

HANDFEEDING and WEANING FIERY-SHOULDERED CONURES

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My first Fiery-Shouldered Conure chicks were hatched at the end of May 2000. The parents were feeding them fine, but, not as good as I thought they would. It was their very first clutch. Also, they were housed in a temporary cage, which was beside the feeding station. So there was a lot of disturbance, when it came to feeding time twice a day for our other breeding birds. So I decided to take the chicks out around the middle of June 2000. They were currently 19, 18 and 17 days of age. I had noticed that they were smaller than my Greencheek Conures for their age, and their white down was not thick, but sparse.



I placed all three close-banded chicks in a tall square plastic ice cream container, which the bottom layer consisted of one inch pine shavings and the top layer consisted of one inch aspen shavings. All three chicks were cuddled up together. I then placed them in my pre-warmed, disinfected, cleaned nursery hospital #3 brooder at a temperature of 90 degrees F. They seemed to be quite comfortable with this temperature. In this brooder, is a special tray for water, which I immediately filled up. I also place a small jar of water by the chicks to help keep the humidity level up. About every four to five days, I lowered the temperature down by one degree. By the time they were at 85 degrees F, they had enough feathers on to put them in a clear plastic container with shavings and a wired lid, partially covered with a dark heavy towel and placed on the nursery counter. The chicks could see out the front of the container. They huddled together near the back. Once they got used to everything, then the chicks started coming to the front of the container. When they did this, I placed a small multi-colored wood ladder shaped into a semi-circle for perching near the front of the container. When I saw them starting to pick up the shavings. I placed a small dish of Hagen Tropicana High Performance Cockatiel Granules in with them by the perch. When they started perching and picking at the granules and were always at the front of the container and had all their feathers on. Into the weaning cage they went.

Handfeeding

At this age, I handfed only three times a day. I personally like to use the monoject 412 syringe with the catheter tip. This tip is way too long though and I like to cut the tip off, until it is less than one inch long. Because of the jagged edge after cutting, I will file it down until it is very smooth and no sharp edges can be felt. At this age, I find that the chicks will take just about half a syringe, which is approximately six cc's. The formula is made thinner when younger and as they grow older, I thicken it up somewhat.

I used Hagen Breeding Mash/Handfeeding Formula to feed my chicks. I took the syringes and measure out the required filtered water for three chicks and placed it in a heavy-based thick edged glass and microwave for twenty seconds. Then, I took a two-cup Pyrex measuring cup and fill with about three-quarters full with water and put in the microwave for one minute and twenty seconds long. While the water is being warmed. I took a clean spoon and measured out the formula powder into the warmed water and mixed thoroughly until I got the desired thickness that I wanted. Which, when on a spoon, will barely fall off. Then I placed a small amount of "Prozyme" which are digestive enzymes into this mix. Mixed thoroughly and waited for about a minute and then mixed again. The enzymes have thinned the formula considerably by this time, to the thickness that I wanted to feed. If it was too thin, I added just a very small amount of more formula powder to thicken it up. If it was still too thick, then I added a small amount of filtered water, until the desired thickness was achieved. In the last feeding of the day formula, I also added a very small amount of smooth peanut butter (to help them go through the night better) and a pinch of spirulina until the formula was slightly green. By this time, the formula had cooled considerably and there were no hot spots at all. Then, into the syringes, the formula went and then the syringes, into the warmed measuring cup of water, which was about 108 to 110 degrees F. The formula inside of the syringes, is two to three degrees cooler. This is then placed on a warmed mug warmer or hot plate, which keeps it at a very stable temperature.

I find that the enzymes really help put good weight on the chicks. The enzymes break down the formula into an more digestible form, so that the chicks can utilize the nutrients more efficiently. Which, then puts more weight and size on the chicks. At weaning time, they may lose some of that extra weight, but I find that by the time they are all finished growing up, that they put that weight back on and then some.



The peanut butter, which has a higher protein and fat content, is placed in the last feeding of the day. This helps keeps the chicks satisfied and contented until the next feed. I always made sure that they were totally empty in the morning. The spirulina is very beneficial and helps build up the immune system and gives such a vibrant shine and coloration to the feathers.

When I took the chicks out to handfeed the first time, there was no feeding response and sometimes, they just sat there and looked at you. Or sometimes, they tried to back up away from you. I then held them in my left hand. I leaned very close to look at them and started talking softly to them. Then, I took my right hand and gently stroked the sides of the beak on both sides and under their chin and top of their head. Meanwhile, talking all the time. Then, I concentrated on rubbing both sides of the beak and squeezed ever so gently at the small bumps on the sides of the beak. The beak opened up and I took the syringe to the right-hand side of me out of the warmed water and placed it in the mouth and proceeded to feed the chick from the right side of the beak going towards my left. Meanwhile, I am still talking to the chick. It only took about fifteen seconds to feed in total. I felt the crop, to make sure there was enough formula in it. I

only like to see the food in the crop not to go any higher than the top of the crop. No food was seen along the side of the throat. After feeding, I held the chick in my hand and continue rubbing around the cheek area. Then, I placed the chick back into his container and proceed with the next chick.

