

Why parent-rearing of parrots is so important

By ROSEMARY LOW

Parrot welfare and over-production of parrots are inextricably linked. No one will deny that over-production means low prices, unwanted birds and breeders desperate to sell -- to anyone who will buy. Many parrots are carelessly sold -- by breeders because of space reasons and because they need income to finance the upkeep of their birds. They are sold carelessly by pet shops and dealers because, frankly, most of them have absolutely no interest in the future of the bird that is sold. The income is all that matters.

Sadly this has always been so but formerly it was easier to place parrots which had to be found new homes. Now there are so many in this situation (partly as a result of impulse buying) that only a fraction can be found suitable homes. In industry if there is no demand for a product or if the price has fallen due to over-production, production stops. Yet bird keepers appear to be, in the main, totally careless of the fact that the reason they cannot sell their young, or sell them at a reasonable price, is because they are breeding too many.

Hand-rearing is to blame where the larger parrots are concerned, and the strange notion that parent-reared parrots are useless as pets. What saddens me most about the current pet parrot scene is that so many hand-reared parrots can never fulfil their potential as adorable and loving pets who have a home for life - or as long as their owner survives. In many cases, especially where the white cockatoos are concerned, the unfortunate birds are weaned too early. This means that they are anxious and whining and already maladjusted psychologically.

The new owner soon becomes disenchanted with such a demanding bird which is refusing to feed itself, screaming and craving attention to an excessive degree. Even species which wean much earlier than cockatoos, such as Greys, may not be fully weaned when sold to an unsuspecting

owner or pet store. Some die. Others develop severe behavioural problems.

The fact that countless breeders do not want to look in the face, is that many parrots take a long time to wean at the natural pace. Breeders are either unaware of this or frankly unwilling to undertake the extra work and expense over a few more weeks - possibly even months. Clearly such breeders should not be hand-rearing parrots.

Mortality of chicks

But they do not want the parents to rear their own young for two reasons. One is that mortality of chicks is often high in inexperienced hands. The other is that there is little or no demand for parent-reared parrots as pets. Neither of these problems are insurmountable, as I will explain later.

First let me elucidate on why parent-rearing is preferable to hand-rearing.

1. It reduces the number of parrots reared at a time when supply exceeds demand; prices are maintained and unwanted parrots are reduced.
2. "Burning out" females by constantly removing the eggs for artificial incubation, so that they lay four or five times a year, is carried out by many commercial breeders. It would be impossible if hand-rearing techniques had not been perfected. The breeder never considers the psychological harm that constant removal of eggs and chicks causes. Permanently denying them the opportunity to rear young is cruel. That such wonderfully intelligent and sensitive birds should be reduced to egg-machines is one of the very worst aspects of

aviculture. It is fuel for the anti-birdkeeping element. Parrots are more sensitive than most birds to events which are emotionally disturbing. This is why feather plucking is common among parrots as a group yet rare among other birds. It is often the human equivalent of tearing out their hair with frustration. These poor birds are totally at the mercy of their keepers.

3. Parent-rearing keeps the pairs occupied for weeks or months, according to the species. They need the occupation. Rearing reduces the monotony of the days and weeks and years which have little to distinguish them. Boredom and lack of stimulation is a very real problem for the more intelligent species. Many parrots enjoy family life and most "owners" obtain a lot of enjoyment from seeing family groups in an aviary. (And I do mean an aviary and not a little suspended cage where close confinement can result in aggressive encounters.)
4. Many hand-reared birds are useless for breeding, and countless males of white cockatoos are serial killers. For breeding purposes there is nothing wrong with hand-reared birds per se; the problem is that they are not socialised at an early age. Most are separated from their own species at or before weaning, leaving many of them unable to behave normally in the presence of their own kind, if breeding is attempted at a later stage. Some are confused about their own identity and can relate only to humans.
5. Promoting appealing hand-reared cockatoos and macaws, and other parrots, as pets,



Rearing their young helps to break the monotony of life in captivity for lorries and other intelligent parrots



This young Red-topped Amazon (*Amazona rhodocorytha*) was reared by foster parents. This is a better alternative to hand-rearing for endangered species



The hand-rearing of endangered species such as this Hyacinthine Macaw, increases the probability of being sold into the pet trade



Most hand-reared male cockatoos, such as this Citron-crest, are useless for breeding purposes

results in them being bought by people who have no previous experience with parrots (or even with birds). They are unprepared for such a demanding pet and for one which is so complex emotionally. They are unable to cope and the parrot ends up on the re-homing roundabout. Many people who would not have the time and patience needed to tame a parrot buy hand-reared birds although they do not have the time, patience or sympathy to offer loving care.

