

## BREEDING AFRICAN GREYS

by Linda Greeson

Fads in the demand for varied species of exotic birds come and go over the years, but the market for the African Greys remains remarkably stable. The reason for this is more than their reputation for being the best talkers. It is not just their tonal range giving them the ability to perfectly mimic that endears them so to their owners. Typically the pet Grey enters completely into family life with an amazingly intelligent use of its extensive vocabulary. The Grey is very observant and uses phrases and full sentences completely appropriate to the occasion.

There are three main types of African Greys. We breed the nominate species, *Psittacus erithacus* Linnaeus, commonly known as the Congo Grey, exclusively. We are convinced that they are not only the largest and most beautiful but also the most intelligent. The Ghana or West African is very similar to the Congo in all ways except being smaller in size. The Timneh Greys are smaller yet, less attractive in coloring, more difficult to breed, not generally as popular, and more difficult to market.

## SELECTING BREEDING STOCK

All breeding birds should be either surgically or DNA sexed. Surgical sexing provides the additional information on sexual maturity and capability to reproduce. DNA sexing is so inexpensive, convenient, and non invasive I use it exclusively except in problem situations. The males usually have larger heads and beaks and some breeders pride themselves on being able to determine sex by appearance. These are at best educated guesses with a fifty percent chance of being right and not to be depended on when fertile eggs are the objective.

If allowing a number of birds natural selection in a large cage is not practical you will need to make the choice of a mate for your birds. We have found that by putting two new birds of opposite sex together immediately upon obtaining them they will pair bond with very little trouble. They will both be frightened in a strange cage and new

surroundings and find security in each other. By the time they settle down they will be great friends.

It has been our experience that the best breeders are birds that have been pets for a length of time but for one reason or another never became too tame. This type of bird seems quite stable as long as humans are outside the cage and are not unduly startled by their presence. Their age, always difficult to determine, can at least be verified by the length of time they were previously owned.

The ideal situation for trouble free breeding is to allow an unrelated pair of young Greys to grow up together in the same cage without too much human attention. Some of these domestically bred pairs will start breeding at three years of age, but most often they are four years of age or older. Once your pair has matured sufficiently their productive life will be long. The life expectancy for an African Grey is sixty to ninety years and they continue producing for their lifetime.

A tamed, wild caught bird presents a different picture. Given conditions that suit their need for security they make excellent breeders. If hand fed babies are to be used as breeders it is best to raise them in a group, letting them realize that they are birds by their relationship with each other. A hand fed baby that has been raised one-on-one with a close relationship with a human has a difficult time accepting the fact that he is a bird and rarely makes a satisfactory breeder. It takes a long time, sometimes years, for this bird to revert to wild instincts. The length of time seems to depend on how tame the bird has been.

Strangely enough, the formerly tame parent bird is more vicious and dangerous to the owner while protecting its young. The wild bird retains a certain amount of fear that inhibits its conduct to a certain extent. The former pet has no fear of humans to control its behavior..

## NEST BOXES AND CAGES

It is my belief that when undertaking any breeding program it is wise to investigate the habits in the wild of the species you are interested in. In their native forests the African Greys' nests are found in hollow tree

trunks or inside large tree branches. The birds use their powerful beaks to enlarge holes started by nature.

Very often many pairs nest in one small area, but only one pair to each tree. Their eggs are laid about two feet below the entrance hole on the moldy wood. Their nests are usually quite difficult to find as they choose impenetrable thickets deeply shaded by dense foliage. They never select an open, bright, sunny area.

The choice of nest box closely mimics the bird's natural choice in the wild. We have had the most success with an L shaped box, two feet high and two feet deep at the base. We provide an entrance hole five inches in diameter near the top of the box with a welded wire ladder for climbing. We add eight inches or so of untreated wood shavings to the box.

The birds always nest in the darkest corner of the bottom section. In the outdoor aviary we locate the cages as high as possible, away from brightly lighted areas, and with a great deal of surrounding shrubbery. We choose parts of the aviary with the least traffic. Security and privacy are essential.

Many years ago, as novices, we set up our breeding birds in huge flights -four by six by twelve feet for each pair. They just loved their homes. They ate well and had lots of exercise but never went to nest. We changed the type and location of nest boxes, altered diets, and had happy, healthy birds but no babies. When we decided to try smaller cages we were pleasantly surprised to have most of our pairs on eggs within a month. We now have all of our breeding pairs of Greys set up in our outdoor aviary in cages two feet wide by three feet high by six feet deep, suspended from the ceiling with the base five feet up from the floor.

