

Parrotkeeping—How Do I Raise My Birds?

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Feathered Companions Aviary (FCA) is a small home-based aviary, where chicks are fed in the kitchen and fledged in the living/family rooms. I get frequent queries for explanations of my handrearing and general feeding methods, and hopefully, this will answer many questions. This series is directed primarily at the small home breeder, for whom bird breeding may be a family endeavor, and for whom integration into the family environment is important. These are my methods and rationale—not the only way, but what works for me! There are links on my site to excellent resources. There are also articles with pictures, for example, on my outside aviary enclosure and discussing interactions with my birds. Please note that where specific brand names are mentioned, these are not necessarily endorsements of that brand.

Part 1 of 5 —Parrotkeeping

Aviculture, like virtually all animal husbandry endeavors, is labor-intensive, and those involved have to enjoy what they do to stay motivated to continue. In a home aviary, because the birds are literally part of the family environment, balancing total family needs with aviary activities becomes crucial for long-term integration of human and avian relationships and enjoyment.

Overcrowding of birds is asking for failure of the endeavor and less than best care for the birds. Imposing birds on human household members who are hostile to them is detrimental to the success of the companion bird integrating into the household. Birds are totally dependent on best judgment and practices of their aviculturist caretaker!

I have been raising small parrots since the early 1990's, and I have tried different environmental manipulations, feeding regimens, and handling techniques. I've learned a lot the hard way, as well as the easy, natural way, and I continue to learn each day from others and from my birds. Most of my experiences are with smaller hookbills, formerly including cockatiels, Bourke's parakeets, and rosellas, and currently including Pacific parrotlets, Pyrrhura and Aratinga conures, and Indian Ringneck parakeets.

The majority of my birds are inside, with adults and juveniles in my living/family room areas for sociability and interaction. Most get out in the evenings, and they can fly to and from various play/feeding ("foraging") stations, some of which hang from the ceiling and some of which rest on top of cages. The flock dynamics are very interesting!

Indoor



Indoor/outdoor

Indoor cages with portals to outdoor flights



Outdoor flights



Outdoor aviary enclosure





I also have several indoor/outdoor (connected by portal) flights, some of which house *Pyrrhura conure* breeding pairs, and larger ones which house Indian ringnecks. I have enclosed the entire outside aviary area to keep out large predators. This also allows me to go outside and enjoy the fresh air with flighted pet birds.

Basics and Variables

Type and size of cage and lighting, schedule of feeding, and environmental enrichment are all considered for successful breeding. What makes it difficult for the beginning breeder is that there are many ideas on what is the “best” way to raise and maintain birds. There are some “basics” (and many books and articles expound on those) and some personal-choice “variables” (and just as many books and articles discuss those). Each person has to choose the variables they prefer and which work for them. Following are my choices.

Cages—We all accept that parrots should be in appropriate cages—type, size, sturdiness, functionality—for their species, use, and maintenance. My “house” birds are almost all in powder-coated cages, because these are the easiest to clean and they “look good” in the home. In the past few years, because of competition and sources from other countries, powder-coated cages have become affordable for most people. Some of my cages are dometop, and some are flat-top with perches and playstands on them. This provides variety and allows preference for those birds that like one type better than the other. These cages are sturdy and durable, and they can also be rolled out on the back patio on a rotating schedule for power washing.

Lighting—Fluorescent lights, usually four-foot suspended, with full-spectrum tubes provide lighting to indoor cages. There are several brands of these “full spectrum” tubes, but they should be for birds, not just plants or reptiles, as the right lighting, including UV, is important to birds. My lights are on timers, so that the birds can have relief from the bright light in the afternoons, when they are most apt to nap, and so that they go off at staggered times in the evenings for a gradual reduction of light for nighttime. The house birds go to their cages quite easily when the lights dim. I also have small nightlights in each area, so that the birds are not in total darkness.

Feeding and Watering—Bowls in the bottoms of cages (not under perches) provide water and afford bathing opportunity for all cages. The bowls are rinsed and refilled daily, and sometimes twice daily if the occupants foul the water or splash it all out of the bowl. I use large 10” bowls for small and mid-sized conures and ringnecks, filled about 1” deep, and 4” bowls for parrotlets, filled about ½” deep.

Most of my birds LOVE to bathe in their water bowls. Also, when a hen is laying, she will get her belly wet and thus regulate humidity in the nest box. Some people mist their indoor birds because of the low humidity in the home. I rarely do that, but rather keep that water bowl full enough for

bathing. Some of my birds, when out playing, will fly over if I turn the kitchen faucet on. They will either jump on a plate I hold beneath the faucet, or they sit in the palm of my hand and enjoy a quick shower.

Foods and Feeding

Feeding a balanced diet to a mixed group of parrots offers a challenge because what's required by one species may not be perfect for another; what's available for the birdkeeper may be limited; and what the birds will actually eat may not be what is the most desirable. Product names mentioned are for examples, but are not necessarily endorsements.

