

Parrotkeeping—How Do I Raise My Birds?

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Part 3 of 5 — Handfeeding and Raising Youngsters

If a person can successfully co-parent chicks by leaving them in the nest and handling them, it may be possible to have tame chicks without pulling to handfeed. BUT, that just isn't an option in most cases, because the parents won't tolerate it and/or the person cannot be there at the right times to consistently handle the youngsters. Co-parenting IS more time consuming, minute for minute, than handfeeding, in my experience, so the argument that the breeder is lazy and trying to avoid spending time handfeeding is just not true the majority of the time.

Depending on the species and the quality of parenting, there are different opinions on when to take the chicks for handfeeding. I try to leave chicks in with the parents as long as practicable, realizing that if I take them when they are a bit older, I must consider the brooder environment more carefully and spend extra time with them in the first few day's adjustment period. It is usually more stressful for a 3+ week old chick to adjust, for example, than for a 10-day or even 2 week old chick to adjust. Older chicks (whose eyes are open and trying to focus) are more aware of their environments and more used to the dark coziness of the nestbox and ministering of the parents, so it may take them longer to accept a new environment and caregiver.

Sexing and Banding

Sexing—As a rule, I DNA-sex even pet birds (unless they are sexually dimorphic or color sex-linked), as I believe it is advantageous for new owners to know the sex of their birds. For example, if they have a female, they can ensure at maturity that she gets a little extra calcium so that there is no egg-binding problem. If they decide to add another pet bird, they can opt to get one of the same sex if they are not interested in breeding.

Banding—I band all chicks with numbered and appropriately sized closed bands. I consider banding a good avicultural practice in order to maintain the history of parentage of a bird and to be able to identify a bird if lost or stolen. There is a differing opinion by some in regards to dangers of bands on pet birds, but I do not share that. If the bird is banded with the appropriate size, there are rarely problems.

Typically, a baby will be banded BEFORE pulling for handfeeding (e.g., 10 days to 2 weeks for sun conures). With most species, if you wait until after pulling, you have to go with a larger band that either may not stay on the baby or may be so roomy that it could hang on twigs or toys in the cage.

Specialty organizations sell closed bands with the initials of the organization on them. In the U.S., L&M Leg Bands also makes and sells custom imprinted bands appropriate for the species size.

Sharing breakfast cereal



Snacking on peas and carrots



Microchipping—I do not usually microchip my birds. That is a decision for the new owner in consultation with their veterinarian. In my opinion, because a microchip is relatively large for some of the smaller species of parrots, and because it is not detectable except by an appropriate microchip scanner/reader, it is not as effective in identifying quickly a lost or stolen bird.

Brooder Environment

I do not use clear, lighted brooders such as the aquarium types, because I believe those stress chicks more than a dark brooder. I try to simulate the nestbox environment in order to reduce stress on the chicks by starting out with a fairly dark brooder. When I feed, the lights are dim, and the light over the feeding area is a low-wattage amber, which seems to startle chicks less than brighter lights. This seems to be particularly true for more timid species, such as Indian ringnecks. Unless you pull ringneck chicks to handfeed very young (around 2 weeks old), they are more likely to react negatively to being placed into a brightly lit environment from the nest, and I think they stress unduly.

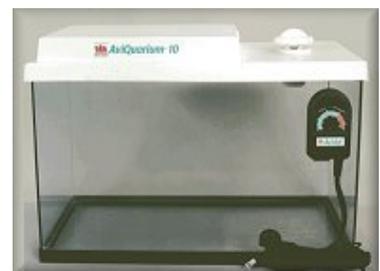
Types of brooders—I have commercial brooders, but I rarely use them. They are larger and bulkier than “home-made” brooders, and larger is not necessary for the small parrot species I raise. If temperature is critical, e.g., with younger chicks and singles that don’t have clutch mates to help keep them warm, then the commercial brooder is advisable, as it is much more precise in heat and has an air circulating fan and filter. Humidity can also be better regulated. It is still prudent to have a backup thermometer and hygrometer, and to calibrate the commercial brooders if temperature is critical. Even the digitally equipped brooders can get “off” in temperature, and that can mean the difference in thriving, or even life or death to a very young chick. The younger the chicks, the more temperature and humidity variations affect them, from chilling to literally “cooking” if the temperatures aren’t monitored properly. An unfeathered chick will require a higher temperature (in the upper 90’s), for example, than a partly feathered chick (in the low 90’s or upper 80’s), and having other chicks in the brooder to huddle with and hold temperature also affects if variations in temperature will be tolerated. Instructions come with commercial brooders, and there are books that are excellent references, such as *Hand Feeding and Nursery Management* (Voren and Jordan).

