

Disappearing Grey Cheeks And Small Eggs

Many times, small eggs are laid by hens that are small themselves, having health or genetic problems or they are older birds.

3-3-2004

By Robbie Harris

About five years ago, when I was 13 years old, I read your article on grey cheeks. They sounded like a good pet, so I bought your book and read it. Then I got a baby grey cheek and named it Taylor. She is the neatest bird. She does flips, circles and is potty trained. The pet shop hasn't had any more in, but I know a breeder in San Diego. I am very concerned they are not going to be saved and will soon disappear in the United States. I have heard they really need their privacy and can't be bred indoors. Is that true? I breed lovebirds in my room, and they do just fine.

You are most certainly right; the grey-cheeked parakeet (*Brotogeris pyrrhopterus*) is disappearing in the U.S. so quickly, I do not even know if many will be around in less than 10 years. The grey-cheeked parakeet you purchased from a pet shop five years ago may have been the last of the birds that were being imported into the U.S. from South America. Most of those imported babies went to pet shops all over the U.S. Comparing the numbers that entered this country, very few went into breeding programs. Keep in mind that, over the years, thousands of tame, hand-fed baby grey cheeks were imported to the U.S., which made these birds plentiful and abundant in pet shops for pets. With sometimes a dozen of these tame babies sitting in shops, people saw them, played with them and most took one home to be a family pet. Because of the large numbers being brought in, many bird breeders did not even think about setting this species up for breeding, very much like the dusky conures that came into the U.S. in large numbers. Dusky conures make excellent pets, but because the price out of quarantine was about \$20 each, I guess many thought not to bother with this species for breeding as well, for at the time it just was not worth it.

Grey cheeks first came out of quarantine for \$25 each, then quickly jumped to \$35 with the very next shipment. Some years later, they were coming out of quarantine for more than \$100 each, with waiting lists of buyers. Pet shops sold them anywhere from \$150 to \$300 each. Today, a tame baby grey cheek will quickly sell for as much as \$600 in a pet shop, and many times this is with a waiting list as well, since very few are being bred and available. Because importation of almost all parrots has ceased here, grey cheeks are rarely available as pets. Very, very few are being bred in the U.S., and the pet demand is still quite high.

As you have found, this species of bird makes an incredible pet, very much like a little person. They quickly learn tricks because they are eager to learn, and thrive on human attention. Many people are now trying to find some of these imported birds to set up for breeding but most are too old to breed. I have found that the older birds have fewer fertile eggs. Young birds seem to have large clutch sizes, where older birds lay fewer eggs and many do not hatch. But, with very few around, it is worth trying to breed them.

Grey cheeks will breed most anywhere if they are ready and willing to breed. I have seen tame birds breeding inside homes with all kinds of commotion going on around them. They have been bred in kitchens, living rooms, bedrooms and garages. I have even heard of people breeding their pets, which were a pair, and playing with them while they were tending to eggs (I would leave them alone during incubation time). So, if you are really anxious to work with these wonderful birds, your room will do just fine. Just get them a nest box and all kinds of wonderful foods — meaning a large assortment for them to pick and choose from daily — this is the most important part of getting them to nest. Hopefully, they will lay and raise young. Good luck, and I say, "Go for it!"

I have been raising birds for about six years, mainly conures, some cockatiels, and I have a pair of Senegal parrots. I have noticed that some eggs are large, while others are small in comparison. Yet, they usually all hatch and do fine, except for the really small eggs. Sometimes I find a dead chick in those little eggs. Is it normal for pairs to lay eggs that are so different in size? And, if an egg is really small, can a chick outgrow the shell before it hatches?

Yes, to both questions. Hens of the same species can lay different-sized eggs, and, sometimes, there can be different-sized eggs in the same clutch. Usually all goes well, but sometimes if the egg is too small, the chick will outgrow the eggshell (its capsule) and die days before the hatch date. The tiny, helpless chick inside simply runs out of growing room. If the chick fills the egg just a little too much, and takes up the air space days before hatching, it will also die.

Many times this problem can be seen with a good egg candler days before the due date for hatch. With problems like this, I usually open the top of the egg days before the chick is due to hatch to give the chick more room to grow. This takes skill and years of knowing eggs and embryos very well.

I have a friend who was having trouble with his scarlet macaws; the chicks were all dying a day or two before hatching. I checked things out. The chicks seemed to be outgrowing their shells before they were ready to hatch. I helped with the next egg that was due to hatch and showed my friend what to do. The chick I helped with lived, but my friend still hasn't mastered this technique of hatching and has not been able to save any more chicks since that day. It takes real know-how, because the egg needs to be opened at the very right time and in the right spot. Too soon or too late will result in a dead chick. Opening the egg in the wrong spot can also kill the chick inside.

I have helped out various conures and other small parrots, because the egg was smaller than normal. The chicks inside were growing to normal hatch size, but the capsule was not right in size, resulting in chicks with not enough room to finish the growing and hatching process. Even in the nest, if the egg is left with the parents and if the parents do not help the chick out, the baby will die. Many times, trying to save chicks in these small eggs is a hit-and-miss operation. It is always best to work with large-framed birds, especially hens, so that the eggs are hopefully normal in size. Many times, small eggs are laid by hens that are small themselves, having health or genetic problems or they are older birds.

Robbieharris.com Robbie Harris has a Web site so people can easily get in touch with her. She will post things she learns that may be of some importance to others, such as hoax e-mails. Questions for her Bird Breeder column can be sent through her Web site: www.robbeharris.com. She will answer questions that seem to be the most frequently asked and those that will help many.

Robbie Harris raises a wide variety of exotic birds at her home in Southern California. She has written two books, *Breeding Conures and Grey-Cheeked Parakeets and Other Brotogeris*, and owns and raises a large variety of African parrots, including greys, Jardine's, Capes, Senegals, red bellies, brown heads and Meyer's. Harris has received seven U.S. First Breeding Awards for various types of psittacines.