Breeding parrots -- learn about their life in the wild

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Why is it that some people are very skilled at breeding parrots and other animals, while others never achieve any degree of success? While luck plays a part in any endeavour, would-be breeders who continually complain of bad luck should probably be substituting that term with “bad management” and lack of knowledge of the species.

Experience does enter the equation to a degree, but many beginners are successful while others keep parrots for years with very poor breeding results. This is not only because they have too many birds and not enough time to devote to each pair, but because they lack the ability to identify with the parrots in their care. Yes, it is all about caring and that derives from careful observation and trying to work out what is best for each pair.

Individuality in all members of the parrot family is something that is very obvious. Added to this is the different range of behaviours natural to the great number of parrot species kept in captivity – in the region of 200 species. So why do many keepers standardise the way their parrots are fed and housed, with little consideration for the requirements of species and individuals?

Over the years I have met some very good breeders. Always I have been impressed by their attention to detail and their knowledge of the requirements of the species with which they achieve success. Sometimes I have been amazed by what they have told me – facts that emerge from careful observation. There is so much that we can learn from such
The conscientious breeder will read all he or she can about the natural history of the species kept. This information can provide many clues to
breeding success. An example is Musschenbroek’s Lorikeet (*Neopsittacus musschenbroeki*) from New Guinea. I had kept this species for some years before I realised that it was highly territorial. My pairs were not in visual contact, although they could hear each other. Then I moved. I decided to place two pairs in a small unit of four aviaries, one pair on each side of a service area. This was a big mistake. Within a few weeks both females had denuded their breasts. One pair was moved to another location but now, six years later, the breast feathers of both females have not grown again.

I was lucky in that the result could have been disastrous, as it was for a very successful lorikeet breeder in the UK. At one time he was the only person having consistent success with his pair. He decided to obtain any odd birds that became available and to make up several more breeding pairs. This he did. When he told me that he had built a special unit to house them all in adjoining aviaries, I suggested that this was not a good idea. It was several months before I spoke to him again. He had a very sad story to tell. On the same day he had found two females dead in their nest-boxes, killed by the males. I had noticed how my males became abnormally defensive of the nest-box when they could see another pair. The males cannot vent their aggression on the “intruding” pair so they kill the unfortunate female instead.

Of course this does not happen in the wild. In Australia, I have seen Musk Lorikeets, for example, escort trespassing pairs out of the territory of their own nest site. In may parrot species there are never enough nest sites for all pairs to breed. Therefore those pairs dominant enough to retain a nest site become highly territorial.
In a captive situation one can apply this information to ensure that where breeding pairs of the same or related species are housed in fairly close proximity, the area of the aviary that contains the nest-box is screened with solid partitions. This gives a pair a greater sense of security. Broken eggs and mutilated chicks can ensue if male aggression is not reduced.

Naturally aggressive species
Some parrot species are naturally more aggressive than others. Such species can prove very difficult to breed if they have visual contact with others. Vocal contact appears to be less of a problem. After all, the calls of parrots carry long distances in the wild but if the callers do not appear, no stress is caused.

Among the most aggressive parrots, in my experience, are certain Amazons and cockatoos. In this list I would include Blue-fronted, Double Yellow-headed, Yellow-naped and Cuban Amazons, Hawk-headed Parrots and some white cockatoos, such as the Citron-crested. As a group, Amazons might appear quite homogeneous, yet nothing is further from the truth. In temperament the species vary from calm and laid-back to potential killers.

When watching Amazons in the wild, I have realised how the natural characteristics of certain species predispose them to be good pets or otherwise. For example, when you see a group of Yellow-fronted (Yellow-crowned) Amazons they are loud and look and sound as though they are really enjoying life. This is also true of the very vocal Festive Amazon. Both species make wonderful mimics and have outgoing personalities. Yet Orange-wings, for example, are less vocal and more secretive. They seldom are talented talkers in captivity and wild-caught
birds have morose and nervous dispositions in comparison with Yellow-fronted Amazons, for example.

What has this to do with breeding success? Simply that some species are more susceptible to stress than others. Study the behaviour and temperament of the parrots in your care and try to work out which conditions will give the best breeding results.

Colony breeders
Certain parrot species are not aggressive and welcome the company of their own kind when breeding. They have evolved to live and breed in close proximity and aggression levels are very low. Grey Parrots fall into this category. Although it is not usual, as many as three nests have been found in one large tree. Greys can be bred with success in a colony aviary. Friends of mine in South Africa bred from six pairs in an aviary measuring 13m (42ft) long by 4.25m (13 1/2ft) by 2.1m (7ft) high. Colony breeding in a smaller aviary is unlikely to be successful because only the dominant pair would breed.

In the wild Galahs are highly sociable. Several pairs nest in the same patch of trees, sometimes as close as 10m from the next pair. In Florida, at ABRC (Avian Breeding and Research Center), there used to be a wonderful large aviary in which Galahs bred in a colony. The secret of the success here was that all the nest sites were hidden. Not one was immediately evident; all were reached through tunnels of wire mesh behind vegetation. This was an ingenious idea.

