# MYSTERIES OF THE BIRD WORLD

**by Linda Greeson**

**Every police department in the country has a file of unsolved cases. I am sure that every exotic bird breeder and pet owner also has a mental file of unsolved mysteries in their experiences with tropical birds. I often find behavior patterns and actions for which extensive reading and discussion with other breeders provide no answer to my questions "Why?" and "How?" Much of the behavior that puzzles me is related to the breeding and rearing of the young.**

**With most creatures on this earth putting a male and female together at the appropriate time will invariably result in mating. A female dog in heat is supremely attractive to all male dogs, no matter how inappropriate the match. I once had a toy poodle who when in heat drove my huge male St Bernards to distraction, so much so that they became physically ill unless I farmed out either the male dogs or the poodle during the heat. Parrots, on the contrary, are very discriminating in choosing a mate, males and females alike. I have many times offered a cock in prime breeding condition three to four hens before the pair would progress further than a platonic relationship.**

**What I cannot fathom is what determines these arbitrary choices. Do birds, like humans, make decisions in choosing a mate by differences in size, appearance, or personality? Is it possible that they have instead some instinct, still intact from their wild state by which they know that this particular mix of genes will not produce good offspring? Why are many so fussy?**

**In the wild most large birds await the rainy season to start breeding. The heavy and frequent rains in the tropics assure them that when their chicks are hatched there will be an abundant supply of food to feed their young.**

**Many of our domesticated birds are housed indoors, frequently with air conditioning controlling the temperature and humidity and artificial**

**lighting controlling the length of exposure to light. Why, then do these birds follow the same response to the start of the rainy season? Our rainy season in Florida is most unpredictable. It does not occur regularly during the same months each year. How do these birds, housed in a completely artificial atmosphere know that it is time to go to nest when the rains come?**

**It is quite common in breeding birds to have the hen throw the newly laid eggs completely out of the nest, either one or all. Orthinologists report that these discarded eggs are almost always infertile. Since the fertility of the egg at this early stage cannot be determined by man without microscopic examination, how does the bird decide whether or not they are clear?**

**There are times when discarding eggs makes perfect sense. When eggs are due to hatch in 21 days, for example, on the 22nd day when no chicks are forthcoming many hens are observed to promptly discard the eggs. I have a well marked calendar and still often run into difficulties keeping track. How does the hen know exactly when the allotted time has expired? We know that this ability is part of her instinctive behavior, but how in the world does she keep such accurate count of the passage of time?**

**Even more distressing is the occurrence of one chick in a clutch being pushed to one side, or even completely out of the nest, by parents who take excellent care of the remaining chicks. I cannot count the number of times we have taken pity on the neglected chick, hand feeding and nurturing it to apparent good health, often for three to six months before it suddenly dies. We have never once succeeded in keeping one of these neglected birds alive longer than six months. They apparently have some hereditary defect not possible for us to detect. How then, does the hen know at an extremely early stage of development that this chick should be allowed to die before time and effort are expended in trying to rear it? What does she see and know that we, experienced breeders, are unable to observe?**

**We occasionally have other pairs who deliberately kill their young in the nest, usually at ten to fourteen days. The only explanation I have found for this is that the parents are anxious to start on another clutch and**

**wish to clear the nest. To me this does not seem logical. Is this not entirely against the universal law of nature that each species must be propagated to survive? On a few occasions we have been able to rescue one or two of the babies before the slaughter is completed. When these were slipped into the nests of other birds with babies of the same age they were successfully reared, showing no physical defects to account for their parents' behavior. The second clutch is then often cared for until maturity by the same parents. When so much effort has gone into hatching and feeding the first clutch, why destroy them to start another? For me, another mystery!**

**Many of our larger parrots, renown for high intelligence, engage in chewing activities that defy explanation. Even though they have identical material available, they will select their own perches to gnaw and work at, usually somewhere near the center, until the halves crash to the ground. Replacing perches is frequent routine work in the aviary. Remaining sections of the perches left specifically for chewing are ignored. Why?**

**Even more puzzling are the pair of Chattering Lories who habitually work away at chewing out the bottom of their nest box, making a large enough hole for loss of a whole clutch. Reinforcement of the bottom with heavy wire has prevented the loss of chicks but why do seemingly intelligent birds work so hard in the one area that will destroy the young? If this type of activity were practiced in the wild unless the birds had the whole depth of a tree trunk to work on, the result would be the same.**

**During our winter cold spells we worry a great deal about the welfare of our outside birds. They all have sheltered places to roost and many have nest boxes in place where they could be quite comfortable on chilly nights. Instead very few take advantage of the shelter provided. They often sleep hanging by beaks and toes to the cold wire when at least the wooden perches would be warmer for their feet. Talk about not having sense enough to come in out of the rain! They do not seem to have sense enough to come in out of the cold. And why sleep hanging on to the wire instead of roosting on a comfortable perch anyway? How can a bird rest properly when suspended by his toes and beak from the side of a wire cage.**

**Almost all parrots habitually soak food in their water bowls. This is a sensible procedure for hard item such a monkey chow biscuits, much like us dunking our doughnuts! As we clean and change water dishes so frequently we wonder why they cannot differentiate between the hard foods that profit by soaking and the already soft foods that immediately disintegrate in the water, resulting in an inedible mess. When you can find the time to sit quietly by and watch your parrots' normal activities many interesting habits may be observed. When presented with new and unfamiliar food we have often seen our birds perch on the edge of the food dish, heads turned side to side, looking the new item over very carefully. They then turn about, still carefully balanced on the edge of the food bowl and deliberately defecate on it's contents. The message they are sending us is loud and clear and often repeated over many days until the new food is finally accepted. Certainly their purpose in this behavior could not be just a method of communicating their displeasure to the feeder.**

**Since they often will follow the same seemingly deliberate procedure to deposit their droppings in water bowls - and with an entire cage to choose from the frequency with which this happens must be more than accidental - why this fouling of food and water?**

**It is well known that when reaching the stage of development when nature intends for them to start to fly, baby birds all go through a slimming out period. Instinct tells them that to be successful first attempts at flight require less weight. The mystery to me is how does this baby know when and just how much to cut down on his food intake? Their perfectly timed and managed reduction diets would be the envy of Weight Watchers!**

**We explain most of these mysteries as instinctive behavior, a holdover from the protective mechanisms necessary to maintain life in the wild. Why, after many generations of domestication do these instinctive behaviors persist long after they are necessary for survival? The most fascinating part of breeding exotic birds for me is that each day offers an opportunity to learn. No one will ever know all about parrots.**

**Never a day passes without some new experience, some new bit of knowledge, or a new question to answer. There are always unsolved**

**mysteries to ponder on and wonder about. Perhaps what seem to me to be actions beyond logical explanation are to someone else easily accounted for. Some one, some where, must have the answers!**