6. Inexperienced people who do not understand the problems involved in hand-rearing, too often start with Greys, cockatoos and macaws. Sadly, the result is birds crippled with rickets or which suffer painful crop burns and other injuries. Too often, all the vet can do is to put the young parrot to sleep after a short life of constant suffering. Those attempting to hand-rear should start with smaller species (but not Budgies and Cockatiels which are not among the easiest).

I am not suggesting that no parrots should be hand-reared as pets. I am suggesting that it is morally wrong to flood the market with hand-reared birds of species such as cockatoos, macaws and Greys which can live into their fifties. Comparatively few people look after such birds conscientiously over the long-term. It is more sensible to make available to the pet market conures such as the Green-cheeked or Blue-cr owned. (But of course, not so profitable – but neither is it so time consuming.) Potentially conures can live into their twenties or early thirties so they are still long-lived – but much easier to rehome if problems occur.

So how can breeders be persuaded to let their pairs rear their own young? First of all they must realise that most parrots will rear if they are in a relatively stress-free environment and if they are fed well and often. The production of healthy young also depends on the right calcium/phosphorous balance in the diet. Probably the two most common reasons for failure of parent-rearing concern feeding and health: insufficient, unsuitable or infrequent feeds, and disease which originates from the parents. Deaths of young chicks are often due to bacterial infections (possibly a result of a dirty nest-box) or due to viral diseases such as polyoma. Breeders should make more use of avian vets to screen their birds for potentially fatal diseases and to eliminate carriers from their breeding aviaries.

Daily nest inspection

If parent-rearing is to be successful, one must know what is happening inside the nest. Cameras can be extremely useful but they do not tell the whole story. Handling a chick provides vital information. However, the parents must be used to daily nest inspection (after the clutch is complete). One needs to know the temperament of each individual bird and how they react to nest inspection.

Daily handling of chicks in the nest until about three-quarters of the way through the rearing period (after that it is too difficult) is necessary for two important reasons. Handling and daily weighing enables an assessment of

a chick's health to be made. Should it need to be removed for hand-rearing or treatment of some kind this will be apparent before it is too late. Observant breeders seldom find a chick dead in the nest, except as a result of an accident. They recognise early signs of deterioration in health and development.

The second reason is that chicks which are handled regularly in the nest are easier to tame as pets than those which have not been handled. The ease of taming a parent-reared parrot is dependent on the following:

- If the parents are steady, allow close approach and are not nervous, the young have no reason to be nervous either.
- Removing the young parrot from its parents at independence (when it feeds well on its own and when the separation from its parents will not be too traumatic emotionally) and keeping it in a spacious cage in the most lived-in room in the house. Handling should not be forced on it. It will come to you when it is ready.
- The personality of the individual. Some parrots, including many which are hand-reared, do not have pet potential.

The rewards of taming a young parent-reared parrot are great. It is very satisfying. In addition, such a parrot will usually be well adjusted emotionally, better able to amuse itself in your absence, less likely to resort to feather plucking in times of stress and less likely to try to dominate you. It will also cost less than one which has been hand-fed and you will have the satisfaction of knowing that the parents were

allowed to rear it.

However, the purchaser of a parent-reared parrot should have the knowledge, the information or the evidence which allows him or her to distinguish such a bird from one which has been wild-caught. Remember that Orange-winged and Mealy Amazons, some macaws and caiques are still coming into the country from Guyana and that countless wild-caught Greys are being imported from Belgium. No member of the Trust is likely to fuel this trade but I would ask every member to take the opportunity to tell people who might seek their advice never to buy a wild-caught bird.

But to return to the subject of captive breeding, much of the blame for misunderstood and unwanted parrots must be laid at the door of breeders. They are producing parrots without giving any thought to the consequences of their actions. Some aviculturists who are truly concerned and conscientious have already made the decision to stop rearing parrots or to breed only to order for a few caring people. These are the real parrot lovers.

The claim that is often made that the rarer parrots are being bred to "save them from extinction" no longer has any credibility. There are now too many serious diseases in parrot collections to release captive-bred birds and risk wiping out wild populations. In any case, there are too many hazards in the natural habitats (or what is left) for releases to be successful, in the majority of cases. So breeders, please do not delude yourselves about your reasons for producing the rarer parrots... 