

NEW BREEDER BASICS

By Linda Greeson

The many questions I receive from novice breeders, or those considering getting into bird breeding, seem to fall into familiar patterns. From Florida to California, many of the problems that arise and mistakes made are surprisingly similar.

Quite often I hear from the owner of a pet bird who is still recovering from the shock of the cost of the avian addition to the family. He decides that it would be a wise move to buy another of the same species and of opposite sex and breed a few of his own. With this plan he would not only have two pets, but would soon re-coop the cost of both and even make a little profit.

But, as Robert Burns once said: "The best laid plans of mice and men gang aft astray." There well may be many unforeseen additions to this rosy scenario. The loving, cuddly pet who has bonded so well with his devoted owner usually has a complete change of personality when placed in a breeding situation. With eggs or babies to protect the formerly sweet bird can become aggressive and even down right dangerous. Breeding birds are no longer good pets.

The placing of a hen and a cock together does not automatically insure that baby chicks will soon be produced. Many of the larger birds, and a fair number of the smaller ones, may take years to bond to each other. It may even be that the pet never will become compatible with the mate chosen by its owner. Some birds, for no apparent reason, will never even share the same perch. When all does go well, after hand feeding the babies, the owner cannot bear to part with them. A house full of birds and no improvement in the balance in the check book is the result.

Many prospective breeders start their career by searching for proven pairs of the species they have decided to raise. It is rare to find prolific proven pairs for sale without some "strings attached." The buyer must accept on faith the word of the seller. I once purchased a "proven

pair" of Yellow Napes only to find on examination by my Veterinarian that the hen had no follicles on her ovaries and the cock had blocked seminal ducts. They were both completely incapable of producing offspring. I had bought them in good faith from a lovely old lady who had told me all about the babies they had produced in the past.

The "proven" label is not dishonestly applied if your pair has a history of producing one egg at three to five year intervals. The birds may be good producers and invariably eat their eggs or the chicks. The owner may not mention that with this proven pair you must be on the alert to remove the eggs promptly, incubate them, and hand feed from day one.

The search for bargain prices is often equally fruitless. Unless there are unusual personal problems forcing the sale, the owner is not likely to offer for sale healthy, prolific birds who are good parents, especially at bargain prices. He is usually selling those birds he wants to get rid of, and may not feel it necessary to disclose his reasons to you.

Often the novice fails to plan adequately before getting started. Provision must be made for proper housing of the newly purchased pairs. I once met a woman whose pair of Yellow Napes had for years been breeding and producing chicks in a cage located in the busy front foyer of her home. This is most unusual. My napes all demand complete privacy or they do not produce a single egg.

All too frequently sufficient study and investigation of the habits of the species does not precede their purchase. Before investing in a beautiful pair of large Macaws, it is well to be familiar with the amount of noise you can expect each morning and evening. If profit is the objective, the marketability of the type bird selected for breeding is an important consideration. For example, if the plan is to breed African Greys, one should be aware that the demand for Congo Greys is consistently good over the years. The demand for Timneh Greys has always been quite small, making them more difficult to sell. Thus the breeding pair of Timnehs found at such a good price may prove not much of a bargain.

Practical consideration needs to be given to the amount of time required to care for birds and hand feed their babies. In addition to knowing how to accomplish the feeding process, some one has to be at home at

regular intervals to accomplish it. Not all employers look kindly at buckets of baby birds being kept in the rest room!

Many beginning breeders start collecting birds from varied sources without the ability to differentiate a good specimen from a poor one, or even to recognize the common symptoms of illness. In their eagerness to get started they are too impatient to wait out a reasonable isolation period for each new bird, and catastrophe can result. These are times when familiarity with a good Avian Veterinarian becomes all important. Having a "Bird 911" number to call is always a good precaution.

Limiting the flock to a few different species makes for easier care, less difficulty in replacing mates, and the long term benefits of building up a good blood line and gene pool. I confess that this takes a great deal more self control than I have been able to muster. I am constantly "falling in love" with yet another species, regardless of how impractical their addition to our flock may be.

I have repeatedly suggested to prospective breeders that they try their wings on a few inexpensive pairs of birds. I urge them to start small with prolific birds such as cockatiels or small conures and learn as the flock is built in size and variety. My advice to the beginner is to attend bird shows, join bird clubs, subscribe to bird magazines, and take advantage of the wisdom of more experienced breeders. There is a wealth of information out there to be had for only a little effort and initiative. You can be sure that the day when you have nothing left to learn will never come.