

Can I Pair Up My Parrot?

Successfully pairing up a former pet is not as easy as some people might believe.

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By Rosemary Low

A desire to breed parrots often stems from the enjoyment provided by a pet bird. Or even from the fact that a parrot obtained as a companion has not lived up to its expectations as a pet. (This is often not the fault of the bird but due to the owner failing to discipline it.) Thus, the owner ponders whether the bird would be happier with a mate.

Photo: Rosemary Low Breeding a pet bird may seem like a good idea, but it can have disastrous results.

This can be a difficult question to answer, because so much depends on the circumstances. Successfully pairing up a former pet is not as easy as some people might believe. This article discusses a few of the problems that can arise with pairing the larger species.

The Best Candidates For Pairing The success of such a venture depends partly on whether the bird was hand-reared or whether it was wild-caught or parent-reared. Those in the latter category are the best candidates to be set up in a breeding situation. This is because most hand-reared parrots have not had the opportunity to learn the behavior (and in some cases) the vocalizations of their own species. Having been kept exclusively with humans, they may be confused about their own identity. If they are very tame, they are more likely to perceive another bird of their own species as rivals for their owner's affection rather than potential mates. With some smaller species, such as cockatiels and conures, this is not the case. They may readily accept a companion.

The difference with hand-reared and wild-caught cockatoos is so great that they are hardly recognizable as the same species. A tame, wild-caught cockatoo that has been kept as a pet is a good example. Present it with a mate, and its behavior toward its human companion may alter, literally, overnight. This is no exaggeration. It happened with a male citron-crested cockatoo (*Cacatua sulphurea citrinocristata*) in my care. From the moment he saw the female (also wild-caught), he was no longer interested in me. This pleased me very much.

Another factor to consider is whether or not the species is naturally aggressive. I knew someone who had a female black-capped lory (*Lorius lory*) as a pet — a tame and sweet bird. She decided to give her a mate; a male that had also been a pet. The male killed the female within minutes. Given the nature of this species (all *Lorius* lorries are very aggressive), that was 100 percent predictable — and so sad. The owner was heartbroken.

On the other hand, many former pet macaws and some Amazons and African greys go on to make good breeder birds. Much depends on how strong their bond is or was with the former owner. In a totally new location where that person is missing, the jealousy element has been removed. If a bird shows an interest in another bird of its own species that is placed in a cage near it, this is a good sign. If they are kept near each other for a while and more interest is shown than jealousy, they can be let out in the room at the same time. If mutual preening occurs within a few weeks, it is time to think about building them an outdoor aviary, or, in some cases, two aviaries might be more appropriate.

Providing The Right Environment Hand-reared cockatoos are extraordinarily demanding and often insecure. It does not matter whether a tame male is carefully introduced in an aviary, all the psychological factors for that male are stacked against him because of the way he has been reared. He just does not identify with other cockatoos. If they have lacked the companionship of other cockatoos from the time they were weaned, they are likely to be very jealous if another cockatoo, a potential mate, is introduced to the household. In this situation a male cockatoo may have one aim — to kill the intruder. Moluccans are notorious for this. Sadly, many females have died as a result of being attacked by males that were former pets. I know of only one instance where a male, hand-reared Moluccan has become a successful breeder bird. I would be delighted if breeders would bombard me with letters to tell me that their hand-reared, male Moluccan is a perfect father. I would like to be proven wrong.

Obviously, a former pet should not be placed outdoors until the warmer weather comes. On mild spring days, it could be placed in an outdoor aviary and brought in again at night. The gradual transition from pet to aviary can be very beneficial.

Remember that a parrot that has spent all its life inside a house will be totally bewildered when first placed in an outdoor

aviary. Everything is so different and strange. Make sure the food is placed by the perch. For the first couple of days, the bird may be too nervous to explore the aviary to find food and water. If the aviary has an enclosed shelter (as all good aviaries should have), start off by placing the bird in the shelter. After a couple of days open the hatch. Make sure that the bird roosts inside at night.

Fitness Counts Pet birds are seldom in the condition needed for successful breeding. They may be overweight, or they may never have had sufficient flying exercise. Worse still, if their wing feathers were trimmed on a regular basis from the time they were young, the muscles needed for strong flight may never have developed. It will be months before they can fly strongly. A male or female should not be placed in the same aviary until both birds can fly the length of the aviary.

The other important factor is that an overweight female is very susceptible to egg-binding or prolapse of the oviduct. Her first egg might be her last. Laying may kill her if she is not in good condition. Calcium supplementation, from the time she goes outdoors, will also be necessary, unless she has been fed on a pelleted diet.

I would suggest that before a former pet is placed in an aviary, it is handled to ascertain that it is not carrying too much body fat. Also, the nails may need to be trimmed. If they are very curved or too long, there is a danger that the bird will become trapped on the wire mesh or be unable to climb easily on this surface.

Selling To A Bird Breeder What should you do if a breeder wants to buy your bird? If your parrot is very tame and bonded to you, have grave doubts about this. Separating your parrot from everything it has ever known may be very stressful. Thus, it will be extremely vulnerable to attack from its potential mate. Some breeders take a rather casual attitude to introducing new birds. The very worst thing anyone can do is to introduce a bird to an aviary where the other one has long been an occupant. It will attack an intruder in its territory. The best way is to place the birds in adjoining aviaries without a visual barrier. When they show an interest in each other, the male can be introduced in the female's aviary. This gives her the psychological advantage. Because the male is most likely to be the aggressor, this advantage is important. An uncaring attitude on the part of the breeder could cost your parrot its life.

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