



One Breeder's Way with Greys *Psittacus erithacus erithacus*

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As I look back over the last 20 years, and realize just how far aviculture has come, I am so thankful I was in the midst of it all. 20 years ago we didn't even have a test for Psittacosis, let alone any of the other diseases out there. Today, thanks to the pioneers we have tests and treatments for many of the disease that devastated aviculture in the early years. We have new methods of care and diet that were unheard of 20 years ago. Aviculture has taken some giant leaps forward, and with all our knowledge we have also taken a few steps backwards.

When I started breeding birds in 1984, I acquired all fairly recently imported stock for my breeding birds. This eliminated a lot of the diseases associated with big quarantine facilities housing numerous different genera of birds. I knew the diseases they may have when coming from Africa. Once housed in a warehouse, aviary, or store with other birds from other continents, it was anybody's guess what the birds may have come in contact with. In acquiring newly imported stock, I pretty much knew, which diseases they may have been harboring. All new birds got a complete vet check, at least as complete as it was in those days, about two weeks after being in my quarantine. I tried to buy most of my birds in groups. Pairing up groups was much easier than working with one or two pairs.

After attending the IAS Conference in January of 1993 I started using Pretty Bird colored pellets. Mike Massey was at this convention and being the salesman he is, convinced me to try it. The very morning it arrived I was cutting up the usual fare of fruits and vegetables and the phone rang. My mother was just taken to the hospital due to having seizures, and I should come right away. As it turned out, she was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, and she would live for about another year. Since she was my best friend I wanted to spend this year with her. It was a 12 mile drive, one way. Since my husband and I had another business (that made money) it was going to be difficult for him to feed the birds and care for the business. He suggested we eliminate the time consuming preparation of the fresh produce and just feed seed and pellets. I was mortified knowing my birds couldn't live without them. We had our veterinarian, Dr. Marge Wissman come out and discuss the problems we might encounter. She assured me when we did the annuals in August we could supplement what might be lacking and give them a boost. The diet of 70% pellets and 30% parrot seed mixture was decided upon, with no other foods or vitamins being added. When August arrived the birds were healthier than they had ever been, and my year's production went from about 30% to 90% and has held steady ever since.



During breeding season I could not bring myself to stop feeding a bean, corn, and rice mix along with corn-on-the-cob to birds with chicks. Other than that, no produce has ever been fed. In about 1996 I had a chick with a fractured leg and blamed it on the parents stepping on the chick. In the years following, I had occasion to pull a few more chicks with slight folding fractures, and after much research, came to realize it was probably diet related rather than being stepped on. I began watching my pairs eating habits a bit more closely and saw the greys (being as smart as they are) were feeding very little seed or pellets, mostly mash. Over the years more and more pairs started doing this. I assume they figured it was easier to feed mash, rather than the old belief “they know what food is better”. Although I did supplement the mash with vitamins and calcium, it seems this did not work.

I worked on this problem before the breeding season started in 2001, and decided to feed a breeder pellet along with the regular pellet/seed mix, and omit the mash and corn-on-the-cob. I watched the pairs closely to see how they would feed babies. They took to the breeder pellet like it was candy while feeding their chicks. In doing so, I found parents no longer fed their chicks through the night. Since I have cameras with sound all through my aviary I was able to learn there were no babies peeping at night and feeding going on. Chicks were about 10% heavier when pulled from the nest; the chick’s crops were not being stretched to the maximum and best of all, no fractured legs any more.

I firmly believe in annual preventive veterinary medicine. I have been using Margaret Wissman, DVM,DABVP, Avian Practice since about 1990. I do not have a single year of poor production, low fertility, dead-in-shell and the infamous FIRES to put out. When deciding any treatment protocols for my birds, all decisions are made taking into account seriousness of illness, ease of administration, efficacy of treatment, expense, and long-term effects. We can only do this because of Dr. Wissman’s in-depth knowledge of my flock. Her knowledge is gained through blood work, viral screening, serology, hands-on physical examinations, culturing, prophylactic deworming, and doing necropsies on any bird or egg that dies. Dr. Wissman views this as a tool for learning and knowing my flock and giving her insight. Unfortunately a dead bird is a window into the flock and is a very valuable tool.

