

## Tips for Identifying a Good Parrot Breeder

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The breeding and adoption of young parrots can be an unpopular subject, especially among those involved in the rescue and rehabilitation of adult parrots. Many believe that there should be no further breeding of baby parrots, and that it is irresponsible for caregivers to even contemplate the adoption of a baby parrot when there are so many adult, previously-owned parrots who need homes.

I prefer not to get involved in such debates. The truth is that there will always be people who want to adopt young parrots. Given that, there will always be breeders. Therefore, I believe it extremely important for us all to be knowledgeable about the breeding practices that result in well-reared parrots who are prepared in every way possible for life in captivity.

No matter what we are purchasing, it is always important to "vote with our dollars." If there is to be some breeding, then it is important that truly excellent hobby breeders are supported and that production breeders and those unskilled at the art are not.

### Adopting the Older Parrot as an Option

Understanding this information can also be helpful when you do adopt an older parrot. Knowing how babies should be raised and understanding the type of personality that optimal rearing practices produce will enable you to better assess the older parrot in your home. Older parrots do not learn in the same way as babies do; they may take longer.

However, if you adopt an older parrot without good eating skills, or a parrot who won't play with toys, or a parrot who is afraid to take a shower, you will understand that he simply didn't have good learning experiences as a baby parrot. You will also understand that you can still teach him. In other words, understanding optimal rearing practices can help you to sort out why your adult parrot behaves in a certain way.

I recently spoke on this topic in Brisbane for the Parrot Society of Australia. In preparing for this presentation, I interviewed several hobby breeders in the United States and was gratified to learn that all had, over the years, come to the same conclusions about which practices are most important in the rearing of parrots. They were the same conclusions to which I came when I was breeding African Grey parrots over 20 years ago.

When I use the term "hobby breeder," I am referring to those who produce a very limited number of parrots each year. By virtue of this fact, as well as their commitment to using the best rearing practices, they are *not* contributing to the rescue situation in this country and it is important to grasp this fact. Neither are these breeders making a profit. Instead they breed, as I once did, for the love of the species.

### Most Important Practices: Abundance Weaning™

The two most important practices embraced by these breeders are those of (1) Abundance Weaning™, and (2) fledging. The term Abundance Weaning™ was originally coined by breeder and behavior consultant Phoebe Linden. This term refers to the fact that the young parrots are allowed to reach food independence at their own pace, without ever experiencing the hunger that so often leads to anxiety. Contrast this with the production breeders' practice of force weaning their babies in order to get them out the door as quickly as possible, in order to ensure maximum profit. In the wild, young parrots would never be allowed to become so hungry that they call repetitively for food, since this could attract the notice of predators. Instead, they are fed often and regularly.

During the force weaning process, babies are weaned according to a schedule that requires that feedings are dropped in anticipation of early adoption or transfer to a pet store. In young parrots, hunger results in anxiety. Thus, hunger and anxiety become inextricably linked, even when the parrot grows into an adult. Many are the feather picking African Greys who do not eat well, forever bouncing back and forth between the two states of hunger and anxiety.

In truth, young parrots have an innate drive that directs their development and will result in food independence at the correct time, always after fledging. Obviously, if in the wild, a young parrot could not become food independent before it could fly. This fact should inform our expectations and our practices when rearing parrots in captivity. So, for example, it is normal for an African Grey to wean independently at approximately 16 to 20 weeks, since they routinely fledge at 10 to 11 weeks.

On the other hand, a pair of Moluccan Cockatoos might not wean their babies until a year of age. I often hear the larger cockatoo species described as needy. These are not by nature needy birds. However, they certainly behave as needy parrots throughout their entire lives when weaned at 15 weeks as some breeders do. You simply cannot ignore the natural development of a species and get a good result.

## **Most Important Practices: Fledging**

Abundance Weaning™ and fledging go hand in hand. I have seen over the past few years that a few breeders are allowing their babies to fledge and many are becoming less willing to completely clip babies before adoption, encouraging a partial clip at most. This is a wonderful and important development. The young parrot who is able to fledge and learn good flight skills will be a completely different adult parrot from his cousin who did not have this experience.

When a young parrot fledges, he must first learn to land and control his flight. The urge to fly is instinctive, but the ability to do so must be learned and this takes at least a few weeks of practice. Beware of the breeder who clips babies after one or two flights. The skills necessary to controlled flight and skillful landing take some time to develop.

