

## Incompatible African Greys?

**If a pair of parrots in a breeding situation do not get along, it's possible they will never breed.**

*By Liz Wilson, CVT, CPBC*

Courtesy Daniela Slanina, California

Some parrots do not get along, and may have to be separated to keep them happy.

**Q:** Earlier this year, I purchased a pair of African greys. The male can be mean to the female, which is very timid and only has one leg. He bites her and makes her scream. I have a fairly large cage with a breeding box attached that she hides in when he is in one of his moods. Unfortunately, she has laid two clutches of eggs since coming home, but they are never fertile, and I believe it has affected her psyche. Is this normal behavior for him to bite her?

I hate to take away the breeding box because she goes in there to rest her one remaining leg. She is very sweet and not aggressive, and the male has become much more social with me. Will they ever be able to produce a baby, or does he have a problem making the right connection with her because she only has the one leg? Do I have to separate them?

**A:** Because you have an attached nest box to their cage, I assume you want these two African grey parrots to breed, so I will base my comments on that premise.

Do you have a proven history of this pair successfully breeding, or are you taking the word of the seller? Indeed, from what you describe of the behaviors of these birds, they are not a pair at all. Instead, they sound like two birds of the same species that are locked in a cage together with no choice in the matter.

You say the cage is “fairly large” and without being given actual measurements, my assumption is that “fairly large” translates to entirely too small from the birds’ perspectives. (From my experience, even cages that owners think are huge are often much too small.) My understanding of an ideal environment for breeding greys is not a cage at all, but a flight that gives them the room to move around normally and sit apart if they wish, not crowding them in close proximity. Housing captive birds in cages that are too small is likely one of the prime causes of mate aggression. After all, how long do you think the average marriage would last if couples were locked in a small, one-room apartment for their entire lives together?

**Too Much Pressure?**

Giving this female African grey parrot a nesting box to “rest her leg” is not necessary, nor do I think it is good for her. According to Dutch avian veterinarian and certified parrot behavior consultant Jan Hooimeijer, providing a nest box puts incredible biological pressure on a bird to reproduce, and the disabled female does not seem to need to be doing this right now. If you are just trying to ease her disability, provide her a padded platform perch or something similar instead.

From what you describe of their interactions with you, it sounds like both of these birds would prefer to be pets, not breeders. If not, why would they be friendlier to you than with each other? A true pair in the world of aviculture is composed of two birds that have chosen each other — not two birds that have been caged together.

I do not have breeding experience so, for perspective, I consulted with colleagues. Certified parrot behavior consultant, aviculturist and pet store owner Jamie Whitaker of ABC Birds in Texas commented that it does not sound like your greys are compatible, at least at this point. From her experience, the fact that the female only has one leg makes breeding more difficult, but not impossible. Only if the pair is strongly bonded and working together could breeding be possible. This does not describe your greys right now. Whitaker also commented that bonded greys are “generally very gentle with their mates.”

These birds should be separated for now. They each need a big cage or a huge cage with a divider so they each have their own “apartment” area. They can be out together on a very large playpen that allows them to stay apart if they wish. Once they have relaxed with their new situation, observe them. If they start seeking each other’s company — sitting together and allopreening — then you can consider building them an aviary. They can live comfortably together in a spacious aviary, and copulate and raise babies if they choose.

Two parrots might also take a very long time to decide to start a family. According to African parrot breeder Jean Pattison, pairs can be housed together for several years before they choose to raise young. As to whether laying infertile eggs has

affected the female's psyche or not, I couldn't say. My macaw hen has been laying clear eggs for 15 to 20 years and it hasn't seemed to have an adverse affect on her. What I do know is that being locked in a small space with a frustrated, incompatible male would definitely do damage to my psyche!