SPECIALIZING

Specializing has many obvious advantages. You can have uniform cages and nest boxes, concentrated knowledge, the ability to switch partners, and behavior patterns become apparent. When I had only three or four breeding pairs, I would find a pair didn’t feed their young any corn-on-the-cob for one day. When I had 15 pairs of greys all feeding babies, it became very apparent that this happened on the seventh or eighth day with all the pairs. This shows a particular pattern, the significance, is still unknown to me. After a few years of observing your



birds, behavior patterns slowly emerge. With all this, I have come to realize the two most important things for successful breeding are TERRITORY and COMPATIBILITY!

I believe if two birds are compatible they will be good solid producers and feed their babies well. If they routinely abandon eggs or mutilate and kill chicks, either they are insecure or incompatible. You may have an occasional weak chick, or the breeders may have a disease brewing, causing mutilation or killing. Under no circumstances should that be a continuing problem. In my situation, I feel I have established a very secure environment in raising all Africans and performing yearly preventative veterinary care. Infertility in my aviary only means one thing - incompatibility.

VISUAL SEXING

This is to be used only as a quick guide, and is not meant to replace DNA or surgical sexing. Keep in mind this is for birds 18 months and older. Babies can be sexed in the nursery due to the lighter overall color of the hens, and some practice with the values of grey under the wings as they get near weaning, as explained below.

Most aviculturists are aware of the males being darker in color. This can only be based on the fact both birds originated in the same region of Africa, or the chicks are from the same clutch. Also hens usually have a gradual dark to light transition of grey, from neck to belly, while males have a more uniform grey in the same area.

Importers used the under-tail coverts as the guide for sexing. This should not be termed "vent area" or "ventral feathers". The under tail coverts are directly under the tail feathers and consist of ten feathers. These feathers almost seem to support the main tail feathers and form a "V" shape with the point stopping slightly shorter than the tips of the tail feathers. Feathers of the hens will be edged in grey, while males will be solid red. Males will occasionally have a "hairline" of white on the edge.

Observe your birds from about five to ten feet away, while on a perch or hanging upside down from the cage top, and flapping their wings. With this action you are able to distinguish three bands of grey on the underside of the wing. The top band is the feathers making up the ventral antebrachial coverts. The band directly below is the feathers of the minor ventral wing coverts. The last band consists of the primary remiges. In a hen these bands respectively "appear" grey, white and dark grey. The male "appears" grey, grey and dark grey. If you hold a bird, rather than viewing from five to ten feet away, and study this, your eyes "see" the actual different bands and you can not easily distinguish male from female.

Lastly, the length of the female's wings appears to be a bit longer than males. Female's wings extend beyond the tail just a bit, while the males fall a bit short.



SETTING UP PAIRS

Ideally five to eight pairs should be introduced to your property at one time. All birds are flocked together in a 4X4X8 (minimum size) flight, with a lot of perches. Being in a new place, no one bird has established dominance. Birds are vetted about two weeks after flocking. They remain together for approximately another two weeks, no less. (When all the birds are flocked in one flight, you must not be fooled by the hen. Hen greys are ladies of the night. A hen will solicit any and all males. I believe she may be checking to see who has the biggest....er....crop, capable of feeding her and their chicks. Males, being what they are, are more than obliging, in feeding her. At this point, I remove all the males and place them in a flight right next to the hens. I leave them separated for no less than two weeks. Once the separation is over, I remove one hen at a time and “paint” her with artist transparent permanent ink. I literally pour the ink in my hand and rub it all over her head, chest, back, and wings. Do not use washable. It makes a horrible mess, especially if it rains and do not use red. Red looks too much like blood and you’ll end up scaring yourself when you see her later. Each hen is painted a different color and replaced into their flight. I next proceed to take one male and put him in the flight with all the hens. Usually, before I even retreat to my spy area a pair is feeding each other. I net the pair up and place them in their breeding flight. I again catch another male and repeat the procedure. When you get down to the last two to four birds, they may not be as compatible as all the others, but you and they have no choice. I have not been able to determine who does the choosing, perhaps the male just picks his favorite color. My breeding season starts in October and runs through about May. I want my pairs paired up in late August or early September, and I usually plan it this way.