Once these are in place, the development of the young parrot takes a completely different form. Now, he has the power to go where he wants and uses this to more fully explore his environment, as well as his social relationships. And, as he does, his confidence and coordination grow exponentially. He is the lucky parrot who is able to complete his development from fledgling to adult according to nature's plan and the results are extraordinary. No other practice will do more to ensure his success in captivity over the long course of his lifetime. Moreover, through this experience, he learns to think and to plan where he wants to go and what he wants to do. He develops neural pathways that babies who never fledge will lack.

## **Breeding Stock and Environment**

Aside from these two most important practices, however, these hobby breeders have other practices in common. First, they begin by only setting up the most excellent breeding stock. Unfortunately, for many years, problem parrots have been relinquished by caregivers and placed into breeding situations. When this is done, it means that we are then breeding parrots who have already proven their unsuitability as human companions. It is crucial that this practice is stopped and that, if we are to breed parrots in captivity, that those who have proven themselves as human companions or have already produced successful human companions be allowed to breed.

Next, breeding pairs are housed in such a manner that they experience the greatest sense of safety and security. If employees are caring for the breeding pairs, care is seen that only the most trustworthy are employed, that staffing is stable and that these caregivers speak softly and behave in a predictable manner. Pairs are afforded privacy, are provided with large enclosures, plenty of enrichment and an excellent diet, and are allowed periods of rest from producing. All of these provisions are important.

If breeding pairs are stressed or fearful, these emotions will be communicated to their young in the nest. Conversely, if pairs are housed in such a way that they remain relaxed and happy, and come to trust their human caregivers, these feelings about humans and life in general will also be communicated.

## **Pulling Babies for Hand Feeding**

Equally important is that babies are left with their parents for as long as possible, often up to six weeks, if the weather and the temperament of the parents allow. The longer they spend with their parents, the steadier they will be as human companions. Babies need to learn that they are birds before they go on to learn the skills that will make them successful as human companions. As human hand-feeders, we cannot possibly communicate knowledge to baby parrots about what it means to be a bird.

Once pulled for hand-feeding, these breeders feed the babies in an interactive and responsive manner. Avoid the hand-feeder who gavage feeds the babies under her care. Gavage feeding is the practice of delivering hand-feeding formula directly into the birds' crop from a metal feeding tube fitted to the end of a syringe. Breeders use this technique to feed babies because it is fast and creates less mess on the feathers. When this method of hand-feeding is used, the young birds do not even learn to swallow or to taste the formula, which slows the weaning process later.

As babies develop and begin to explore, they are provided with a wide variety of healthful foods, including pellets, whole grains, sprouts, vegetables and fruit. It should serve as a red flag if you encounter a breeder who weans babies to a seed mix. Seed mixes do not provide complete nutrition and are too high in fat, and a baby weaned to such a mix begins life at a disadvantage.

## **Other Considerations**

At about this stage, they are also provided with a wide variety of toys and colorful objects to investigate. There is a particular stage, as young parrots are developing, when they are naturally curious. It is critically important that they are provided with plenty to explore at this point. Exploration is curiosity in motion. Have you ever encountered a parrot who won't play with toys? Chances are, his

natural curiosity was not stimulated appropriately as a baby. It is the wise breeder who provides babies with a wide variety of enrichment items to explore at this stage of development.

As babies begin to explore, good breeders understand the importance also of allowing the young birds to have control over their interactions with the world. Baby parrots learn in a two-steps-forward, one-step-backward manner. They may be quite brave one day exploring their environment and then need to hide for a day or two. These hobby breeders understand and provide for that need.

Really excellent breeders go even further. They expose the babies to other parrots and other household pets, always doing so in a safe way. They teach babies to take showers. They teach them about household activities and noises, such as the vacuum. They expose them to other people.

Lastly, babies are trained in husbandry and compliance behaviors. They know how step onto a hand. They are happy remaining in a cage for period of time. They are taught to go into a carrier. They trust people and find their interactions with them rewarding because they have learned under the care these breeders provide that humans can be trusted.

Young parrots reared with these practices will be hugely different from those raised through production methods where money dictates rearing practices. They will be confident. They will be coordinated. They will interact with humans in a trusting way. They will be independent and well able to entertain themselves. They will be athletic. They will be a whole lot more fun as human companions.

