

to wean or not to wean



Perhaps no other avicultural issue in recent years has stirred such controversy and emotional debate as the sale of not-yet-weaned psittacine chicks by breeders and bird shops - and for good reason!

When undertaken irresponsibly, the transfer of a helpless young parrot in the midst of its hand-feeding phase can result in a host of serious problems. Insufficient or imbalanced nutrition can cause stunting, poor feathering, skeletal deformity, vitamin excess or lack, even kidney and liver damage. Unclean habits or exposure to foreign microbes may bring on disease, fungal infection, sour crop, etc.; while improper feeding technique can result in burnt crop or food aspirated into lungs.

This issue's contributor **EB Cravens** has bred, trained, raised, kept and rehabilitated more than 75 species of psittacines during the past twenty plus years. His emphasis on natural environments for birds, the urging of babies to fully fledge during the extended weaning process, and the leaving of chicks for many weeks inside the nest box with their parents in order that they may learn the many intangibles of their species, have succeeded in changing for the better the lives of so many captive parrots. He has written extensively for magazines all over the world and on the internet.

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Hand feeding is a complicated process involving changes in chick privacy, formula, schedule and flight environment.

IN ADDITION, incalculable emotional stress and behavioral abnormalities are sometimes brought on by neglect, frequent hunger, and hand-feeding routines which ignore basic principles of nurturing.

Psittacine chicks are extremely hardy. Their power of endurance and will to survive are obvious to anyone who has hand-raised even a few chicks. But, by the same token, it is apparent in the avicultural world that some inexperienced or neglectful hand-feeders make a practice of doing only enough in their role as surrogate mothers to keep the chicks alive and growing. They neither excel nor flourish, and of course, never reach maximum healthy pet potential.

Breeders, bird brokers and retail shops that make a habit of selling unweaned parrots to such inexperienced hand-feeders are acting irresponsibly. In some cases, the end result may be death. With the tools, techniques and

knowledge available in psittaculture this day and age, the loss of any healthy chick due to faulty handling by an unpracticed new owner trying to cope with the intricacies of hand-feeding, is a sad failure.

Blame rests both with the insensitive seller of the bird, and the foolish-minded buyer! Is it any wonder so many veterinarians, parrot behaviorists, and conscientious bird breeders are now going on record with the hard line stand: "No more selling of unweaned parrots?"

'Tis interesting to consider just exactly what the motives are behind selling an unweaned chick...

One of the most common motives is haste. Various hand-feeders' round-the-clock workload is tremendous with so many chicks in the nursery and on the way. Stress and the burden of too many psittacines at a facility nearly always results in forfeiture of advanced natural

parrot-keeping methodologies. Quality of life for breeding pairs suffers, while the emotional needs of fledglings are imperfectly fulfilled.

A second reason for the desire to sell unweaned psittacines is, of course, money. Aviculturists are hesitant to keep the neonates around for weeks at a time, when someone else is willing to do the work.

Thirdly, parrot chicks not yet self-feeding are bought and sold in the U.S. because that is what certain customers think they want. This is a fallacy promoted by some parrot sellers. They try to convince customers that unweaned chicks will "bond" better and be friendlier than weaned birds. In fact, already weaned and fledged psittacines, when properly raised, are much less trouble and much better adjusted when they move to the new home.

FOR MANY YEARS I CHOSE TO SELL some of my eight and ten week old hand-feeding chicks to the reputable exotic bird store where I worked as manager for seven years. The owner is a more experienced hand-feeder than I, who has raised to weaning hundreds of hookbill pets, of dozens of species. I trusted Feathered Friends of Santa Fe and knew my chicks would get premium care there. But, I no longer do this as I now believe that parrots are more confident and well-rounded if they grow up the first 16 weeks or more at our aviaries around the parents who hatched them.

CERTAIN AVICULTURISTS prefer to wholesale all their young chicks to "brokers" who are experienced at handfeeding and weaning parrots before reselling them. Once again, when all parties involved are responsible, there should be no reason for a chick to be in physical danger. However, think about when a chick is moved from its dark secure nesting box to the breeder's nursery, on to a broker for handfeeding, then to a pet store for sale and finally to the new owner's household. This is five major changes in its life, all in the span of four or five months. Not only is this difficult for the parrot to assimilate, but if not done flawlessly at each step, it can leave lasting emotional trauma on a chick. Stable childhood is a critical ingredient in making a contented psittacine pet!

It is not unusual to see single dark "stress bars" on a bird's plumage marking the exact progress of pinfeather eruption when abrupt environmental change took place. If a chick must be transferred, extra care, love and nurturing are essential. Hatch and nursery files and all up-to-date information on the psittacine should be included with the transfer, along with a supply of the exact formula being handfed at the time. Moving a helpless chick to a new "habitat" is risk enough without the new owner immediately making a switch in food.