With home made brooders, which I often use with older chicks (~3+ weeks, or 2 to 3 weeks if a clutch can “huddle” together), it is wise to have a thermometer with hygrometer (humidity measurement) to be sure temperature and humidity stay within a few degrees of tolerance. You can also visually see if chicks are too hot (they will be spread out and lethargic) or too cold (they will be

Commercial Brooder



Aquarium brooder



Portable cooler brooder



Water cooler brooder



Intermediate Plexibrooder



huddled together and agitated). Also, with experience, one can note the skin tone (plump, healthy pink for proper humidity and temperature vs. pale or very red for improper temperature or humidity). In addition, proper digestion between feedings is another indicator of temperature adequacy.

Intermediate plexibrooder—The plexibrooder is an intermediate brooder that I use as a step between the dark brooder and the weaning cage. It sits in a secluded area, where the chicks can venture out and see the world, but not be frightened by too-bright lights or other birds moving around rapidly. When the chicks are mostly feathered, and from the time the chicks are in a more lighted brooder (e.g., the plexibrooder), they have a sleepbox in the back of the brooder against the heating pad, which warms the back of the sleepbox. The chicks will stay warmer if they need that, and venture out if they don't. Chicks usually stay in the plexibrooder for a week or so. When they are climbing all over it and looking for a way out, they graduate to the weaning cage. I do NOT put them in the weaning cage until I feel they have developed enough self-confidence not to be intimidated by a larger worldview—usually timed closely to when they would venture out if parent-raised.

Nursery location—Although it is best practice to have your “nursery” away from mature birds, it is also impractical in many home aviary settings. However, we need to be aware of the possibility of a mature “carrier” bird passing on something that doesn't affect them, but which could be deadly to a youngster with an undeveloped immune system, and to understand that separate areas insomuch as possible is good avian husbandry. The “Model Aviculture Program,” <http://www.modelaviculture.org>, provides guidelines on nursery location and biosecurity.

Product names mentioned are examples of well-known brands, but are not necessarily endorsements solely of those brands, as there are many good avian-specific brands on the market today, unlike even as recently as a decade ago.

Handfeeding

There are several good books, as well as detailed articles on handfeeding basics, including the Voren and Jordan book mentioned previously, so I won't go into extreme detail here, except to say that handfeeders should educate themselves BEFORE their first clutch in order to avoid problems that are covered thoroughly in the excellent materials available. They should also have a mentor or other experienced handfeeder to call upon if they encounter a situation they cannot handle.

Following are my preferences and techniques. I use Zupreem Embrace Plus handfeeding formula, because it gives me good weight gain, and I think the active smaller birds need the extra calories. When I have used “regular” handfeeding formula, I have also had to add a little unsalted, unsugared peanut butter to raise the fat content in order to get desired weight gains.

Handfeeding Setup

Feeding tub, formula and water containers, syringes



Feeding equipment and method—I use small to medium insulated soup containers for the formula, because those hold heat better than a regular cup. I start with hot tap water, add formula, and stir until desired thickness. Formula bags give formula to water ratios, and while that's a good guide, I've found that particularly older chicks may want a little thinner formula. Insofar as temperature, using a thermometer is safest, particularly so that the formula isn't too hot (as it can burn a baby's crop). Again, sometimes the older chicks want it almost at the top range of heat and thin, or they will refuse to eat enough (even if they still need it).

During a feeding, if the formula cools down too much, I will reheat for a few seconds (usually 4 to 5 max) in the microwave, but I will then stir well and check the temperature to be sure it's not too hot and doesn't have "hot spots."

I also use a separate container with warm water to dip the syringe after filling and to hold a syringe of water used to rinse the youngsters off. The rinsing syringe works better with pin-feathering chicks than a wet cloth, which tends to smear the formula into the chest area.

I utilize a plastic pan with a plastic grid, wash cloth, and paper towel on the bottom, as a feeding "tub." This tub sides keep chicks from wandering; the plastic grid keeps them off the bottom which gets wet with rinsing; the wash cloth covers the grid and keeps the paper towel from bunching or slipping as much as it would otherwise; and the paper towel can be changed with each baby or feeding, as needed.

For lighting, I have an overhead low-wattage orange-bulb light, so that they are not startled by brightness, but still have some warmth, and I can see to feed!

Syringe or spoon—My handfeeding is usually done with a 5 cc "O-ring" syringe. I also use a "bent" spoon to start a chick that has been pulled for handfeeding a bit late, because they take to that easier than a syringe. I transition them to a syringe, as that is less messy and somewhat faster than a spoon. I will sometimes use the spoon to "top off" a fledgling youngster that has decided it doesn't want to eat from a syringe and yet still needs a certain amount of formula. Others use pipettes for the smaller species, but I've found a syringe works best for me.

