Handrearing Parrots

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An advertisement in a past issue of *Australian Birdkeeper Magazine* made me smile. The Australians have got it right, I thought! The advertisement read 'African Greys -handraised $6000, parent raised $8000'. In the UK the equivalent would read; 'African Greys – handreared £550, parent reared £350'. The latter price does reflect the fact that, sadly, wild-caught African Greys are still being Imported into the UK and are used for breeding stock; in addition it shows how undervalued parent-reared young are and how parrot breeding in the UK is now geared to producing young for the pet market. While this aspect will almost certainly become more important in Australia, I think that there are more Australian breeders who enjoy the process of watching their pairs in aviaries fledge young than is the case in the UK.

Nevertheless, the last few years have seen a substantial increase in the number of parrots handreared as pets in Australia. Due to availability, the species involved are a little different from those in the UK. In Australia, Galahs, corellas and other cockatoos, lorikeets, Quaker Parakeets, conures such as the Green-cheeked and the Sun Conure, and Eclectus Parrots are among the most popular as pets. In the UK African Greys are the number one candidates for handrearing, with smaller African parrots such as Senegal and Meyer's Parrots, cockatoos, *Pyrrhura* conures, Amazons and macaws a long way behind. In both countries Black-headed Caiques are climbing very fast up the popularity ladder.

Handrearers can be divided into two categories: those who rear a few birds at home and those who do so for commercial reasons. In this article I would like to give some advice to the relatively inexperienced. The first suggestion I would make is to start with a species that is easy to rear. In this respect lorikeets are at the top of the list because they feed readily and they are the easiest of all parrots to wean. Weaning is the hardest part for many people. Rainbow and Musk Lorikeets would be ideal for the beginner. Cockatiels are readily available and inexpensive but they are not the easiest chicks to rear from an early age, so if you are a newcomer to handraising wait until you have gained more experience.

With some hobbies, being overambitious does not really matter if those involved have the cash to waste. With parrots, those who decide to handrear are holding, literally, precious life forms in their hands, and they are solely responsible for what follows. The beginner must have the most basic knowledge needed to handrear, and, in addition, the necessary tenderness, power of observation and feelings of concern.

Before starting to handrear chicks I would suggest that you consider the following:

- You should have at least four years' experience in bird breeding. It does not matter in which species except that they should be altricial, ie those hatched blind and naked. This gives you the experience of knowing what a normal, healthy chick looks like.
- You and/or another member of your household should be available to give around-the-clock feeds or with a break of seven or eight hours. (In some cases this may mean taking the chicks to work in a specially adapted cage or brooder! The alternate for someone handrearing alone could be virtual confinement to the house for several weeks.)
- You must be committed to looking after this chick or chicks for between three and seven months depending on the species. You should realize that it is unethical to sell unweaned chicks.
- You should not rear from the egg if you have not handreared parrots before.
- You must have unlimited patience.
- The importance of good hygiene must be firmly instilled in your mind.
- You should obtain a book and/or video on handrearing. Do not read it or watch it only once, do so three or four times until you are thoroughly familiar with the contents.

There are a number of different methods of handfeeding and an endless variety of food formulas. Making a comparison of the methods used will usually impress you with the dissimilarity. Methods must be adapted to suit the needs of the species and the environment.

Temperature Control.
The first requirement is a reliable brooder. These are expensive. Accurate temperature control is imperative. More chicks die of overheating than die from a temperature that is too low. The latter is obvious because chicks would be lethargic, feel cool to the touch and food digestion would be slow. A chick that is too hot might be extremely restless. Overheating occurs either because the brooder is set at the wrong temperature or it is malfunctioning.

Incubator-hatched chicks should be maintained at the same temperature as the incubator for the first few days. Two good quality thermometers should be used to warn if one is faulty. Chicks that are a few days of age and have no feathers (and almost no down, in most cases) are maintained at a temperature between 32-35 degrees centigrade (90-95°F) depending on whether or not there are other chicks to keep them warm, and on the requirements of individual chicks and species. A single chick will usually require more heat than several, who will cluster together. Chicks of large species maintain their body temperature better than small ones. Humidity is also important. Keep a small spill-proof container of water, to which chicks cannot gain access, in the brooder.

