

Over-production of parrots

Giant implications for parrot welfare

by ROSEMARY LOW

Peter Them from Denmark wrote to us in July regarding a problem which all parrot breeders need to face up to. In his opinion:

"In recent years there has been a great revolution in aviculture in the European Union, as well as globally. Modern technology and new knowledge in the hands of bird breeders has resulted in many parrots and other birds, including species which formerly seldom bred in captivity, being bred in large numbers – enough to supply the avicultural and pet trades.

"There is now an oversupply of many parrot species in aviculture and there is no need to take more birds from the wild. With the dramatic increase in captive breeding, aviculture has become self-sufficient. The prices of most parrots and other birds have crashed in recent years. Many breeders tell me that they are not allowing their parrots to breed this season, as they cannot sell or give away the young birds. The parrot market, local as well as national and global, has come to a standstill. Sales are poor and prices have dropped tremendously over the past few years. People are desperately trying to get rid of their parrots at very low prices. Should aviculture continue to mass-produce parrots and other birds?"

It is very obvious that the answer to this question is: NO. Or perhaps I should qualify this with the suggestion that it is very obvious to those who care about parrot welfare and the plight of individual birds, yet a subject to which the commercial breeder hardly gives a thought. His only concern is profit. When trade is in living creatures ethics should play a very strong part.

Alas, this is not the case.

I have seen parrot breeding go full circle, from being a rare event to a mass-production trade, in which thousands of parrots are kept and bred in conditions little better than those of commercial poultry. I find this immensely disturbing, partly because parrots have such awareness and intelligence that close confinement in an unstimulating environment is a thoughtless form of cruelty.

But this is not giving a direct answer to the question of whether aviculturists should continue to mass produce parrots. My answer is no because:

1. Demand for all species with the exception of the Grey

Parrot, has declined dramatically. This has led to wide availability of many species at very low prices. The result is that many members of the parrot family become the subject of impulse buying. Cheap birds are inadequately housed because a spacious cage costs perhaps ten times as much as the bird. Cheap birds are not valued and are given away or even liberated when they become too much trouble or when the family goes on holiday.

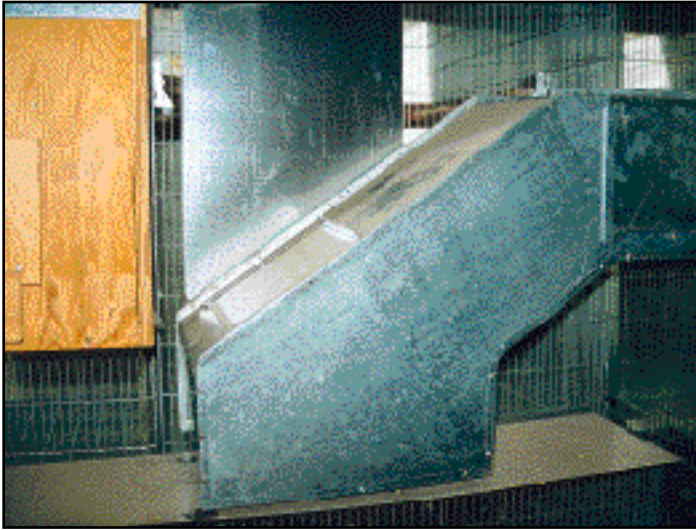
2. When breeders cannot sell their young or obtain a realistic price they are, as Peter Them states, desperate to get rid of them. They will sell them or give them away without a thought about their

future. They don't care where they go. As the more expensive species become harder to sell, the same applies. In this case, many are sold before they are weaned, even to people who have absolutely no experience in feeding and weaning a young parrot.

3. If parrot production in Europe ceased tomorrow, it would take years to find good homes for all the unwanted and ill-treated parrots which even now desperately need to be with sympathetic people. By producing more and more young, breeders are creating a problem which has become apparent only in the past five years or so, and which is set to escalate to very serious proportions. I refer to unwanted birds and those which are not unwanted but are kept in totally unsuitable conditions. The day before I wrote this article I was told about a pair of Long-tailed Parakeets and a pair of Patagonian Conures which had been kept in a flat, each pair in a Sonya cage (a pet type cage measuring 24in x 15in x 25in high - 61cm x 38cm x 63cm) with a nest-box attached to the side. Sadly, as in the case of cats and dogs, there will always be people who keep their pets in a totally inappropriate way, usually out of ignorance. Bird magazines do not reach these



Parrots in pet store in Spain. Clearly the space given is inadequate.