Visual barriers between the cages, recommended by so many breeders, do not seem necessary if there is at least two feet of space between the cages. Any closer spacing without barriers results in territorial competition with constant sparring between the males.

Securely fastened and stable perches are necessary for mating. These can be 3/4 of an inch to 3 inches in diameter. The variation in width provides for exercise for the birds' feet. We install one cement perch per cage to assist in keeping toenails trimmed and also add a 1/2 by 1 inch wire perch. Greys use the perches as well as the nest boxes for mating. They normally mate several times a day for three to four weeks before laying their first egg.

As part of their courtship ritual the male may feed the female and then do a little dance for her. He holds his wings out at an odd angle, turning in circles, much like an Indian War dance. After much feeding and dancing he will tread on her back and mate. Eggs are usually laid about three weeks after the courtship ritual is observed.

### THE INCUBATION PERIOD

When we note that a hen is spending long intervals in the nest box we try to find a time when she is out in the cage and quickly check for eggs - but only once. As long as we observe that the hen comes out of the nest box at least once a day and are reassured that she is all right, we leave the birds strictly alone. Checking the nest box more often can be a disaster. Cracked eggs or abandonment of the eggs can result.

We do not check the nest box again until the chicks hatch - about 28 to 30 days later. Two to five eggs are usual. A way of determining the time of hatching is to notice when the parents food consumption drastically increases.

We check the babies about once a week and remove them from the nest for hand feeding at 15 to 21 days, depending on the size of the youngest in the clutch. All must be removed together. Greys will not care for a single chick left in the nest.

Caution must be used when removing chicks from the nest. Parent Greys are capable of inflicting serious injury. With the exceptionally aggressive birds we use a small bird net to scoop up the babies. We never resort to gloves as if they are heavy enough to protect the hands they do not allow for enough feeling to insure the necessary gentle handling.

## THE GREY CHICK

The newly hatched chicks are strange looking little creatures covered with a fine white down. They can be observed sleeping with their heads between their feet. For the first week their necks are not strong enough to support their heads. The hen may roll the chick on its back for easier feeding.

By the third week, with a secondary heavy grey down covering, heads are being held up for feeding and the eyes are beginning to open. The cock joins with the hen in providing food for the endlessly open begging mouths. I have read that the parent birds keep their babies' crops stuffed full to prevent the noise of crying, hungry chicks from attracting predators.

After removal from the nest, until about eight weeks of age when the chicks develop many of their feathers, they are kept warm and fed with a pipette or syringe three times daily. We use plastic boxes, lined with paper towels and a thick layer of wood shavings, and covered with toweling, for brooders. Feedings are gradually increased in amount and decreased in frequency. Most of our baby Greys are weaned by ten weeks, although there are many individual differences. They are more aware of their surroundings than most other species and require a great deal of attention to be properly socialized.

Our hand feeding diet is Exact Hand Feeding Formula by Kay Tee. The ease of preparation and convenience in storing is important but not the sole factor in making the decision to use a prepared formula. It is more expensive than the concoctions we formerly prepared, but also more effective in producing rapid growth rate with a minimum of crop problems.

We close band our chicks somewhere between 18 and 21

days. Greys have big feet and toes which develop rapidly. It is better to risk losing a loose band than to wait until too late and try to squeeze those fat toes into your band. We use a size 14 band which can be ordered from the Society of Parrot Breeders and Exhibitors, Post

Office Box 369, Groton, Massachusetts, 01450. This service is available only to members of the society. They can also be ordered from L&M Bird Leg Bands, PO Box 2943, San Bernadino, Ca, 92406.

## DIET

Our birds are fed the same diet all year round. The only adjustment is the addition of more soft foods when they are feeding babies. The main ingredient in our bird's diet is pelleted food. We are currently using a product manufactured by the Kay Tee Company called Exact Parrot Breeder Formula. It is the size of small, flat raisins and is very crunchy. The advantages of feeding a pelleted or extruded diet are many, with the birds receiving complete, balanced nutrition in every bite. With this regime we have not found it necessary to add calcium supplements which were formerly necessary to avoid rickets in the babies. We occasionally give very small amounts of seed to our birds as a treat. This never amounts to more than 10% of their total diet. If you feed seeds as a main diet, supplements must be given on a regular basis. An excellent supplement for a seed diet is the vegetable mixture we feed when the birds are feeding babies.

