

# Parrotkeeping—How Do I Raise My Birds?

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## Part 2 of 5 — Breeding Birds

*Birds are NOT like dogs and cats. Most parrot species bond to one mate (though not necessarily for life), and the environment and diet have to be right for them to breed and rear chicks successfully.*

### Breeding Environment

When I started investigating breeding in suspended flights, one of the first things I was told by a breeder with an outdoor setup was that you wanted a large flight for exercise, a sturdy perch for breeding, and a nestbox to be the focal point of the pair. Toys were distractions from their main activity—breeding. I wasn't convinced then, and I'm sure that was incorrect advice now. Birds are intelligent creatures, and in the wild they have not only lots of area to fly, but also lots of fauna and flora to explore, as well as variety in food and play objects.

For birds that are indoors, I provide an overhead fluorescent light fixture with "full spectrum" lighting (specifically for birds, not plants, because of the different UV requirements). I change bulbs with each new season, as the lights diminish in effectiveness over time.

Because flight space is necessarily limited in a home aviary, particularly if we are setting up individual breeding pairs, making flight setups as interesting and stress-free as possible can be a challenge—but it is in their best interest, as well as promoting a more productive breeding environment. I believe we have an obligation to provide environmental enrichment for all our birds' well-being.

Of course, there are also survival issues from predators. In our home aviaries, they do not have to worry about predation if we can make the areas safe from night marauding creatures, such as opossums, raccoons, ringtailed cats, ferrets, owls, rats, coyotes, snakes, etc., and daytime predators, such as hawks and domestic or feral cats.

**Cages**—Because of the fact that many breeding pairs are not very human-oriented and may be stressed by frequent handling or nearby activity, my breeder pairs with this temperament have their own areas, with larger flights because they don't get out as often, and with privacy from human "living" areas. Those pairs that enjoy human activity may be in the living room, but they usually will have a private corner, because they may be disturbed by evening noisy flock activity or human gatherings.

**Feathered neighbors and visual barriers**—Many species are sensitive to their neighbors, rather like people. A quiet person probably doesn't appreciate a super-noisy neighbor. Same thing with birds. And in the case of pairs set up for breeding, noisy neighbors can mean no eggs,

Indoor breeding setups



infertile eggs, broken or eaten eggs, killed or maimed or deserted chicks—not exactly a pleasant scenario! For some species, sight barriers are necessary for less stressful breeding, and I provide those. I usually hang a thin piece of plywood or opaque acrylic in between two cages for a visual barrier.

**Suzie Bubblebutt—  
soon to lay**



**Unwelcome intrusion!**



**Nestboxes, inspections/intrusions**—I use either bootboxes or vertical grandfather nest boxes for my birds, appropriately sized for the species, and providing them as much privacy as possible, e.g., facing the entrance hole to a wall or at least away from other birds, if at all possible.

I also give my breeding pairs in the nestbox as much privacy and freedom from intrusion as I can. Different pairs are tolerant to different extents to nestbox inspections. The key is to know your pairs, and that only comes with experience with them, unless you have a good background on them when you bought them. Even then, a change in environment can bring about a change in behaviors. A formerly proven and producing pair can refuse to even lay for a year or more in a new environment!

There is often a necessity for a judgment call, which becomes better with experience and knowing your pairs—when to monitor nestlings closely and when to just let the parents do their job. No one can make that call for another—just advise what they might do in that case. It's tragic to make a decision to check and have a parent bird kill a chick right in front of you, but it's also tragic to not check and have parent birds not feeding or mutilating

chicks, when you could have seen a problem and removed the chicks. We don't always in our own lives make the best decisions, no matter how much life experience we have, nor should we expect perfection in our birdkeeping. We do the best we can and realize that nature sometimes throws us a nasty curve.