TERRITORY

I believe, and so do many aviculturists I have talked to, that there is a minimum distance between cages that is necessary for the well-being of the birds. Unfortunately, I did not start out knowing I would have this many birds and I do not have the room. My cages are approximately six to twelve inches apart. I started using full partitions between all the cages about eight years ago. The birds must not feel threatened by neighbors, and they must feel secure. Partitions go up about Labor Day and they are removed about Memorial Day. During the summer they get their rest and build up, bicker with their neighbors and just chill out.

COMPATIBILITY

This is my love: the pairing and the breeding. This is where the challenge lies. Birds have all been paired and in their breeding flights, and all partitions have been put in place. There is much vocalization in the flock, and a lot of flying and activity. The hens spend a lot of time interacting with their males, on the far end of the flights, away from the nest boxes. This is



where you really see them hanging upside down from the flight top sparring with the mate on the perch or they both hang and spar. Any hens I notice hanging back and not joining their mates become suspect. I watch that pair a little closer. I begin to notice the male keeps her at a distance, and that she is fearful of him. She stays in the box a lot. I try to fool myself into thinking she may be going to nest, but by season end there have been no eggs. Another pair acts about the same way, but this hen doesn't allow the male to approach her, and she appears to be more dominant. By seasons end, there are eggs, but all have been infertile. These two pairs will have to be re-paired. All the other pairs went to nest at the end of October.

By the end of breeding season, a few pairs had only laid once and raised chicks, most went twice and some three times. I can usually expect some infertile eggs if any pairs go on to lay a fourth clutch. I think with the males guarding and feeding the hens, they become bored, and just peter out.

Memorial Day is here and all partitions come down. There is much activity and vocalizing in the aviary. You can just feel the excitement of all the birds seemingly rejoining the flock. The males spar between cages at the far end. The hens begin to take their places near the nest boxes and they aren't allowed to join the males very often in the ritual of protecting their territory. Only in the early morning and late evening are the hens seen with the males. During much of the daytime, their station is near the nest box. This goes on most of the summer and by breeding season, the males are once again pumped up. Each has done his job protecting his hen. When the partitions go back up, the males almost seem to say "see, I drove them all away."

Africans are not very demonstrative birds and you have to read a lot into what they do. For example, I had two hens together for treatment with medication. Anyone seeing them would have thought they were the most loving pair of birds you could ever want. They were constantly together, sleeping, preening and eating. These activities in no way are proof of a compatible pair. They would never raise chicks. It took well over a year for one of them to accept a male. She was a very dominant hen. She is now one of my best breeders, but it was a lot of work. I never made that mistake again. I never house two birds of the same gender together.

You must be able to observe your birds without them knowing. The more pairs you have, the better the observations will be. Imported birds that aviculturists now own should be breeding by this time. If you purchase non-proven imported birds, know ahead of time that they should be re-paired. There is no such thing as a bonded imported pair now. If they are healthy, and not breeding, they are not compatible. If you have a pair of imported birds that haven't bred yet, go home and find them new mates. There is no reason to wait. All the years and prime health going to waste. Do it! Don't fool yourself. We have all heard the story of the pair of Hyacinth, *Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*, macaws breeding in the pet store. They loved each



other so much they just couldn't help themselves.

SIGNS OF BREEDING

One of the first signs I see is the food intake greatly increases. If you monitor and ration your feed this will become very apparent. As they eat more I feed more. At the height of breeding they are consuming almost twice the amount as they normally do.

Secondly, I see (or maybe I should say smell) the sweet odor of the hen. I notice it in the nest boxes first. I can usually smell hens housed outdoors when about five feet away when I'm feeding. This is the powder down smell, only much stronger. It has nothing to do with their droppings taking on an odor, much as some birds do.