Mass production leads to Greys and other parrots being bred in tiers of cramped, dark cages.

- people and aviculturists and informed pet owners may never have any contact with them. I believe that over-production of parrots results in more birds getting into the hands of such people, often through auctions where no information on care is available at the time of purchase.
4. It is a myth that captive-breeding of parrots lessens the demand for imported birds. The two issues are unrelated. Importation occurs not because there is a demand for imported parrots but because there are exporters and importers who can make money from the exercise. They care not that a large proportion of these imported birds are dead within a few weeks. Importers and some retailers know that they can sell imported Greys and Orange-winged Amazons, for example, because they are half the price of captive-bred birds.
 5. Mass production, and sometimes even production by the back garden breeder who has only a few aviaries, results in many birds being kept in appalling conditions. The week before I wrote this I was in Europe and visited a breeder who had 100 pairs of Grey Parrots. They were kept in dark conditions in cages no more than one metre wide. He told me that they bred better that way. In fact his results from so many pairs were very poor indeed. If he had kept one third the number of pairs in cages three times as large he would have bred as many young, if not more.
 6. The desire to mass-produce has resulted in most of the larger parrots being hand-reared for pets. Many end up in pet shops and because they are so tame and appealing they are bought by people who would not otherwise have considered owning a parrot. Too often they are ignorant of the time and commitment needed to give such a bird a good quality of life. Especially with cockatoos, the outcome more often than not is a young bird which is sold before it is weaned. The stress and anxiety that the forced weaning it usually suffers, affects its pet potential. Its screaming or whining results in many cockatoos having four or five homes before they are one year old. Many end up stressed and plucked in rescue centres. Parent-rearing is seldom permitted because maximum production is the aim and cockatoos will lay multiple clutches in one season. (Sometimes it is because the breeder does not have the skill to provide the conditions which enable a pair to rear their young to independence.)
- Peter Them stated that many breeders are not permitting their parrots to breed this year. He must know breeders with a sense of responsibility. At least in the UK, I seldom encounter parrot owners who make a conscious decision not to permit their birds to breed. The

problem of being unable to sell the young is usually dealt with by selling the breeding pair.

I now limit the number of young I breed to a total of four or five a year, of which perhaps only two or three are sold. Some of my birds are past breeding age. With others I remove eggs so that they are only permitted to rear one chick as I believe it is unfair and stressful to some birds to stop them breeding. Some pairs greatly enjoy the experience of rearing young (and I do mean to fledging) and it gives them a purpose. It is always a joy to see the young one with its parents in the aviary.


With some species, and this includes lorries, the most humane way of preventing birds from breeding is to leave the young one in the aviary and to remove the nest-box. Last year my Stella's Lorikeets produced a young male of the melanistic form. As the latter is not as popular as the red Stella's, I could not find anyone who wanted him. He has formed a very strong bond with his father. They spend hours rolling around in play on the aviary floor. His presence prevents the male from trying to mate with the female. Of course, if the young one had been a female this solution would not have been possible.

As a last resort, the best method of preventing production is to replace a female's eggs with

infertile eggs of approximately the same size, or with plastic eggs. Removing the nest-box can be very stressful and might result in the male attacking the female. The strategy should vary according to the circumstances of each pair.

At the end of the day, it is the breeder who controls the number of young parrots available. He controls the supply but not the demand. If the demand is not there, breeders must act with the interests in mind of the young they have or could produce. If the market is not there, mindlessly allowing the birds to breed year after year only exacerbates the problem of low prices and reduced demand. The consequences for individual birds is appalling. That is why so many parrot rescue centres have come into existence during the past five years or so.

The breeder who says he must sell young to pay for the upkeep of his other birds, is in a Catch 22 situation, especially as parrots and parakeets are so long-lived. The only responsible answer is to stop breeding and look after the birds until they die or can be found suitable homes. Unfortunately, not many people are prepared to do this.

A sense of responsibility and a commitment for life to the birds which people keep is so often lacking. Sadly we live in a throw-away society. 

NOTE: We intend to discuss the whole subject of parrot welfare, including 'rescue and rehabilitation', in our November issue. Please send any comments or proposals to the editor.



Stella's Lorikeets bred by Rosemary Low.