After a few days, the chicks open their beaks for me, when I put a slight pressure on those bumps and I don't have to do all of the above. But, I always take the time to stroke their head, cheeks, beak, chin and snuggle them up to my face or chest, give kisses on their body (no saliva on my lips), and I totally enclose my two hands around their bodies. I feel that this helps in the taming/bonding process. Also, when weaned and until they go into their new homes. I still continue this process.

Weaning

They were fully feathered between four and a half to five weeks of age and did not need the heat anymore. At five weeks of age, they were put into the weaning, galvanized wire cage of twenty-four inches deep by twenty-four inches wide by eighteen inches tall with half inch by one-inch spacing. A dowel perch (easiest to disinfect) is placed about three inches off the bottom of the galvanized tray. The tray is lined with newspaper. I also place in their cage the small wooden semi-circle ladder, which they are familiar with. There is a small swing and two different toys attached to the sides of their cage. A small low to the ground ceramic dish is placed on the tray with the granules in it.



The first thing the Fiery-Shouldered Conures did, was to start climbing up the wire cage. They climbed everywhere. Then, they came back down and started walking in very short steps around the paper and then climbed onto the semi-circle ladder. They also tried to climb up on the dowel perch, which was funny to watch. They put their beak on it first, then a foot and then the other foot grabs the perch and the next thing you see, is a conure hanging upside down with his two little feet still attached to the perch. They hung on for a little while, looking a little confused. Then with their heads and bodies swinging back and forth, building up momentum, they try to grab the perch and try to swing themselves up, with no success. The oldest one did make it on the second try. But, the youngest two did not. In a day, they were all perching on the doweling just fine and I took out the semi-circle ladder.

When the Fiery-Shouldered Conures were initially placed in this weaning cage. They stopped picking at the granules for a few days, as they were in a totally new environment. A whole new world had opened up for them. There was so much more for them to do, new sights, louder sounds, and they could see more activity in the room. They also had a different perspective than when

sitting on the counter in their container. They were also beside other handfed birds in other cages that were their new neighbors.

They started picking at the granules again after a few days had passed. This is when I introduced a small low to the ground ceramic dish of water. Curiosity overcame them and they just couldn't resist to find out what it was all about. They couldn't see anything in this dish at all. They started to perch on the side of the dish and then put their heads down into the dish. The surprised look on their feathered faces, as their beaks touch the water was comical. The heads were thrown back up quickly and they almost lost their balance, while at the same time shaking the water off. Then, curiosity strikes again and down they go again, more slowly this time. Their little tongues sticking out and touching the clear liquid. They straightened back up, savored the flavor of the water in their beak and decide, that, hey, this is not too bad, and down they go again. But, this time for a drink of water. They have now learned to drink water. After the discovery of this wonderful substance, they found out that you can bathe in it as well. This is also a funny thing to watch, as the three Fiery-Shouldered Conures are perched on this three and a half inch dish trying to bathe all at the same time—which didn't work out at all. But, they were smart. They started to take turns. One conure would bend down for a dip and then come up. Then instantly, the next one was bending down. He came up and the third would go down and do the same thing. This would go on for several minutes. I just had to contain myself from laughing. What a sight! It reminded me of several of those glass-birds with their bottoms filled with colored liquid, feathers on top of they head, long necks and long beaks. You put a glass of water in front of them, push the heads down and they would go bobbing back and forth for a long time, while periodically touching the water.

At five to five and a half weeks of age, they discovered the art of flying. They have a twelve-foot wide by twenty-foot long room to perfect this ability. It is amazing, how the first flight of each bird is well planned, it seems. They seem to know were they are going and how far. It is slightly clumsy. But, by the third flight, they are sailing through the air perfectly, turning corners and landing with perfection on my shoulders or head.

By six to six and a half weeks of age, the Fiery-Shouldered Conures were eating the granules quite well. They were starting to cut back in the amount of their food at each feeding, usually consuming around four cc's.

By six and a half to seven weeks of age, I noticed that they were starting to refuse my offering of the syringe of warm tasty formula more and more. They were then cut back to two feedings a day, with a third feeding offered to them if they wanted it.



This is also the time when I started the progressive wing clip on each chick. I initially took off the first three primary flight feathers on each side and then gave them a few days of flying. This helps to build up the breast muscle and gives them more strength in their wings. Then, a few days after this, I cut off two more primary flight feathers on each side. Now, it is getting very difficult to fly, but they can still do it. By doing it this way, the clipped birds learn to flap their wings vigorously in their cages on a consistent basis, once weaned and for the rest of their lives.

Now they are seven to seven and a half weeks of age and they refuse the formula even more. The granules are disappearing at a faster rate. By this time, they are down to one or one and a half feedings a day of around three cc's.



By eight to eight and a half weeks of age, they are finally weaned and their wings clipped to what is appropriate for the species. Between six to seven flight feathers on each side. I waited about one week after this, to make sure that they were eating well on their own, before sending them to their new homes.