Weaning Cages



Overcoming Fledgling Food Rejection—When the chicks have started flying, they will often be more interested in flying rather than eating formula. They will still need the formula, because they are not eating near enough food on their own to maintain their weight. I will let them fly first and work up an appetite. If they are mainly resisting being in the feeding tub, I will feed them on top of the cages (where they land after flying around). It's a less contained mess, and they will get it on their faces and chests, but they will often eat several cc's that way, and I can catch them up after they've exercised and clean them up.

Weaning Cages and Environment—The weaning cage is often a smaller cage than the flight cage that they will ultimately occupy, although it is big enough for them to move around in and explore, climb, flap, and even take very short flights across, up, and down. For a clutch of green cheek conures, for example, their "beginning" weaning cage will be about 18" square and 24" tall. I start with their familiar sleepbox, set in the bottom of the cage (with newspaper and white paper towels on the bottom grate until they are comfortable climbing around). I move the sleepbox up once they are regularly hanging out higher in the cage. Once the youngsters are climbing all over the beginning weaning cage (usually a week or less), I move them to a larger flight cage that's about 32"W x 22"D x 36H. They can fly across that size and learn to maneuver, so that when they are out flying in a room, they seem to control themselves better.

I have hanging toys in the cages and different diameter perches at various levels, but allowing wing flap room. Until they are eating weaning food well, I don't put foot toys in the bottom, as I want them to play with the food pieces rather than plastic pieces. Once they are in the larger flight cages, however, they also have small foot toys in the bottom, as well as hanging toys and swings.

Weaning food, food, everywhere! That's my philosophy with young birds. I have bowls in the floor of the cage and in suspended bowls near favorite "hang-out" perches (as I can determine those). Soft food gets changed or replenished at least twice a day, and the "dry" food (small pellets and seed mixes) gets changed and replenished as necessary. I start with crumbled bird bread and a combination of hulled millet, quinoa, and steel-cut oat groats. I also sprinkle over the soft foods (sprouts, chopped veggies, fruit) an egg food like Higgins Proteen 25 or Quicko, and I include small pieces of leafy veggies and fruit for food and play.

Formula Treats—All of my handfed birds, including breeders, know what a "formula treat" is—they are my "moochers." I can go around with a syringe of formula and give each a beakful, and it's greedy gobbled. I have found that this can reinforce the "tie" to me as a provider with them (keying back to handfeeding days), so that they stay "tamer," even without intense hands-on. This also makes it easier to give medications if I need to do that.



Handling—I cuddle and kiss on the chicks from the time I start handfeeding them. While they're in the nestbox, I may reach in (if parents are out) and stroke them, talking softly, but I don't think that is as critical as how they are handled once taken for handfeeding. I am always careful to cradle them and not grab in a hurry, and to reassure them with a soft voice and whistles, and depending on the species, other sounds to which they may respond positively. For example, crimson bellied conures make tiny "clicking" sounds; green cheeks, roseifrons, white eared, and ringnecks have distinctive whistles; and sun conures (which do not whistle) make what I call "sun-duck" sounds (almost like a little quack).



Most species will go through an independence stage during their first year, varying in intensity, whether it's around weaning time, or post-weaning. That is NATURAL, and how one deals with it can determine the successful evolving of that behavior into a satisfactory companion animal or not. I sometimes keep certain chicks well beyond weaning when I feel they need to "work through" a stage, because I am concerned that particularly a novice owner may not be

able to cope with it. The idea that one must get a just-weaned chick as the best companion is just not true, in my experience. Think about it. If an experienced aviculturist has worked through an antisocial stage with a chick, what a benefit to the new owner! Birds are long-lived and adaptable, and there is rarely a chick "too old" to adapt to a new home. What's more important is matching species and personality with the intended new owner and home.

A Few Q&A's about FCA Avicultural Practices

When do you know a chick is weaned, and when can it go to a new home? When chicks are eating a variety of foods well, don't beg for formula, and hold their weight, they are weaned. They will be playing, active in their cages, and flying a good bit. I usually like a chick to be weaned for two weeks before they go to a new home, particularly if they are going out of town or out of state, because I am not local to those buyers for hands-on assistance if the chick

“regresses” to handfeeding. They are very unlikely to regress if they have been properly weaned—and that sometimes means keeping them longer.

Birds are also sensitive to the “emotional charge” in a household, and some of their actions (including excessive screaming, biting, or feather picking) can have roots in environmental stresses of people in the household. The new owner has a responsibility to research the physical and psychological needs of their species, so that they can handle personality challenges successfully. This makes the continuing, and hopefully, lifelong relationship with the companion parrot much more satisfying for both human and bird.