The first fact to understand is that the longer you leave a chick in the nest, up until the time its eyes open, the easier it should be for you to rear. Small chicks of small species are difficult for people with large hands to handle. Newly hatched chicks of the smaller species might weigh only 4 grams. Unfeathered chicks must be handled gently with warm hands; very small chicks should be wrapped in a tissue while outside the brooder to prevent heat loss.

A single chick needs support. A common mistake of the beginner is to place a small chick in an over-large container in which it can move about. Place it in a small container and pack tissues around it. The popular notion that hygiene is maintained by placing chicks in individual containers should be ignored. If disease is present it will spread anyway, on your hands or clothes (or on the feeding implements if these are used for more than one chick). Without its parents, a chick needs physical contact with another chick. It does not matter if this is a different species or slightly larger, it will fare better with a companion.

Methods of Feeding.
The easiest implement for feeding small chicks is a teaspoon with the sides bent upwards. In my opinion, this is the best method of feeding even a chick weighing two grams! Wash the spoon after feeding each chick. If you are inexperienced, do not try to feed into the crop. This is the method most likely to kill a chick. In the wrong hands, the tube can go into the windpipe instead of into the crop. Although it is possible to aspirate a chick using a spoon, this is extremely unlikely. If you must feed into the crop for a specific reason, feel the end of the tube in the crop before pressing the plunger.

A chick will feed readily from the spoon from the day it is hatched – provided that the spoon is warm. Test the temperature of the spoon and the food on the inside of your wrist. At first use a thermometer to test the food. It should be fed at about 42.7°C (109°F) for very young chicks, gradually reducing to 40°C (104°F) for older chicks. The spoon must be warm but not too hot.

Some people prefer to use a 3ml plastic syringe for small chicks, feeding into the beak. Spoon-feeding is time consuming with older chicks of larger species, such as macaws and cockatoos. A bulb syringe, to give food into the mouth, is a good alternative. If you have small hands, a large syringe, eg 60ml, can be difficult to manipulate. The rubber ring on the syringe needs to be lubricated with sunflower oil to keep it moving smoothly. These syringes were not meant for multiple use and must be changed often. Another implement that can be used for feeding is a medical pipette. All these instruments must be washed after each chick is fed, or use a whole bowl of syringes, one per bird.

Note carefully that an enormous danger in syringe feeding into the crop, using a tube or a crop needle, is that the food is too hot. This has resulted in excruciatingly painful crop burns and death. Take heed of this. One great advantage of spoon-feeding, or syringe-feeding into the mouth, is that if the food is too hot (or too cold), the chick will shake its head and refuse it. When it is older, it will also do this when it has had enough. (This often makes weaning easier as you are not giving a chick more than it wants to take. You can also give food of a coarser consistency, allowing the young parrot to chew the particles in the food.)

If you are feeding several chicks, the food will cool before you have fed them all. Start with the youngest, as older chicks do not need food quite so warm. If they are all the same age, or if there is more than one clutch of chicks, you can stand the container of hot food in a bowl of boiling water to help maintain its temperature. You could reheat the food – but not more than once. Take great care in using a microwave to heat food. (This is not recommended.) There could be hot spots in the food, resulting in a crop burn.

It does not matter how good the food is – a commercially prepared formula or otherwise – if a chick has been poorly fed in the nest during the first few days of its life, it might never make a healthy specimen. In fact, poorly fed parents can produce chicks that are weak from the time they hatch. Make sure that your breeding birds have a nutritious diet and offer a calcium supplement. This is probably best added to a good quality rearing food or to some favoured food item.