Because of the many books and articles expounding the necessity and merit of different diet types (much like for humans), it can be very confusing to the beginning breeder. One person will tell you their success has to do with feeding mostly pelleted feeds, and another will tell you they never feed pelleted feeds. One says sprouting is too problematic because of mold and bacterial problems, and another says that sprouting is easy and necessary for healthy birds. It truly is up to the aviculturist to do research for themselves, use common sense, and make decisions based on what works for them and their birds.

Birds in the wild forage and eat a variety of foods, including "live foods," such as plant parts, flowers, insects, etc. Providing a suitable diet can be a challenge for the aviculturist, and there is more than one opinion on how best to do this.

Sprouts—Sprouting is one method of providing living, growing food, and the variety of grains and seeds available offer choices that fit species size and aviculturist's needs and preferences. For me, sprouting is easy, and if you follow a few basic rules — including using high quality seeds and grains and following basic cleanliness procedures — there should seldom be any problem with providing fresh, living sprouts for food. I never feed sprouts from the store, because the chance of bacteria colonies, such as e-coli, is just too great.

Vegetables and fruits—As a daily staple, in the morning, I typically feed kale, collard or mustard greens, or broccoli for the dark green vegetable, and carrots for the yellow-orange. I occasionally use parsley or celery for variety. Apple is the usual fruit offered, although occasionally banana, grapes, or other citrus may be offered as a side dish. Knowing the source is important. For example, I do not feed grapes grown outside the U.S. I wash the fruits and veggies well, often using a produce rinse, such as an apple cider vinegar solution or GSE.

Morning Feeding

For all of my birds, in a large stainless steel bowl, I mix a smorgasbord of the following in the approximate ratios shown:

- ✓ Rinsed sprouts (1/3)
- ✓ Chopped fresh veggies and fruit (e.g., kale, carrot, apple) (1/3)
- ✓ Seed mix (1/6)
- ✓ Other, e.g., bird bread, spices, etc. (1/6)

For parents feeding chicks, I will feed more of the egg food (e.g., Higgins or Quicko) plus additional crumbled bird bread.

Sprouts

24 hours



32 hours



Easy sprouting instructions (~32-hour cycle) for a dozen birds (for 2 to 3 days):

- In the evening, put 1 cup hulled raw seeds to soak in stainless steel bowl of water covering about 1" over the seeds (with a few drops of bleach or apple cider vinegar added).
- The next morning, rinse in a medium colander and drain. Put the colander on a small dish and cover with a cloth. Leave on kitchen counter.
- Rinse again and drain at night.
- Rinse again and drain in the morning and feed.
- You can make two or three day's worth at a time, and keep balance in the colander (on a dish with cloth covering) in the refrigerator; rinsing each morning and feeding half or third.

I put the green veggies, carrot, and fruit (cut into large chunks) into my food processor, pulse a few times to coarse-chop, and add to the bowl of drained sprouts in the morning feeding. I sprinkle a powdered mix that is mildly antibacterial/antifungal and aids in digestion (cinnamon, ginger, garlic, cayenne, wheat grass, spirulina, aloe), and toss all lightly. I also keep back a few small stems and leaf pieces of the vegetable and put atop the soft foods in youngsters' bowls for them to nibble on and play with. In the late afternoon, I feed a small amount of frozen mixed vegetables, which have been thawed under running hot water, drained, and sprinkled on top of any morning soft foods still remaining in bowls. In the evenings, I remove ALL soft food bowls from the cages, so that they don't attract night marauding insects and so that the birds don't try to eat them in the morning before I get fresh food in the cage for them. I also remove water bowls and replace with fresh in the morning.

Growing food—I do not have time to garden, but being able to control the quality of vegetables and fruits more than just looking for "organic" in a store is obviously desirable and healthier—for your human family as well. You can also grow what may not be readily available locally, e.g., rose hips, an excellent food for birds which grows on a lovely, if very prickly, fruiting fence hedge.

Seed mixes—I believe that conures and other small hookbills need some seeds. Since I am never 100% satisfied with most available commercial seed mix blends, I add to them. I start with a good, clean, small hookbill seed product, such as Volkmann's, Higgins, Hagens, and other well-known mixes containing small to medium seeds and grains (e.g., millets, buckwheat), and with SOME safflower and sunflower seeds, but not heavy on these, as they contain a lot of fats. I usually do not get a mix that contains peanuts, as there can be issues with aflotoxins in raw peanuts. I then add a variety of other grains or seeds, depending on what I have. It doesn't have to be the same all the time! Typically, I may add small amounts of split green peas, rye or barley flakes/grains, oat groats, pepitas

Coarse chopped kale, carrot, and apple



Breakfast for the "bird gang"



Dish for youngsters



(hulled raw pumpkin seed), flax seeds, dried red pepper flakes, and dried herbs (e.g., Italian seasoning with no salt).