## **Diet**

*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.*

Breeding pairs get extra calcium BEFORE they start the breeding season, so that the hen can build up her reserves for egg-laying. My pairs have a mineral block and piece of cuttlebone (and their preferences vary for these) in their flights. In addition, I will either sprinkle an avian-formulated calcium supplement with Vitamin D3 (the "sunshine" vitamin, which assists in calcium utilization by the body), such as CalciCare, on soft foods two or three times a week, or put a few drops of liquid calcium supplement, such as CalciBoost, in their drinking water. Since hens use calcium reserves out of their own bones if they are deficient, health problems with the hen or with soft-shelled eggs will result if sufficient utilizable calcium levels are not maintained.

During incubation, I provide a good diet with plenty of fresh water (including a bathing bowl for the hen, as she will get her chest wet and instinctively regulate humidity in the nestbox). When the parents are feeding chicks, I add plenty of fresh, nutritious foods that are easy for them to take to the chicks, and I check that food at least 3 times per day, as they will go through a bowl of fresh foods quickly when the chicks are developing.



## Handfeeding Decisions

**Taking a clutch to handfeed**—Deciding when to start handfeeding depends on the species. The age of the chicks when you remove from the nest to handfeed varies with species and what you intend for that clutch. For example, most small conures can be taken up to 4 weeks old and are still very tractable. Parrotlets and Indian ringnecks usually need to be taken for handfeeding before 3 weeks



old (and preferably at about 2 weeks old) to maximize their pet potential. Regardless, handling and socializing are more important than just handfeeding for a quality companion parrot. *That cannot be emphasized enough!*

**Co-parenting babies**—Unless one has a parent pair that is very tolerant (and many are NOT), handling the chicks enough in the nest to ensure they will be tame is difficult. This method can be more labor-intensive than just taking a clutch and handfeeding from a young age, as you have to deal with the protectiveness of the parent birds in addition to the handling of the chicks.

### ***What is Co-parenting?***

Co-parenting is a term used to apply to some degree of joint rearing of chicks from hatch to weaning—depending on the situation, the temperament and setup of the parent birds, and the schedule of the person doing the co-parenting. It includes, but may not be limited to, the following three methods:

- (1) Supplementing handfeeding morning and evening, handling/playing with the babies, and leaving in the nest box through weaning;
- (2) Handling/playing with the babies for a daily period of time (usually 5 to 15 minutes) without handfeeding, and leaving in the nest box through weaning (and even beyond); and
- (3) Handfeeding in the morning, handling/playing with in the evening, and pulling from the nest box at or near fledging for handfeeding (and/or co-feeding with parents).

Some smaller aviculturists have been experimenting with variations of co-parenting for many years. Co-parenting can also be useful when first-time parents are not quite tending the babies as well as experienced parents would. The breeder can supplement feeding, also handling the babies for early socialization, while leaving with the parents (provided the parents tolerate this intrusion).

U.C. Davis did a study years ago on orange-winged Amazon babies, basically using method (2). They had rigged up a way to shut the parents out of the box, so there wouldn't be a problem with aggression toward chicks or handlers during the interactive chick play times. Follow-up studies on generations-level effects are being conducted. These hope to discern the adult temperament impacts of the co-parented birds themselves (as distinguished from either wild caught or handfed from an early age) as parents. It may be a few years before results are published.

**Parent raised babies**—If you want to raise only breeding birds and are not concerned with tameness, then parent-raising is an option, IF your pair are good parents and will rear to weaning and beyond. Some will and some won't! Also, you must be vigilant in removing weaned parent-raised babies from the flight with many species, as parents may pluck or otherwise attack fledglings in that confined environment, particularly if the parents want to go back to nest. Fledglings, even if tolerated, may also destroy eggs or kill new babies. This isn't true with all species or all pairs, but it's better to err on the side of caution than walk out to a chewed up baby on the floor of the flight!

## **Upcoming discussion topics**

**Part 3 – Raising Youngsters**

**Part 4 – Selling Birds**

**Part 5 – Legislation and References**