

WEANING

by Linda Greeson

The weaning of baby birds who are being hand fed can be a frustrating procedure. Over the years I have heard and read many suggestions for making it easier and I have tried out many ideas of my own. Some hints are helpful, but there seems to be no magic solution. It is much like searching for the perfect product to clean windows. No matter what they promise, all the highly touted products on the market still require a great deal of time and work - no shining windows with an easy swipe of the cloth! Common sense, infinite patience, and considerable work are requirements for a successful weaning program.

We have found that a very early start helps. As soon as the chicks start moving around in their box we suspend a spray of millet from the cover for them to pick on. Little is really ingested, but perhaps the idea is presented to them that those beaks are intended for more than being held wide open to beg.

As soon as the chicks are promoted to life in a cage, even though feedings are still being given at regular intervals, efforts to wean are started. Spray millet is the old reliable first food to offer. Slices of soft whole wheat bread are picked on at an early age. While the bulk of the feedings are given with a syringe, bits of food are offered from our fingers to give the bird the experience of feeding himself.

I am reminded of the days when my children were babies. I would let them fumble around with one spoon while all the while I was busily "shoveling" the food into their mouths with another spoon - messy but effective. As the babies grow and the number of hand feedings given daily are gradually reduced, low, shallow dishes of a variety of foods are offered.

Until they are old enough to sit on the perches the food must be placed on the bottom of the cage where it is easily accessible to the birds. Corn is a good starter food, the canned kernel type is easy and convenient to use. We feed our birds "Exact" by Kaytee and hand feed the babies on this same food pulverized and moistened with warm water.

At an early age we offer the babies the Exact morsels, at first partially chopped up in the blender. They are soon able to handle the small sized form with no preparation. In this way they do not have the delay involved in learning to crack seed and extract the contents before getting a significant amount of well balanced nutrition on their own.

We offer the babies a large variety of foods for several reasons. We want our birds as adults to be accustomed to many different fruits and vegetables. In addition we find that their tastes are highly individual and completely unpredictable. One baby will show a marked preference for a little mashed white potato; another will just "pig out" on canned sweet potatoes, or green peas. A square of corn bread left from dinner provides a feast for most. Any wholesome, soft food suitable for humans is worth a try. Do not become discouraged with the first refusal. Often foods ignored at first will be accepted on subsequent tries. They prefer food to be warm or at least at room temperature. Most will refuse even their favorites right from the refrigerator.

Constant attention must be given to the removal of uneaten food from the cage before it has a chance to spoil. The larger birds will soon take an interest in small pieces of fruit - banana, apple, orange, or especially grapes. Green beans and broccoli are well accepted. They enjoy an interesting change in color, shape, and texture. Picking up a green bean or a slice of orange is a form of play for them at first.

Eating is not their main interest in the food, but rather a fringe benefit. At an early age all birds experience a "slimming down" period. At this stage in their development instinct tells them that in order to fly it is necessary to shrink their crops and lose some weight. Their number one goal in life is to learn to fly, not to eat. The faster they become convinced that they are able to use those wings, the faster they get back to the business of eating.

For this reason, whenever possible, with the safety of the bird in mind, we delay clipping wings until this slimming down stage is completed. At this time there is much stretching and vigorous flapping of wings, accompanied by a firm refusal to accept anything but a small portion of the hand feeding formula they had previously been relishing. They are really dedicated dieters -would that I could develop such willpower!

Observing this reduction in food intake and loss of weight, even the experienced breeder tends to become anxious. We have found it best to patiently wait out this period, no matter how long it takes. If we feel that the bird is getting a little too thin, we offer hand feedings in small amounts more frequently in this stage. The birds will usually accept a few cc's of their formula quite eagerly before their determination to stick to their diet reasserts itself.

Experience has shown that it is not productive to force feed the usual amount to an unwilling bird. It is not only a frustrating experience for the feeder, with aspiration a danger, but the bird's response destroys what should be a pleasurable interaction. It is not the actual feeding that makes for a tame baby. The interaction with the feeder, the enjoyment of the petting and talking accompanying the actual process, is more important to achieving a bond with humans.

There is no rigid schedule possible to use to decide when weaning should be completed. Birds of the same species, even from the same clutch, are highly individual. They set their own pace, and this varies widely from bird to bird.

An anxious new owner of a baby cockatiel called me recently to discuss her bird's poor condition. She had been given a schedule to follow for feeding and weaning her pet that directed her to reduce to one feeding daily at six weeks and to discontinue feedings at eight weeks. The owner was following instructions to the letter, but the bird was a week or two behind the schedule set for it, and was literally starving to death. An additional two weeks of handfeeding restored it to good health.

At the other extreme I sent an African Gray baby home with instructions to the new owner to continue a late evening feeding for a short time. More than a year later I had occasion to talk with the

devoted owner. She told me that she was still handfeeding her full grown bird each night because he "begged for it." This was a case of the bird training the owner!

As a general rule, mindful that exceptions are the norm, one can expect the smaller birds such as Cockatiels, Quakers, small Conures, etc. to be fully weaned at six to eight weeks. The mid sized Grays and Amazons usually take three to four months to fully supply their own nutritional needs. The larger the bird, the longer the weaning period. The Cockatoos and Macaws require five to six months, some considerably longer. I am told that the Hyacinths are even slower, taking six months to a year to fully wean. The Lories present a different picture. They will learn to eat by lapping at a low dish of warm, "soupy" food while still in pin feathers, often at five to six weeks.

One little trick we found to speed up the process of getting the birds to eat on their own was to put a mature bird in the cage with the babies to serve as a teacher. We used Fred, one of our pet cockatiels with considerable success - that is until Fred decided to teach mating instead of eating. It is best to select a female teacher! Placing a young bird who has been a problem eater - many weeks overdue to wean - in a flight with a group of mature birds often works well with Cockatiels and small conures. The example provided by the flock is usually all that is needed.

Making a judgement as to when to put away the handfeeding equipment - with a big sigh of satisfaction - involves a bit of close observation. Is a sufficient amount of the food offered being eaten and not just scattered about on the bottom of the cage? When the bird begs so piteously is his crop round and full? This would indicate that the begging is either out of habit or an attention getting ploy. With access to a gram scale weight can be closely monitored. For the pet owner, feeling a sharp breast bone through those fluffy feathers is an indication of too little food intake.

We usually make a final check on the fullness of the crop of our weaning birds in the late evening and often prolong a single night time feeding "just to be sure" - but not for a year!

We must remember that handfeeding is an alteration of nature's plan. In the wild where birds fledge naturally the adult parents can be observed feeding their young for what for us would be excessively long periods of time. It would be wise for us to lean toward a weaning schedule geared toward the birds' best interest rather than our own convenience.