To prevent a calcium deficiency, a calcium supplement should be added to the food once daily if chicks are not fed on a commercial formula. In my opinion, this should be added to the spoon or the syringe for each chick, not added to the mixture made up for several chicks. Note that parent-reared chicks can also be deficient in calcium. It is important to add calcium to the rearing food or favourite food (not to the drinking water).

The food you give to newly hatched chicks should be diluted for the first couple of days with an electrolyte solution. This solution restores fluids and minerals to the system and is especially good for incubator-hatched chicks, many of which are dehydrated on hatching.

Different species have distinctive behavioural traits that are evident when they are being fed. For example, cockatoos and some conures pump so strongly on the spoon that food will be spilled on the plumage unless paper towel is placed around the chick like a little bib. In contrast, Eclectus Parrots have a very weak action when being fed.

Weighing of Young.
Weighing of chicks is important as an early-warning system. You need to buy electronic scales that weigh to the nearest gram. Note that scales that weigh to the nearest 2-5 grams are not accurate enough for this purpose, except for large species at the weaning stage. Each chick should be weighed before and after the first feed of the day. Weights should immediately be entered on a data sheet. African Greys and most Amazons, for example, weigh in the region of 12-14 grams on hatching and reach adult weight by about five weeks of age. Up until this age they should gain weight daily. Then their weight is stable and starts to decline as fledging approaches.

Failure to gain weight indicates a problem, usually a bacterial, viral or candida infection. Seek veterinary advice as only a veterinarian can carry out the tests to identify the cause.

Identification.
If several chicks of the same species and similar age are being reared, it is essential to be able to identify them. Closed ringing is the best method. Closed rings should be fitted just before the eyes open. Before chicks are old enough to ring, they might be identified with a felt-tipped pen.

The Container Base.
One of the most common mistakes made by the newcomer to handrearing is not to pay enough attention to the surface on which the chicks are standing. It is not advisable to keep them on tissues or toweling for too long. Their feet need exercise or they could end up with toes pointing in the wrong direction. I recommend the use of plastic mesh or plastic-covered mesh of a small size, obtainable from a garden centre. Welded mesh (no larger than 1.25cm square) could be used but it is hard on tender feet. Plastic is softer. Make sure that the mesh is not so large that it can trap the tiny feet. Mesh should be bent downwards around the edges, to fit the container or brooder, and stand about 2.5cm above the floor. If the mesh is too close to the floor, chicks will be standing in their own faeces.

Weaning Cage.
When chicks start to feather they can be moved from the brooder to a weaning cage. This can be constructed entirely of welded mesh. However, when moved out of the brooder many young parrots will appreciate a cardboard box into which they can retire. Weaning cages that are open only at the front present a more secure environment for nervous young ones.

Hygiene.
Unless you have perfect eyesight, use a light-reinforced magnifier and keep it set up where you handfeed. It is surprising what it will show up – dirt on the plumage, an infection in the toes or nostrils plugged with dried food. Perhaps

it will show up the first signs in the mouth of *Candida albicans*, which looks like white plaque.

If attention is paid to good hygiene few problems should be experienced before the weaning stage.

Weaning.
Weaning is the period during which parrots learn to feed on their own. It is a time of great vulnerability for young birds with inexperienced or impatient handfeeders, or with those who mass-produce parrots for the pet trade. In the USA, some breeders do not wean young parrots, selling them before they can feed themselves, often before they are even feathered. In my view this should be illegal as it results in death for many parrots in inexperienced hands.

It is also a major reason why many handreared parrots make poor pets. They are force-weaned at an early age and never recover from the experience. To be young and hungry and deprived of sufficient food is a recipe for never trusting a human again. It is the reason why cockatoos, for example, cry for food for months after they should have been weaned. It is the reason for anxious, neurotic young parrots that are so demanding that the owners cannot cope. It is the reason why so many parrots lose their homes at an early age. I hope this will not happen in Australia. In Europe and the USA it is resulting in the opening of countless parrot rescue centres. But no matter how many open, it seems there are not enough.