Compatibility
The great advantage of colony breeding is that the parrots are able to
choose their own mates. Incompatibility is a major reason for breeding failure among the larger parrots. Many parrots just tolerate their companion but will never breed unless they have a change of partner. This reason for breeding failure is often overlooked.

Many breeders can tell stories of “instant love” when a male and female parrot were introduced. I have seen it myself. If after many years one partner dies, it can be very difficult to persuade some birds to accept a new partner. This is one reason why the wise breeder always chooses young birds as breeding stock.

Lack of stimulation
It is a fact that many pairs of Greys never produce a fertile egg in certain circumstances. The owner tires of them and sells them. Within weeks they have hatched their first young! Why is this? Greys are highly intelligent birds and need stimulation. Sitting for months on end in a wire cage, perhaps with nothing to stare at but a garage wall, must be a form of psychological torture. They need stimulation. The very act of moving them can trigger breeding. In the USA there is a well known light-hearted saying among parrot breeders: if your Greys aren’t breeding, put them in a carrying box and drive them round the block a few times!

This is over-simplifying the case, but the fact is that many parrots stop breeding after they have been in the same environment for several years. There is absolutely nothing to distinguish one day from the next. It seems that the more intelligent the species, the more this applies.

When I managed the breeding centre at Palmitos Park (where there were as many as 700 parrots at times), there were two types of
accommodation: aviaries and suspended cages. I do not usually advocate suspended cages because they generally create a most unstimulating environment, and in the British climate they do not provide enough protection from the elements. In certain circumstances in warm climates they have advantages. The change to a different environment (a suspended cage in a noisy building or an aviary where neighbours were visible on one side only) definitely stimulated some birds to breed. Perhaps some liked the noisy companionship that felt like a flock situation, whereas others preferred the quieter location. Or perhaps it was just seeing new faces and a different outlook that convinced them it was time to breed.

In the wild some parrot species are sedentary but others move around seasonally over large areas in their search for food. It is not natural for intelligent and mobile creatures like parrots to see the same scene day after day.

Original habitat
Parrots from forested areas generally do better where there is tree cover near the aviaries. Conversely, many Australian parakeets and others from desert areas, feel uneasy in a wooded area. Overhanging trees indicate threats from snakes and other predators.

Natural nest sites
Knowledge of the type of nest used by the species in the wild is very helpful. Some large macaws nest in holes in tree trunks, others in open-topped palms and Red-fronted, Green-winged and Hyacinthine Macaws often nest inside cliffs. Cliff-nesting species sometimes try to nest on the ground, or prefer a horizontal nest-box to a vertical one. Widespread and
successful species tend to be less fussy about their nesting sites than more localised and specialised species. The Blue and Yellow is perhaps the most successful of the large macaws in the wild. Although it invariably nests in open-topped dead palms, in captivity it is not at all choosy about its nest. One of the most rare and specialised of the macaws is the Blue-throated (*Ara glaucogularis*). Although some pairs prove to be quite prolific, others show little interest in breeding and perhaps need the stimulus of an appealing nest-box. (On the other hand, could it be that when hand-reared they become too humanised?)

Among the smaller parrots, the conures, some species nest not in trees but in arboreal termitaria. These tend to be the hardest species to breed, such as Petz’s (Orange-fronted) Conure (*Aratinga canicularis*) and some subspecies of the Brown-throated Conure (*Aratinga pertinax*). Among the lovebirds, the Red-faced (*Agapornis pullaria*) is the hardest to succeed with; it breeds in ants’ nests in trees. In captivity, it has seldom produced young except in a nest made from cork that simulates natural conditions.

Female-dominant societies

How many breeders have stopped to consider the fact that not all parrots have conventional male-female breeding arrangements? In the female-dominated Eclectus society, a number of males attend the nest of each female. It seems likely that after one or more nests, the female might be ousted from this site by another female, then the males feed and mate with the new female. In a captive situation this translates to the fact that the pair bond between most pairs is weak or non-existent, or the male might be bullied by the female. This is because they were never intended to live together permanently in a monogamous relationship. In the first
pair of Eclectus I ever bred from in the 1970s, I regularly had to remove
the male from the aviary for a few weeks at a time. Formerly my pet, he
remained tame all his life and would come to me for protection and to be
removed from the aviary when the female became too overbearing. In
fact the correct way to breed from Eclectus would be in a large aviary
where three or more males were kept with one female.

A female Eclectus can be extremely aggressive to another female who is
of course treated as a rival. In zoos I have seen two pairs misguidedly
placed in the same aviary and have wondered how long it would be
before one female killed the other. One also has to take care with a
number of young Eclectus of both sexes kept in the same aviary. I admit I
was guilty of this mistake. The aviary was large but after about a year one
of the females was killed by the other females. I immediately separated
the sexes.