This vegetable mixture consists of equal amounts of dried beans (pinto, navy, split peas, lima, black beans, lentils etc.) and small dried corn. The corn is the type you see in most parrot seed mixes and is available by the pound in bird shops. This mixture is covered with water and cooked in a crock pot, or simmered on the stove, until the beans are soft. To this mixture of corn and beans, about eight cups, we add the following:

two ten ounce boxes of frozen peas and carrots.

2 - 3 apples, cut up including skin and seeds

1-2 oranges, cut up, including skin and seeds.

We add other fruits and vegetables, according to availability and what is in season. The mixture is served in a separate bowl and uneaten portions (if any) are removed before given the chance to spoil. The

addition of this soft food to the diet of birds slow to start breeding has proved to be an excellent stimulant.

Fresh, clean water in a newly washed bowl is required every day. No vitamins or additives of any kind are used in the water as the needs of the birds are amply supplied by the pelleted diet. If you are feeding a seed diet, vitamins should be added to the vegetable mix, as adding them to the water causes bacteria to build up rapidly.

We serve the pelleted diet in seven inch crock bowls. They are heavy enough to prevent the birds from dumping them over and are easily cleaned. The same sized crocks are used for water. The sitting hens can dip their bellies into these dishes or bathe if they so desire.

When feeding seed, many breeders use heavy, plastic flower pot drainage dishes, ten inches in diameter and one half inch high. These are the commonly available ones which look like terra cotta. By using large flat dishes instead of small, deep ones, the birds waste less of their food. The food offered should never be more than about one half inch deep in the dish.

## MANAGEMENT

We are fortunate in Florida to have a climate that permits us to breed our birds in outside aviaries. Access to fresh air, rain, and sunshine promotes good health. Good air circulation is essential to control the feather dust problem with Greys. No matter what the housing situation, the key words in breeding Greys are privacy and consistency. It is important to do the same thing at the same time every day. The birds become suspicious and alarmed at even minor changes. They do not accept the presence of strangers. We become bored with the monotony of their care, but they thrive on it.

Many breeders are having great success producing African Greys in indoor aviaries. At one time we converted an extra bedroom into a "Grey Room." The same thing can be done with a garage, an attic, a utility room, or a basement.

In our Grey room we double decked the cages to best utilize space. We used Vita Lite tubes in fixtures suspended from the ceiling. Breeze box fans in the windows were used to exhaust stale air and introduce fresh air.

The bedroom door was cut out to make an eye level twelve inch square window. Two pieces of glass, salvaged from an old fish tank, were placed in this opening, one on each side of the door. On the "bird side" a piece of solar film was added. Since it was lighter in the Grey room than in the adjoining hall the birds saw only a mirror. We could easily observe their behavior without them being aware of our presence.

My husband did the cleaning and feeding at the same time each day. I very seldom entered the room. Before he entered he always knocked lightly on the door, paused a moment, knocked again, and then verbally announced his arrival by saying the same words "Hello guys, Here I come".

As soon as the birds heard his first knock they climbed into their nest boxes. Back then we had all wild caught, imported birds who would crack eggs and squash babies if they were startled by anyone barging in on them. They quickly learned to identify the familiar voice and series of knocks. This seemingly small detail is an indication of the importance of providing the breeding Greys with a sense of security.

In the indoor situation our chief problem in management was the control of dust. Providing air movement and good quality of the air in an enclosed space is difficult, and a problem we never resolved to our complete satisfaction. Moving the flock to the outdoor aviary was a great relief.

We treat the birds in the outdoor aviary with the same consideration as we did indoors. Although over the years we have added formerly tame birds and many of our own babies to the original flock, we still limit disturbing them to the minimum. They are checked only once a day when their cages are serviced. Our arrival is verbally announced before we enter their area of the aviary. We talk to them reassuringly while we are caring for them. Even the older imported birds are not as suspicious as they used to be and often surprise us by talking back. In spite of all

the years we have been working with them, many still retreat to the safety of their nest boxes on the arrival of any human.

Breeding African Greys can be a satisfactory and profitable experience when both the birds' physical and emotional needs are met. Once you have worked out all the details of how to accomplish this your birds will go on year after year, happy with the same routines. They make working through a period of adjustment well worth while.