

## “Imperfect” Birds

**An avian vet shares her experiences with special-needs birds.**

*By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP, Avian Practice*

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I often receive questions from owners and breeders about "imperfect" birds. So, this month, instead of answering a few questions, I thought I'd share some of my thoughts about birds that have hatched with either a "birth defect," a developmental abnormality or traumatic injury that results in a permanent defect. Some baby birds may develop abnormalities as a result of improper handling or diet.

Since I work with many bird breeders, I see the occasional baby bird with problems related to the musculo-skeletal system. In spite of the best efforts of my avicultural clients, sometimes things still go wrong.

For Example ...

Occasionally, a pair of breeding African grey parrots will have problems with calcium metabolism in their second or third clutch of the season, even if supplemented with the appropriate minerals. What happens is that the little African grey parrots may develop what are called pathologic fractures – fractures that occur from "normal" activities in the nest.

Often these are folding fractures, just from normal weight-bearing. The leg bones may show bowing. Sometimes, the fractures have already occurred and healed (often not in correct alignment) by the time the babies are removed from the nest for hand-feeding.

Neonates may have abnormalities as a result of improper incubation techniques. For example, one cockatiel breeder who is a client of mine had to move her birds around during the hurricanes we suffered through last September here in Florida. She had to move some cages with nest boxes and eggs to get them out of the wind and rain, and this resulted in some of the eggs cooling down during the incubation process.

One chick hatched out with deformed legs. The legs were askew, with obvious deformities to the bones, tendons and ligaments of the limbs. While it is able to stand with support, one foot is turned around almost 180 degrees. In my experience, performing surgery on these birds is very unrewarding and often puts them through a lot of pain and a protracted recovery and, as a result, the bird is often not much better than when we started. Because most of these birds have abnormal bones and joints, trying to repair the abnormalities cannot "fix" the problems.

Time Is Of The Essence

When dealing with developmental problems, the sooner the problem is diagnosed, the easier it is to try to repair or at least ameliorate the abnormality so that the bird has enough function to enjoy a happy life. Baby birds are like Play-Doh™ – if an abnormality is noted, the application of splints, hobbles or other orthotic devices are much more likely to result in a positive outcome than when the bird is older and the bones have stopped growing.

My husband adopted an African grey parrot named Eileen that had severe scoliosis (side to side curvature of the spine). A few years later, I adopted a little African grey parrot that was sitting in a box under a breeder's desk. I heard a noise, and asked him what it was. (I was not this man's vet.) He told me it was a little hypocalcemic grey parrot (low calcium problems causing fractures and abnormalities) that he was going to have put to sleep. I took a peek in the box at the little silver fluff-ball of feathers and offered to adopt her.

Her name is Poppy and – while her leg and foot are crooked, and one wing twists around (even after working with her for quite some time) – she is my wonderful pet. She and Eileen carry on conversations with themselves and us, and often answer one of us when we call to our spouse! They are two delightful birds, imperfect, but perfect in our eyes.

Happy Endings

While bird breeders are very caring people, they often don't have enough hours in a day to care for problem babies. So I usually offer to adopt them, work with them to correct the abnormalities and then find them a good home. It is for this reason, that most of my friends now own one-eyed, limping, or somewhat lumpy pet birds.

Several years ago, an avicultural client of mine called about a blue-fronted Amazon parrot with very abnormal legs and

wings, probably due to hypocalcemia. (Even though calcium problems are most common in African grey parrots, fracture problems can occur in other bird species, as well.) I took the bird in to work on the defects, which were quite severe. He was adopted by a friend of mine who named him Forrest Gump. He has turned out to be quite the personable little guy, with a large vocabulary and a long, low cage that he can get around in.

It seems that most of the "special" birds also have special, unique personalities, and they seem to be most grateful for a chance at life. They don't know they are "deformed," so they seem to adapt to what they have to work with. I actually have a pet Meyer's parrot with no feet, and he can perch on a rope perch high up in his cage. He talks up a storm and can name every pet in our home. Since he has never known any other way, he has adapted remarkably.

While pain is subjective – so many "special" birds thrive, grow normally and talk, play and lead what I would call happy lives – I hesitate to say that they are in chronic pain. If arthritis develops or pressure sores occur, then these would be perceived to be painful conditions requiring medical care. But for the most part, I believe these rescued, salvaged birds are happy and healthy overall.

If you have the opportunity to adopt such a bird, realizing that you will need to work closely with your avian veterinarian, especially during its formative months, I highly recommend it! If you are interested in adopting a special-needs bird, talk to your vet, pet store, aviculturists, small breeders or an avian adoption organization. Special-needs birds have a lot of love to give and deserve a chance at a normal life.