## **Vote With Your Dollars**

I always tell my clients: "You're not responsible for information you don't have." Conversely, once we have information, we are responsible for sharing this. I believe that, if we are lucky enough to share our lives with one parrot, we are responsible for parrots everywhere. We can act on that in a myriad of ways. Now that you understand how baby parrots should be raised and understand the great difference that these practices make in the quality of life the parrot has over decades, you might just want to speak up next time you encounter the friend who wants to buy that sad looking pet shop parrot with a dish of seed in front of him. As you vote with your dollars and encourage others to do the same, you will gradually raise the standard of living for parrots in captivity.

## **Questions to Ask Breeders before Adoption**

The following are questions that should be used to interview prospective breeders about their practices:

1. How many breeding pairs do you have at your facility? (There is no right answer here, but a large number of pairs could mean that breeding parrots receive a lower standard of care.)
2. How are your breeding pairs housed? (The response should provide information about privacy, enrichment, showers, size of enclosures, periods of rest from breeding, etc.)
3. What do you feed your breeding pairs? (If the answer is a seed mix, this should be a deal-breaker because it will mean that the breeding birds are not getting their nutritional needs met and may be suffering from low calcium levels, especially if they are African greys.)

4. For how long are babies left with their parents? (The answer should be for at least two weeks and longer is better. Realize though that some parents will pluck their babies if left too long and weather can dictate that babies are pulled sooner at some times.)
5. Do you incubator hatch babies? (If the answer is "yes," this should be a deal breaker. You do not want to adopt a baby parrot who had no exposure to his parents.)
6. Where are the babies raised once they are pulled for hand-feeding? (The best answer is in the living area of the home, where they will encounter conditions likely similar to those in your own home.)
7. How are babies hand fed? (Acceptable responses include syringes, pipettes, and hand weaning pellets. Avoid breeders who gavage feed babies until weaning.)
8. When are your babies weaned? (The answer you want is that babies are allowed to wean according to their own developmental time frames. If you receive the response that babies are all weaned at a particular time, this should be a red flag. Each baby parrot is different.)
9. To what foods do you wean babies? (The best answer is to a high-quality pellet without artificial colors, supplemented with fresh foods.)
10. What types of enrichment are provided to the babies? (You want a response that includes a wide variety of objects - wood, acrylic, and palm frond toys, including foraging opportunities. The optimal response would include playstands and alternate perches as well.)
11. What do you teach babies before they go home? (The optimal response would include bathing, to step up onto hands, to go to other people, to enjoy time in an outdoor aviary, and to stay happily in a cage for extended periods.)
12. Do you allow your babies to fledge and learn to fly? (If the answer is "no," this should be a deal-breaker.)
13. If so, for how long? (The response must indicate for at least three weeks, and the longer the better.)
14. Once they have fledged, when and how do you clip wings? (The answer MUST be that babies are clipped back gradually, if they are clipped at all. Flight should never be removed from a parrot all at once. Further, if wings are clipped, this should be done well in advance of the day the baby goes to his new home so that he can adjust to his newly-limited ability to move around.)
15. Do you ever send babies home fully flighted? (Hopefully, the answer is "yes." The best practice is never to clip wings.)
16. Can I adopt a fully flighted parrot from you? (Hopefully, you're asking this question. If you are not, please learn more about parrots and flight and living with fully flighted parrots before you consider adopting a baby.)

17. Do you teach babies to fly to your hand during the fledging experience? (If the answer is "yes," you'll know you have located an exceptional breeder who understands how behavior works.)

18. Can I visit your facility to meet the babies? (It is reasonable for a breeder to prevent access to the breeding pairs, but a responsible breeder will want you to visit the babies so that a good match can be ensured.)

19. Do you provide any sort of health guarantee? (The answer should be "yes" and should be for a period long enough that you don't have to rush the baby to your vet the first day you have him home.)

20. What do you want to know about me? (The responsible breeder will have an equally long list of questions for you and may even have conditions regarding the size of cage to be provided, etc.)

If you intend to adopt a young parrot, please do so with all the care you might use in adopting a human child. Be prepared to travel to visit a baby - these truly exceptional breeders are few and far between. You won't be sorry. Such a beginning will set you both up for a lifetime of success with each other!