Thirdly, I notice small tufts of down all over the cage and floor. This appears to be the downy feathers right where the tail and body meet on each side. The tail almost has a pinched look where it joins the body rather than one continuous line. The hen plucks these out and I assume this is for easier access by the male.

Lastly, I see (or hear) late night vocalizations, more often and for longer duration than normal.

COURTSHIP AND MATING

In the African grey's general play, many times they will hang from the top of their flight and spar. If this is unknown to the breeder, it almost appears that they are fighting because it can become quite physical. I think this is a good sign in a pair. During courtship the two will droop their wings as they hold them slightly away from their bodies and walk back and forth on their perch. While doing this, they will turn and twirl horizontally on the perch. The hen seems to make a little grunting noise while doing this. It seems the hen controls the activity (so what's new?) with all the gestures and body language. The hen will slide up next to the male and bite his foot encouraging him to raise his leg. Once he gets the idea she leans forward and into him to make the mounting easier. Once mounted the male drops his wings on each side of her for stability. While copulation takes place, the male will feed the hen numerous times. This may also be a way of stabilizing his hold. Copulation can last up to 20 minutes, and appears to be a very deliberate, caring, and pleasurable act for both parties. Once mating is over they both usually shake out their feathers and go for food. A lot of the breeding in my aviaries takes place about 10 a.m. and near 4 p.m.

EGG LAYING

Egg laying can take as long as a month after the onset of breeding. Once the hen starts laying,



the eggs are normally laid every third day. I have seen some start setting immediately, but normally a hen will begin setting when the second egg is laid. I gauge my hatch time by going about 28 days after the first egg is laid, regardless of when incubation started. I believe greys will be more secure, and produce better, if you are not constantly peeking in their bedroom. Since I do not check my nest boxes as often as most, I cannot say exactly how long incubation really is. For me, it has been between 28 and 35 days, after the first egg laid.

BROODING

African greys, to me, are some of the most reliable parents there are. Greys sit their eggs so tight that some first-timers, or nests with inappropriate bedding, will result in smushed babies. In my ignorance of breeding and determination not to EVER artificially incubate, I have learned African birds seem to give their eggs a cooling down period just prior to hatching. A day or two before hatching, some hens almost seem to abandon their eggs. Eggs can be found that are ice cold to the touch, and still hatch a few days later. I do believe in large water bowls for the hen to soak in if the eggs are too dry. Even in Florida I have seen hens bathe and go immediately back to the nest. I know of many aviculturists who have watering tubes and bottles and say this is not necessary for their situation. I really don't know, but it works for me, so I use big water bowls.

FEEDING CHICKS

Again, African greys are the best parents. I have unknowingly left five babies in a clutch, in the nest for four weeks, and found only a 20 gram difference from oldest to youngest. This has happened twice with two different pairs. I normally pull at no younger than three weeks. Had I known there were five babies, I think I would have been a basket case and pulled early. There really are occasions when "ignorance is bliss".

I do not believe African greys abandon eggs or mutilate chicks unless something is very wrong.

FUTURE BREEDERS

With the enactment of the WBCA, we are into a new frontier of aviculture. I think at this point, only time will tell and we will learn from our mistakes. In this infancy, I have observed many male African greys that were once pets, bonded to their human, have not been successful breeders. Some African greys that were hand-fed, but raised to be breeders, do not do as well as their wild counterparts. Parent-reared birds at this juncture seem to be faring well. I have a few flights consisting of about 18 hand-feds being raised to be breeders. I have groups of four to six birds per flight, flocked together. My three year olds are starting to show solicitation to other members in the flock. Flocking in groups seems to be a better start in producing domestic breeders. African greys that were hand-fed and grew up as pairs together haven't



done as well as I would have hoped. My instinct tells me they may perceive each other as siblings and something in the genetics keeps them from going on to breed. The males seem to really not know what they are supposed to do. Maybe in the wild they go through the same uncertainties. It would be nice if that were the case. Although, when getting dark eyed, or young adult greys out of quarantine, this has not been the case. Those birds, for me, have grown up and have gone on to produce as well as mature, imported birds. In discussing the problems of captive bred birds for breeding, it needs to be noted which “type” we are talking about. Hand-fed ex-pets or hand-fed and raised for breeding, or parent-reared.