Do you vaccinate your chicks (polyoma, specifically)? Do you test them for disease? I do not vaccinate my chicks. There are some species that are particularly susceptible to polyoma even as adults (e.g., caiques), and if I raised those, I would consider vaccination, particularly if the youngster were going to a pet store for resale. If a youngster will be going “out into the world” among other birds, vaccination should be discussed with your avian veterinarian.

The species I raise are not as susceptible to certain diseases for which there are vaccines, although all young chicks are vulnerable (if exposed) to diseases such as polyoma. Usually, if there is polyoma in an aviary, there are sudden deaths among chicks, and there are physical signs that accompany chicks that are getting ill. I do not test chicks for specific diseases, unless I have an unexplainable illness or death, and I want to ensure that I do not have an outbreak of one of the “dreaded” illnesses (most of which can be treated successfully if caught early enough), e.g., polyoma, psittacosis, beak and feather, Giardia, or megabacteria.

How much do you handle chicks when handfeeding? I will spend a few moments with each chick, cradling and talking to it before and after feeding, and as they get older, I spend more time with them. Some species also require more than others. For example, sun conures are naturally very tame and cuddly. Many Pyrrhuras are that way too, but they seem to be a bit more independent and vary more in cuddliness. Parrotlets need early and consistent “hands-on” time, as do ringnecks. If they don’t get it, most will be flighty and touch-me-nots.



Do you prefer to keep pet birds singly in cages or in pairs (or more)? Birds are flock creatures, and I usually keep mine at least two to a cage. They may be same sex or opposite sex, although for long term without breeding in mind, same sex is preferable. Many birds do just fine as single birds in a household, but I personally feel that most welcome another warm feathered body in the same room. They do not necessarily need to share a cage, but having play time out together is usually enjoyed, and they may wind up in the same cage anyway! If they are similar in size and not the opposite sex, that’s usually okay.



For the pet owner, it is important to watch the dynamics among the family members, as birds sometimes attach to one person to the exclusion of others or other birds, and behavioral issues dealing with territoriality and aggression can surface. Especially with conures, they are really touchy-feely birds, as a rule, and if someone works all day, having a buddy to keep their bird company would probably be welcome—whether it’s eating, playing, mutually preening, sleeping, etc. Will they prefer their bird buddy to their human? Possibly, but usually it just changes

the relationship a bit, so that they are not so overly dependent on the human. In my view, that is a good thing!

Do you flight fledge and/or clip your youngsters' flight feathers? All of my chicks are flight-fledged and will not have their flight feathers trimmed until shortly before they go to a new pet home. The reason for the trimming is so that they have a chance to get used to the new home and new owners and to prevent startling and flying into a door or window if startled (because it's a new environment), and so that the new owner will have some degree of control.

I trim only enough feathers to prevent upward and fast flight, as I feel it's important that birds retain some flying ability. Whether a bird stays trimmed depends on whether it's safe in the new home, i.e., whether other animals or children might make a trimmed (or flighted) bird a problem.

Wing feather clipping

I do a progressive wing feather clip on babies. Once they are totally comfortable with maneuvering, landing, etc., and have shown enough independence so that I have to work to get them to go back in their cages, I begin clipping the outer flight feathers. I start with two on each side; then over time, I clip one per side until they can fly, but not soar—level, short hops up, and long glides down—usually no more than 5 or 6 feathers on each side. As your bird matures and gets set in your routine (and hopefully, cooperative about going back in its cage), you can decide how much you want it clipped. I feel it's better that birds go to new homes with some wing clipping, so that if they get startled, they can't fly into windows or mirrors (or out doors). It does make them more dependent on you—but if you want a close relationship, it's up to you to develop the trust that goes with it. In reality, dependence can be forced upon them, but trust cannot.

Advantages to some flight are

- (1) They can go from one person to another easily and enjoy more mobility.
- (2) You can more easily potty-train them as they can leave and go elsewhere and then come back to you; and
- (3) When they are ready to go to bed, they will often fly right back to their cages (or to you, depending on your bedtime habits).

Disadvantages are

- (1) The danger of someone leaving an outer door open or walking outside with the bird on the shoulder and them flying away, getting disoriented with the big blue outdoors, or being caught in midair by a predator, such as a hawk;
- (2) Panicking and flying into a window, mirror, or sliding-glass door; and
- (3) Getting into something in the house they shouldn't (e.g., a hot stove or electrical cord).

In other words, if your birds are flighted, you have to be doubly careful!

Upcoming discussion topics

Part 4 – Selling Birds

Part 5 – Legislation and References