directly before us... “We can choose the one marked avicultural conscience and satisfaction or the one marked financial gain and avicultural ruin”.

The challenge of this message applies equally to us all and is very close to my heart. THINK ABOUT IT.

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