TEMPERAMENT OF CHICKS

I am assuming, in this instance, if you are pulling babies, they are going into the pet market. I believe this aspect of breeding is still very much in its infancy and we are learning so much every day. There are many schools of thought and many different techniques about which most hand-feeders feel very strongly.

The old controversy, “is it genetics or environment that makes us what we are?” is always brought up when discussing temperament. There is much to be said about both, too much. Many of my first-time parents have been nervous with their first clutch or two. As they have become seasoned breeders, the stability of the parents has improved dramatically. I have found this to be reflected in the babies. Hand-feeding chicks from a pair of first-timers cannot be compared to feeding chicks from the same parents five to ten clutches later. I have not seen a marked difference in chicks pulled at ten days from a clutch pulled at four weeks. Babies pulled at four or five weeks, may take a day or two to settle into the routine, and become comfortable. Once they have overcome their initial fear, the weaned baby is as sweet as one pulled at two to three weeks. I do have pairs that produce consistently sweeter babies than others and some that produce better talkers than others. I am sure this is where genes come into play.

PULLING CHICKS

I believe that the trauma a chick experiences when being pulled, can affect it for the rest of its life. Breeding pairs can be very stable and relaxed. They are comfortable feeding their babies. No threats from predators, they are very compatible parents, and raise wonderful sweet babies. Prior to going out to pull chicks, I have everything ready.

I have a towel, a container, a flashlight I can hold in my mouth, and a cardboard divider to separate parents from babies. It is a cool January evening as I tap on the box and the parents move (not run) to the other side. The fact that it is cool accounts for the babies being all huddled together in one clump. I carefully insert my cardboard divider, and gently remove the babies. Not a sound is made as I close the box and retreat indoors with my precious treasure.



The babies are alert and attentive, and as I walk the path to the house, they show a certain calmness from hearing my voice. This is ideal pull: these babies have never known fear.

Now let's examine the same pair four months later in the warm spring of Florida. Armed with all my gear, I tap on the box, and the parents try to retreat to the other side. Babies are spread out all over the box, with wings and legs outstretched to keep cool. I know in an instant that I will have to use a towel to keep the parents back as I reach under them to get the chicks. As I reach in with the towel, the parents start to growl, and the babies try to scurry after the parents. The parents become defensive and the babies become fearful and they start growling. I gingerly pick the chicks up one by one and check with the flash light to make sure I have them all. I close the lid and walk that walk back to the house. All the while the babies are crouched in the corner growling. My voice doesn't have the calming effect it often times does. This was far from an ideal pull. These chicks, with the proper nurturing will be wonderful babies, but they will not reach the same peak of perfection as the ones pulled in January.

One last observation with parent-to-chick problems, is the wild-caughts that have become friendly, less fearful of their human caretaker. These birds present the problem of being aggressive while you are servicing their cages. Although they may retreat into the box WHEN THEY HAVE CHICKS, you can often times hear them charging at the next box interior. These same birds will also charge at you while you are trying to pull the babies. This creates the problem of them tromping all over the babies. In warm weather this is especially bad when they are all spread out in the nest box.

HAND FEEDING

Baby greys are very lazy eaters. Many more times than not, you will have to wake them up to feed. If you use a small syringe they will fall asleep when you go to refill. If chicks were well fed by the parents, they will not cry and beg, since they never had to while in the nest. If chicks cry and fuss, I have found the parent birds did not feed them as well as they could have. Once in the nursery and being fed well this begging may continue. It seems that it has become a habit, rather than begging from hunger. With African greys you must be aware they sometimes puke. The most frequent time is at about six weeks old. Each time you stop feeding, it seems they want to bring it back up to chew it. At this point some find it easier to use a large syringe and fill them quickly without stopping.