Pellets—Most of my birds have free choice pellets in a separate bowl, unless they use them for play, wasting instead of eating—and in that case, they are rationed. Pellets make up about 20% of my birds' diet. Some love the pellets; others eat them sporadically; and a few others leave them. There are good choices in pellets on the market now, and there are differences of opinion on colored vs. uncolored pellets. I find that my birds eat best the Zupreem Fruit Colored Cockatiel blend, so that's what I feed, but it's certainly only one of many choices.

"Bird" bread—The baked specialty bread I make is nutritious and appealing to the birds. There are many recipes on the internet, but I usually make some variation of the recipe I have on my web site. During breeding season and for youngsters, I will crumble blocks of the "bird" bread into the morning soft food and or put small chunks of it besides the soft food in the bowl.

Cooked mixes and hot mashes—There are recipes galore for cooked mixes and mashes, and I have fed many of them, as enticements for youngsters, as soft foods for parents feeding chicks, and just for special offerings. In the winter months I will often feed a small amount of cooked brown rice/lentil mix to birds in the indoor/outdoor cages (on the unheated "bird porch"), to youngsters inside, and to a limited extent to adult birds. One has to be careful about spoilage with these, removing from the cage in 3 to 4 hours, if possible. Most birds do not need constant high protein in their diets. Cooked beans and rice, particularly, should not be fed a dietary mainstay or frequently because of the high protein levels, which in excess could cause gout.

Meat and live "protein"—I do not feed raw meat of any kind. Occasionally, I will feed a small piece of baked chicken breast to my sun conures, who enjoy it as a treat, but I do not typically feed meat or insects otherwise to my birds, as they do not need heavy concentrations of protein.

Other specialty foods and supplements—To the soft food mix, I add the same spices I add to handfeeding formula, sprinkling lightly over. I also add a supplement, such as Higgins Snack Attack Proteen 25 or Quiko Classic (both egg foods), if it is breeding season and if I have lots of youngsters.



Health

With experience, one learns to notice when a bird is "off" or appears to be sick—most of the time. It is not possible to be the "guardian angel" that always catches a sick, distressed, or injured bird before it happens! Accidents and problems that individual birds have in response to their environment are sometimes unforeseen and unavoidable, but they can be lessened through careful, watchful husbandry practices.

Aviculturists need to develop a relationship with an avian veterinarian, and it is wise to have at least one, preferably two other veterinarian names and phone numbers, as well as the location and phone number of an animal emergency clinic. Emergency clinics may or may not have someone experienced enough in avians to provide appropriate care—but sometimes you have no choice!

Having a readily available “hospital” cage—small, dark and with a heat source—is also essential, as when a bird is ill, trying to maintain its body temperature stresses it further. An emergency cage can be a pet carrier with a towel over it and a heat source (e.g., heating pad or reptile heat lamp) to keep it warm. Care must be taken to be sure the bird can’t make physical contact with the heat source and that it doesn’t “cook,” however.

“Well bird” examinations and preventive health care—Routine examinations with full work-ups (blood panel and cultures) for all birds are wise, but not always practical when one has many birds; however, testing of new birds is good animal husbandry. There are diseases that can be dormant in birds for years and then become active. If one has had no health problems related to disease issues (polyoma, psittacosis, megabacteria, worms, etc.), then “spot checks” of the aviary and random testing may be enough to ascertain that you do not have serious health problems. There is lots of information available on types of diseases, their symptoms, prognosis, and treatment, and each aviculturist should educate themselves.



Biosecurity and Quarantine—There are commonsense approaches to ensuring the health and safety of aviary birds. State and federal health web sites have protocols for disease prevention, including the types of precautions that should be taken by aviaries. It is essential to be familiar with these protocols, because if a public health issue arises in your area, you may need to implement the most stringent of these, e.g., Virkon-S footbaths, etc.

As a matter of good avian husbandry, understanding the basis and procedures for quarantine is vital to all breeders, including small hobby breeders. If you bring a diseased bird into your home and expose all your other birds, you may lose every bird or incur huge veterinary bills trying to save or treat them.

Remember that birds can hide their illnesses until they are too sick to do so any longer—it’s a survival mechanism for them, so even if a bird looks very healthy, at a bare minimum, it is important to quarantine all new birds in areas that don’t share air flow with your current stock, and to feed these last, for at least 30 days and up to 60 days. This is particularly important if you are handfeeding babies, as their immune systems have not developed, and they can contract a disease for which an adult may have immunity. I realize that is sometimes difficult to do in a household with limited “bird room,” but it does help protect your birds to follow proper biosecurity precautions.

For further reading, the “Model Aviculture Program,” <http://www.modelaviculture.org>, provides guidelines on biosecurity and quarantine.

Upcoming discussion topics

Part 2 – Breeding Birds

Part 3 – Raising Youngsters

Part 4 – Selling Birds

Part 5 – Legislation and References