

EASY MONEY

by Linda Greeson

Not long ago one of our neighbors entered the kitchen as I was feeding baby birds. He saw the plastic boxes full of crying babies lined up on the counter and was clearly impressed.

"Wow!" Will you look at that!" He said. "How many babies do you have here?" " About thirty." I answered.

"That's what I call easy money." was his reply." I think I ought to buy a few pairs and get into this. It beats working."

I managed to politely remark that there was considerable work involved. After all, he was a neighbor who never complained about the noise from our aviaries. He was one of those exceptional people who enjoyed the sounds of our birds when he awakened early each morning.

"How much will you get for that one?", he asked, pointing at a baby Green Winged Macaw.

"About \$1800" I casually answered as he went in search of my husband, still shaking his head over this easy way we had found to make a fortune.

As I fed the green wing, a nice big baby of five weeks, I mentally reviewed his history. After almost five years of searching for just the right birds, we had finally found the beautiful pair who had produced him. That was six years ago. In those six years, in addition to the daily routine care given any bird, we had gone through several changes in their caging. We finally provided them with a walk in sized flight. We were on the fourth nest box before we found one that satisfied them, and believe me, those were big, heavy, and expensive nest boxes. It had never taken them longer than a week to demolish the thickest perch.

We watched them progress from staying at opposite ends of the flight to mild friendship, and finally, at long last, to courtship. Last year they rewarded our patience with two eggs and were sitting well.

Unfortunately a midnight visit from a possum resulted in scrambled eggs. They did not go back to nest until the following year when, although safely in an indoor aviary, they again became frightened and once more scrambled their first two eggs. Luckily they went back to nest, and this time we quickly snatched up their one egg for artificial incubation.

Twenty eight days later a lovely big chick emerged from that egg. For the first seven days he required hand feeding every two hours, night and day. He was progressing well on four feedings a day but it would be at least five months before he would be weaned and eating on his own well enough to be ready for a new home. All too often a similar background justifies what my neighbor considered an enormous price.

We lost a few Cockatiels this season. They were beautiful big show birds that were the culmination of years of careful breeding and endless study of genetics. When cultures showed pseudomonas to be the causative organism, I had to give the flock of more than 100 cockatiels injections of an antibiotic, twice daily for seven days. These babies I was feeding had also required the same treatment and had survived to be plump and healthy, but hardly met the criteria for easy money. Disregarding the time involved in treating the flock, the cost of veterinary bills, cultures, and antibiotics would offset any profit. In order to be positive in my selections for next year's breeding, I had no intentions of selling these birds anyway.

Three years ago I was fortunate enough to find three unrelated pairs of Blue Quakers. The following year they produced well and were all excellent parents. This year two pairs decided to have eggs for breakfast - their own eggs! mighty expensive breakfasts. The two babies I was feeding were only a small percentage of all those lovely eggs I had been counting on to build up my breeding stock of this rare mutation.

We have fed and coddled four pairs of Yellow Naped Amazons for quite a few years. One pair never did even learn to tolerate each other and we sold them as pets for a pittance. The other three pairs were preening and feeding each other and this year we had high hopes for success. The first pair never did go to nest. The second produced one chick that

they promptly ate. The hen of the third pair spent most of her time in the nest box but for some reason, known only to her, insisted on laying her eggs off the perch. So much for yellow naped babies this year.

One of our African Grays kicked all the shavings out of her nest box. She then sat so tightly that one of her babies was so badly spraddle legged it had to be destroyed. A pair of Moluccan Cockatoos, after eight years together, finally produced three eggs. They became frightened and cracked all three beyond repair. We will probably now wait for their ninth year for Moluccan babies.

All of these birds represent a large investment of both money and time. I have never taken the trouble to make detailed calculations, but I am sure that if the sums of money we paid for the birds, the costs of maintaining them, and minimum wage for the hours spent in their care, had all been

invested in even a savings account, the return in dollars would have been much higher.

We love our birds and thoroughly enjoy them. Feeding a helpless little chick and watching it grow and develop is a joy - even at two in the morning! Having birds you have bred yourself placed on the top bench at shows is as thrilling an experience as watching your teenager walk up to the platform to receive his graduation diploma.

I have dwelled only on the negative aspects of our experience. There have been enough successes over the years to make it possible for us to take the disasters in stride. There is always another breeding season to look forward to.

Breeding birds is fun - it is an all absorbing hobby - it is ever interesting and rewarding - but it is not easy money.