Why are so many parrots force-weaned weeks before the proper time? It is a matter of economics and ignorance, probably in equal measure. The small breeder who handrears a few parrots in his or her home is more likely to produce a well-adjusted young parrot than the mass-producer. Parrots are extremely sensitive birds. If you reared 40 human babies and children together without real parental care or attention to their emotional needs, and only focused on their physical requirements, you would not expect to produce well-adjusted children. It is the same for parrots. Two people working shifts might rear and wean 40 parrots in a responsible and loving manner but it is enormously demanding work that leaves no time for anything else in life.

I have been to sizeable parrot-breeding stations in various parts of the world where large numbers of parrots are produced. I find it extremely disturbing. To see cockatoos and large macaws produced in this way is heart-rending. They crave physical touch and emotional response. They do not receive it and here you have the makings of a problem bird – one that might live for 60 years. Some other parrots can survive the experience because, with a minimum of handling, they revert to a state in which they are emotionally detached from humans.

So a parrot's emotional requirements during the weaning period can be equally as important as the pace at which it is allowed or forced to become independent of humans for food, and as important as the food on which it is weaned.

The first signs that a young parrot is approaching the weaning stage are:

- Ceasing to gain weight;
- Becoming more difficult to feed –preferring to play with the spoon, flap its wings or upset the food – or just run away; nibbling at everything around it, including the food that should have been offered in anticipation of weaning, but well before it can actually feed itself.

Continuing to feed a chick without giving it the opportunity to learn to nibble at food is also a mistake. From before they are fully feathered young can be offered soft items to nibble at, such as wholegrain bread, pieces of orange and warm, cooked peas. At first they will consume little. As they start to consume some items, others can be offered, such as millet spray and ripe pear. A softfood can be made up in a food mixer, using wholegrain bread, hard-boiled egg and carrot as the base, and adding some fruit. Mixed to a crumbly (not wet) consistency, it is ideal for young parrots. They are often attracted to brightly coloured foods, such as red pepper, carrot and orange.

When food is first offered, before a young parrot is perching, it should be placed on the floor of the cage in a small spill-proof container. The larger parrots often prefer soaked sunflower seed to start with, and very quickly learn how to remove the husks. Millet spray is another favourite, although the seeds will be removed before the young bird is capable of eating them. This does not matter. It is all part of the learning process.

Wing Exercise.
At the weaning stage wing exercise is extremely important to young parrots, if their wings are clipped, thus denying them the opportunity to strengthen their wing and pectoral muscles, they might be unable to fly later in life when their flight feathers are allowed to grow back. Wing clipping a parrot at this young age is a form of cruelty that should be against the law. Those who practice it need to realize the psychological and physical harm it causes.

Behavioural Problems.
Psychologically, some parrots are hardly affected by the handrearing process, if not given daily human attention and/or if they are kept with other parrots, they soon revert to a normal form of behaviour. This is not true of some other parrots, especially cockatoos and some lories. The classic examples are cockatoos, especially the *Cacatua* species. All too often they have no real place in life because of their craving to be with people. This leads to extreme forms of behaviour that few people can tolerate and too many sad, plucked and mutilated birds whose stories would have been so different had they been parent reared.

Is Handrearing Necessary?

The misconception persists that in order to produce tame birds suitable as pets, parrots must be handreared. Studies were carried out on Orange-winged Amazons at the Department of Animal Science, University of California. Parent-reared chicks could be tamed by handling them for 30 minutes per day, four days per week, one or two birds at a time, from 35 days to fledging at about 56 days. These young were judged to be tamer than those handled for the same amount of time but from 15-36 days old. (Remember this relates to a species that spends eight weeks in the nest.) With continuing human interaction, the later handled young remained tame, comparable to handreared birds. Breeders know that the most difficult time to handle chicks of the larger parrot species is two to three weeks before they fledge; therefore, if they are handled continuously prior to and during this period, most will remain tame. However, it should be pointed out that there are some parrots that do not like to be handled even if they are handreared, and they might soon revert to being aloof.

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