Vasas Parrots also have a matriarchal hierarchy. Here again, when
breeders keep them in pairs some unfortunate males will be killed. The
ideal set-up is a large aviary where three or four males attend the female.
I feel this is even more important than with Eclectus Parrots. It is
interesting that Vasa Parrot chicks are the fastest growing of all true
parrots. It must be that a single male could not provide enough food for
these fast-growing young.

Aviary size
Problems in breeding parrots are frequently encountered because the
aviary is too small. This is especially the case with inexpensive birds such
as Cockatiels, Rosellas and Ringnecks. Some owners are reluctant to
spend money in building them an aviary of appropriate size because the
cost is so much higher than that of the birds. In fact, these fast-flying birds are more active and need a longer flight than, for example, a pair of Amazons. Many Cockatiels have to tolerate cramped conditions and do reasonably well under the circumstances, because they are flock species with a relatively low aggression threshold. But Ringnecks and other *Psittacula* parakeets are female-dominant species. A male can feel very threatened by the close presence of a female and might be too intimidated to breed.

Cages only 1.8m (6ft) long are entirely unsuitable for active birds like the larger parrakeets. They need a flight with a minimum length of 3.6m (12ft) and preferably 4.5m to 6m (15ft to 20ft) in length. Little pleasure is to be gained in keeping them in cages – and breeding results suffer along with the birds. Anyone who has seen a feral Ringneck Parrakeet or an escaped Cockatiel in flight will realise what streamlined flying machines they are. Even in a 12ft flight they can only open their wings a couple of times – but at least they can fly. This is so important for their well-being and for that of their young. Birds bred in cramped conditions are unlikely to be strong flyers or healthy breeding stock. Resist the temptation to cram in as many pairs as possible to the detriment of other pairs. And remember always to allocate an aviary for young birds.

In female-dominant species (which are in the minority among parrots), male and female do not need to be kept together throughout the year. Males could be kept together in a group out of the breeding season, then introduced to a female in perhaps October or November, ready for the breeding season which starts (in Ringnecks) in February. This long period is often necessary for him to pluck up courage to court the female! Once courtship feeding occurs, the female has accepted him.
Temporary separation

Separating male and female for a few weeks before the start of the breeding season is an idea that can be considered in the case of pairs that have never bred or which have stopped breeding. Assuming that the species is one with a strong or fairly strong pair bond, it is always the male who should be removed from the female’s aviary. This is to prevent aggression on the male’s part when the pair is reunited.

Reuniting the two birds will usually cause great excitement and is an enormous stimulus to breeding. However, in species in which the pair bond is very strong, such as cockatoos and macaws, the separation should not be too long -- perhaps only two weeks. Separating them for longer could cause stress or depression and it is probably best if they are within earshot of each other.

Perhaps more than any other members of the parrot family, macaws have extremely strong emotional ties. When seen flying in the wild, they are always in twos, male and female flying so closely that their wing-tips are almost touching. A devoted pair will seldom be separated by more than a few feet.

An increasing number of breeders are giving their macaws, Greys and other birds, the opportunity to congregate in a large aviary out of the breeding season. This results in increased fitness and in the more natural situation of wild birds, where young ones find partners and the fidelity of an established pair is tested. They have the opportunity to change partners if they wish. Even the large macaws will do so on occasion. This opportunity is very important for pairs that have never bred, probably due
to incompatibility.

It should be noted that the males of most Amazon Parrots are too aggressive for males and females to be flocked during the winter months. However, they might benefit from a short period of separation. One problem in breeding Amazon Parrots is that often male and female do not come into breeding condition at the same time, resulting in clear eggs. Temporary separation might solve this problem, resulting in the production of a nestful of young.

Carefully consider the best way of finding purchasers for those young birds. Remember that if you take them to a selling show and they are not sold, they could pose an enormous threat to your existing birds when you bring them back. They will have been in the same airspace as newly imported birds. Harmful virus particles are circulating in such conditions. If your birds come back to your aviaries, they could be bringing with them potentially lethal diseases.

Finally, there is one factor that parrot breeders should never forget. We are not producing dogs or cats or other animals that have been domesticated for countless generations. We are trying to breed from either wild-caught birds or those which (with the exception of Cockatiels and Australian parakeets) are probably only one to five generations away from wild-caught stock. They are still, essentially, wild birds that have yet to become domesticated.

Even the smallest concessions towards a more natural lifestyle and environment should reap rewards. I will never forget seeing European Wood Pigeons in a stark, bare aviary when I was in South Africa several
years ago. I was shocked to see them in such an alien environment. But
seconds later I realised that that is precisely what we do with our parrots.
Many of them come from forested areas – yet how many of us attempt to
fill their aviaries with fresh-cut branches? This cover adds to their sense
of security and well-being – so should we not be taking a lot more trouble
to provide the right environment for our breeding pairs?

For further information on breeding parrots, refer to Rosemary
Low’s book

PARROT BREEDING
Sixty colour photographs. 160 pages. Soft cover. £15.95 post paid.
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