

## Hand Rearing Birds

### When to Start

Baby birds should be left with the parent birds for as long as possible if one wishes to maximise immunity from the parents. Also, intestinal flora is passed from parent to young along with regurgitated, somewhat pre-digested food, assisting the young birds with digestion. Nesting and feeding behaviour is learned in the nest, so the young who learn from their parents may eventually make better parents themselves.

When removing baby birds from the nest for hand raising, the safety of the young must be the primary consideration. If there is any danger of parental neglect or if aggression exists, the young should be removed.

Most psittacine birds can be tamed if removed around the time of natural weaning and hand fed for a few days to a couple of weeks.

If incubator hatched young are not placed with foster parents, they will be totally dependant on hand feeding. Because the yolk sac provides initial nourishment, just hatched birds may not need to be fed for the first 12-14 hours. Many aviculturists and avian veterinarians recommend feeding fluids or very dilute formula at this stage, gradually thickening the consistency of the formula over a 3 or 4 day period.

### Housing

The nursery may consist of brooders, paediatric units or similar enclosures that have observation windows and temperature and humidity controls. Proper environmental conditions are essential for normal feeding response and efficient digestion. Young birds should be watched closely for evidence of chilling or over-heating. With either extreme in temperature, the birds will grow more slowly and the rate of crop emptying and digestion of food may be delayed or stopped. Birds that are too hot will pant and if feathered may sit with their wings outstretched. Birds that are cold may shiver and huddle together.

The ideal relative humidity is greater than 50%, and the ideal temperature will decrease as the birds begin to feather. In general hatchling should be kept between 90-94°F. Birds that are fully feathered can be maintained at room temperature (70-80°F).

Heating pads and lamps are unreliable and can create an environment that is too hot or too cold. BE CAREFUL! A brooder with temperature and humidity control is ideal. Brooders with straight sides are recommended over those with rounded bottoms, to prevent leg problems.

Bedding material should always be kept clean and dry. Avoid using materials that the bird may ingest. If the birds are observed eating the bedding material, use another type of substrate. We recommend paper towels, tissues or unprinted newspaper (butchers' paper). This material should be changed at each feed.

### Disease Prevention

Baby birds have a limited ability to resist disease, so sanitation and disease prevention are extremely important.

Sterilisation of feeding utensils, disinfection of counter tops and the brooder, and frequent hand washing are essential. Remember that the dishwasher does not disinfect. Wash all utensils with soap and water, rinse, then disinfect. Rinse disinfectant off utensils with clean water before use. We recommend Milton Antibacterial Solution, Avi-Safe or any other antibacterial solution that is suitable for babies' bottles. Follow the directions as per sterilising babies' bottles.

Disease prevention is essential. Do not mix clutches of young from different nests and do not introduce babies or birds from another facility to your nursery. Use separate feeding tools for each bird or clutch.

## Diets

Although the exact nutritional requirements for captive psittacines and other pet birds are not known, many commercially available feeding diets appear to adequately meet the needs of growing birds. Several commercially available diets require only the addition of water. Many varieties of home made diets have also been used successfully.

## Breeding Procedures

Hand feeding diets **MUST ALWAYS** be prepared fresh for each feed. Leftover feed **MUST** be discarded. Harmful bacteria grow rapidly in leftover formula. If you heat your formula in the microwave, the food must be thoroughly stirred and tested for hot spots prior to feeding. Stovetop heating while continually stirring is recommended. Crop burns can be avoided by checking the temperature of the food prior to feeding. Food temperatures between 100 – 105 degrees F after the formula is thoroughly stirred are ideal. Invest in a confectionary thermometer – they are ideal for testing hand feeding formula.

The feeding response of most bird species can be elicited by gentle finger pressure on the corner of the bird's beak. Warm food will also elicit a feeding response in a healthy bird. Baby birds should only be fed if a strong feeding response is encountered. Feed again when the crop is nearly empty rather than following a strict time schedule. Feeding should not be attempted if a feeding response is absent or if the food is cold. Force-feeding can result in aspiration of the food, possibly leading to death.

Feeding should always be done when the bird is facing you, and the utensil aimed from your right to your left, to allow the food to enter the oesophagus, located on the left side of the bird's throat when the bird is facing you. Spilled food should be cleaned from the bird's mouth and body before the bird is replaced in the cleaned brooder.

## Signs of Malnutrition or Disease

If your baby birds do not grow at the expected rate, fail to develop feathers. Fail to gain weight, develop feather, beak or bone deformities, develop abnormal coloration, do not digest their food in a timely manner, or if the food in the crop becomes dense and hard, seek veterinary advice immediately.

## Monitoring Weight

Birds that are being hand fed should be weighed each morning and the weight recorded. Failure to gain weight could signal severe problems. If the weight indicates a cessation of growth or loss of weight, contact us without delay.

## Feeding Utensils

Utensils for feeding may include pipettes, syringes, bent spoons, feeding tubes or crop needles. Ideally a separate feeding utensil is used for each baby bird, or at least for each clutch. Utensils should not be reintroduced into formula that is to be used for another baby. If you are feeding more than one bird, separate out enough for each bird and keep the remainder uncontaminated. All utensils, including mixers, grinders, heating vessels, feeding utensils and containers should be disassembled, washed with clean, hot soapy water rinsed then disinfected, rinsed again and kept in a clean dry container ready for the next use.

## Weaning

When the baby bird begins to show an interest in little spots on the floor, itself or on its brooder walls, weaning can begin. Place a variety of foodstuffs where it can examine and test them. These include bird pellets, fresh corn on the cob, sprouts of seeds or legumes, or small pieces of fruit and vegetables. The bird's natural curiosity will lead it to examine and then eat the foods. Remove all foods that are more than a couple of hours old and replace it with fresh food. Water should be provided during weaning. Weaning is stressful, and some weight loss can be expected. Excessive weight loss may indicate a problem in which case you should contact us for further advice. Some regurgitating of feeding formula immediately after feeding is normal during weaning and indicates a need to reduce the amount fed at each feed. If perches are provided, make sure they are low and permit easy access to the floor of the brooder so the baby bird does not accidentally isolate itself from the food.

Good luck weaning your baby and should you require any assistance during this process please do not hesitate to call.