FINALLY, THERE ARE THOSE CASES when non-professional hand-feeders - that is, inexperienced pet store personnel or a novice pet owner - purchase an unweaned chick. This is where 95% of serious problems arise. In many instances the new owner is simply unfamiliar with the species being purchased. For example, all too many aspiring aviculturists seem to think if they have handfed a cockatiel or lovebird in the past, then they have the know-how to properly raise and wean an amazon parrot or African Grey. Not so, and believe me, one neonate amazon or conure is not the same as all the others. There are early-wean chicks and late-wean chicks and reluctant feeding chicks and chicks with no feeding motion whatsoever. There are those that are always too warm or fidgety, and those that are afraid of the light and those that simply will not stay put in their holding basket in between feeds...

THE KEY HERE IS KNOWLEDGE. And not just reading knowledge, but hands-on practice.

If there are those of you out there who are contemplating raising a medium to large unweaned psittacine of a kind you have never worked with before, seek out and get aid from experienced handfeeders who have raised that same species many times. Ask questions, talk nutrition, note weaning time periods and behaviors, and learn, learn, learn.

By the way, some lethal diseases such as polyoma virus are serious nursery pathogens much more likely to take the life of an unweaned chick. Waiting as long as possible to acquire your new pet while regularly visiting with it as it is being weaned, is to a customer's advantage.

THE BREEDER OR SHOP that chooses to sell an unweaned parrot has far greater responsibility. Such sellers must know when to say "absolutely not" to the transfer of an unweaned chick into an inappropriate handfeeding situation. A new owner with a fulltime job who plans to take the chick back and forth to work could be one such case. An owner that has not yet purchased a cage is another.

Many other undesirable situations can be created by the sale of unweaned chicks. For example, since many breeders discount birds sold unweaned, a purchaser may merely wish to get a



The interspecies socialization chicks receive at a professional site can be invaluable to later pet homes.



Why would a pet buyer want to take a chick home early? So much learning comes from being with its brothers and sisters.

parrot at a cheaper price. Such a monetary motive is suspect when considered in the light of the amount of time and commitment needed to hand-feed a parrot to full weaning.

Another situation I've seen is when a couple must share handfeeding duties, but one individual is "beak shy" of a parrot's bite. This situation occurs most often with large macaws that pump very strongly at formula implements.

A DESIRE TO BOND TIGHTLY with one's new pet hookbill is frequently given as a reason for an owner to undertake handfeeding. This is an erroneous concept. Young psittacines are NOT bonding when they attach themselves strongly to the person holding the feeding syringe. This is not a permanent emotional tie. Just as in the wild, a chick does not "bond" with its mother/father. The quality and depth of the owner/psittacine friendship is determined after weaning when the parrot pet begins personality formation and thinking for itself. Bird dealers who coerce unaware buyers into handfeeding with this false play are to be avoided.

While my recommendations are clearly against inexperienced owners taking on the job of hand-feeding, there is a time I consider ideal for them to step in. The early playful development phase (I call it the "puppy phase") is a joy for owners to experience. This phase does not normally begin until some two weeks before expected weaning

and it continues right up through the fledging phase. Ninety-nine percent of the unweaned psittacine chicks sold through our shop back in Santa Fe were transferred to their new owners at this late phase. At that point, the birds are 90% fully feathered, down to two-plus feedings per day from a warm bowl with the fingers and are consuming nuts, seeds, veggies, pellets and other weaning foods. Being off the syringe, they are safe from aspiration and crop burn dangers. This phase is much more enjoyable and has the benefit of taking place when the fledgling is flying around and can come to you and the familiar food dish on command. This is the ideal time at which a new owner may begin feeding duties of the pet.

On a side note it is important to mention that wherever a parrot is weaned should provide enough space for that bird to complete its full flight training. Weaning goes hand in hand with proper fledging. Young psittacines need lots of enclosed room to develop proper musculature and advanced flying skills.

WHEN WE PREPARE TO SEND A BIRD HOME, we instruct buyers to visit their new chick regularly for ten days to get it used to their voice and touch. The two weeks prior to departure, owners arrive at afternoon feeding time, and are given instruction and practice in feeding their chick warm mush with their

fingers. Any difficulties are ironed out before the bird leaves the shop!

When the psittacine is finally picked up, a list of care considerations, weaning foods, sterility and safety concerns, etc. is reviewed and given the new owner. Full contact information is shared along with instructions to call and report in after 24 hours. The chick is brought back in for a progress visit after 3 days. Weaning can be a particularly difficult time. On several occasions we had chicks brought back to us after 48 hours because they were not eating well enough in their new environment.

So, it can be seen that the selling of an unweaned parrot does not absolve the seller of responsibility concerning the living creature. Once this is understood, and with strong cooperation between seller and new owner, such a transfer can be successfully accomplished only at the end of the hand feeding phase.

But as already mentioned, as a pet parrot buyer, there is really no great advantage to taking the bird home early. Visit it often and leave the weaning to the professionals who have been raising the chick for weeks. Stability and patience are the key to producing the finest of new pets.

You will not be disappointed with the outcome.

With aloha, EB