Feeding time is not my nurturing and play time with the chicks. I get in and feed quickly and efficiently. Once feeding is done, I spend my time wiping faces, cleaning the babies, and playing with them. This is my nurturing time. I, myself, cannot possibly feed 30-40 babies at once and play at the same time. I would spend all my time waking them up, and trying to keep the food warm. I am the most comfortable using a syringe to feed. If quality nurturing time is employed while raising chicks, whether you use a gavage, syringe, or a spoon to feed, the



chicks will be the same. I have tried co-parenting greys and I do not find much difference in the temperament. As a matter of fact, I have pulled greys at eight weeks, with no prior nest box contact from me, and they were superior to some I pulled at 3 weeks.

African Greys prefer the air temperature cool and their food hot. As soon as I bring them in, I try to keep the room temperature at 78 degrees. I do not use brooders I use Tupperware® tubs as their containers, with shredded, crinkled newspaper as the bedding.

I syringe feed and get as much food into them at one time, without stopping for refills. They get bored and sleepy if you dilly-dally. Keeping the food temperature at a constant 110 degrees seems to be a big advantage. The minute a baby resists food I know it has cooled too much. Resistance from a chick and very thin food, are the two main causes of aspiration. When a chick resists food stop and check temperature.

Chicks go through developmental stages while being hand-fed. Growth stages are sometimes interpreted by novices as problems. They will be very active and not gain as much weight as the previous few days, then be very sleepy and put on weight for a few days. Unfortunately they don't all do it the same day, so you may think you have a sick baby when, in actuality, it is going through a growth spurt.

Stages in eating behaviors can be a problem. Some throw up, others let formula run out of their mouths, some chew slapping their beaks together and with hard lips they end up splattering it all over, and some like to sling it. They act like they are the ones doing you the favor by eating. If they learn from the get-go they get all the food all at once, you will eliminate almost all of these problems. Feeding time is a serious time, no fooling around.

You can produce and hand-feed quality pet birds on a large scale. I can feed these babies in one half hour and then spend another quality hour playing and cuddling them.

CONCLUSION

As a breeder I believe we owe giving back to aviculture and our birds. We need to financially support medical research and conservation. It is up to each and every one of us to know the causes we support. Know what they do and where the money goes and then..... **support** that effort.

Some say captive breeding of birds is not conservation and I disagree. A species may become extinct in the wild, but we may still have it in cages or flights. In this way, they are not "forever lost" to the world. Like the Spix macaw, *Cyanopsitta spixii*, there is a ray of hope, no matter how dim that ray appears at this time.



In a conservation effort, we bird breeders help make the public aware of which species are in trouble and are gaining support financially. Any one that buys an un-cape from me hears about the seriousness of the Cape parrot in the wild. These people are usually eager to learn more and offer help.

Looking back over the last 20 years when I attended these conventions, I heard researches talk about the research being done on new diseases, the very diseases that are now easily treatable and preventable. These are diseases that can now be screened for and treated or even vaccinated, and so much is taken for granted. We still have diseases that have not attained “taken for granted” stature; we need to support the research.

With all the knowledge we now have, we do tend to forget the basics. The root of all our endeavors sometimes gets lost in our fast pace to achieve the “perfect world” with our birds. We tend to forget these are still birds, not little people dressed in feathers, or puppies running around the house. Some of these birds are only one generation from the wild and still have the mystery and magic that makes them so precious to us. I have to ask myself, do we expect too much? We are continually changing and modifying our chicks to fit a perceived niche in this not so perfect world, in some not so perfect living room. Perhaps it is we that needs to change, to stop and think of them as birds once again and respect them for what they are and not try to turn them into what “we think” they should be.

Nothing is written in stone. There are many different directions that can be taken to reach the same goals. Listen and talk and work with other aviculturists, and be open minded. As many years as we find ourselves doing this we learn something new each day. Each breeder, hand-feeder has to know his/her own strengths and weaknesses, and be honest. Know the strengths and weaknesses of the birds you care for. Listen to your birds, hear what they are telling you.

If you can't hear them with your ears, then maybe you should start listening with your heart!