

Baby Parrot Development Stages

The developmental stages among birds are as diverse as the size, color and personality of each bird species.

By Rebecca Sweat

Have you ever wondered why Huey, your 4-month-old yellow-naped Amazon parrot, is so darn independent? Why is it that Bart, your newly-fledged black-headed caique, can't resist leaping over to your cockatoo's cage and making himself a pest? Is it normal for Cuddles, your baby sun conure, to sleep on her back on the bottom of her cage? And what is it about your baby chattering lorries that makes them cry so much, even after you've just fed them and you know their bellies are full?

Bird Species Information

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These are not the easiest questions to answer, especially since you can't ask your bird why it does what it does and expect a reply. But one thing is for sure – baby birds can be real characters! Of course, during the first week or two of life, the typical psittacine or softbill hatchling may basically do just three things: eat, sleep and eliminate.

But then suddenly, one day you get a taste for who this young bird really is. Now you've got a bird on your hands that might be super bold, playful, energetic, inquisitive, gregarious, talkative, athletic, boisterous, shy, quiet, spunky, headstrong or timid. You can see some very definite personality traits surfacing. And if you've had experience with more than one type of bird, you may notice how babies of one species behave differently than that of another.

"Certain bird species are going to be more inclined to exhibit particular traits and behaviors than others," said Virginia aviculturist and macaw specialist Kashmir Csaky. "Even as babies, they can be quite different from each other." Sometimes these behaviors carry on into adulthood, she said, while other times the behaviors stop once the bird weans or hits sexual maturity.

Whether you're a new bird owner or someone interested in bird breeding, it's helpful to know something about your chosen species' early development. "The more you know about the development background of your bird species, the better you will understand your pet bird and how to work with it," noted Maggie Wright, an African grey parrot enthusiast and author of *African Grey Parrots: A Complete Pet Owner's Manual* (Barrons, 2001). Understanding how your companion parrot developed as a baby allows you to develop realistic expectations for the relationship you have with your bird, Wright explained.

For those interested in getting into bird breeding or who are new to aviculture, knowing what to expect in the bird species you're going to breed, makes you better prepared for dealing with potential challenges in the chicks you raise.

"This allows you to optimize your management practices prior to and during the breeding season as well as the

adolescent development period for the fledged youngsters,” said Dewayne Weldon, an aviculturist in Texas who specializes in budgerigars (parakeets). Furthermore, you won’t become as unsettled if you see some seemingly “strange” behaviors or physical characteristics in your baby birds. You’ll know whether or not these things are normal.

There are some fairly obvious differences between bird species. For instance, most people know that a larger, longer-lived parrot such as a blue-and-gold macaw takes longer to wean and develop than a smaller, shorter-lived species such as a budgerigar. In general, the smaller bird species have fledged and left the nest before the larger parrots have even become fully-feathered.

But there a lot of other, perhaps less obvious differences, as well. I asked a number of aviculturists to share their observations of the baby birds they breed – both in terms of physiology and behavior. Here’s a sampling of what they had to say:

African Grey Parrots

Compared to the quicker maturing South American parrots, African grey parrots are considered to be slow maturing birds. “Greys may live within their family groups in the wild flocks for as long as the first year of their life. That means that the species is genetically programmed to need that amount of time to mature,” Wright said. An Amazon parrot, on the other hand, may take half that amount of time living with its parents.

Courtesy Lisa Fiducia, California

Young African grey parrot

In captivity, baby African grey parrots can be a challenge to feed and wean, according to Dennis Saydak, an aviculturist in Manitoba, Canada, and director of The Parrot Association of Canada. A lot of times, baby African grey parrots have no desire to learn to eat on their own; they would rather have their parents or hand-feeder feed them instead. “Some baby greys are so content that they are too lazy to even sit up for feeding. We call them ‘flopplers.’ They must be carefully supported in order to fill their crops safely,” Saydak said.

African grey parrots also tend to be very slow eaters. “If you try to force greys to eat too quickly, they will barf the formula right back up,” noted Gayle Soucek, a pet trade consultant and author of *The Parrot Breeder’s Answer Book* (Barron’s, 2001).

In terms of vocalizing, however, African grey parrots are often ahead of the game. Aviculturist Rick Flowers of Louisiana breeds African grey parrots as well as Amazon parrots. He has found that African grey parrots babies typically begin to vocalize earlier than Amazon parrots do. “This usually occurs when the babies are starting to feather in earnest and learning to waddle about and perch,” he said. “They make the sweetest gurgling noises to themselves as they explore their enclosure. The Amazon babies at this stage of development tend to be very vocal only at feeding times and reserve their vocalizations when they are perching well and are almost fully feathered.”

Amazon Parrots

Amazon parrots are one of the birds that exhibit personality traits as babies that they do not typically carry on into adulthood. “Baby Amazons are often timid and reserved,” Soucek said, “however those aren’t words you’d usually apply to an adult Amazon!” Adult Amazon parrots are typically described as bold, lively, feisty and gregarious. But young Amazon parrots are shy around people and are often intimidated by other larger parrots that may also be kept in the breeding facility.

During the early hand-rearing phase, Amazon parrots tend to be relatively quiet Saydak said, “in that they do not make many natural sounds. They do squawk occasionally when annoyed with something.” Amazon parrots often begin mimicking human speech during the weaning period. “It is not unusual for unweaned blue fronts, double yellowheads or yellow napes to enunciate several simple words and phrases with relative clarity such as ‘Up’ and ‘Good bird,’” Saydak said.

Mississippi aviculturist Nancy Speed, also breeds Amazon parrots. Hers are very content to remain in their cubicles in the nursery until they are at least 8 weeks old, without venturing out. “The first flight is often clumsy, and landings can be tricky,” she said. “But they learn quickly. As I watch beginners fly, I can almost hear them think, ‘Wings down, feet out!’ before attempting to land.”

Amazon parrots usually fledge between 3 and 4 months of age – and that’s when they really start developing their independent nature, Flowers said. He has an open area in his aviary where different species can interact with each other. “Our Amazon fledglings are usually more curious and eager to explore than grey parrot babies or cockatoo babies,” he said. “The Amazons are the first to establish their favorite perch and will defend the perch from other birds.”

Budgerigars (Parakeets)

Like other parrot hatchlings, newly-hatched budgerigars are blind and helpless. They huddle together in their nest, totally dependent on their mother for food and warmth. Once the baby birds are about a week old, though, they become quite active and move around, calling loudly for food when hungry, Weldon said. When the nest box is inspected, they often come to the opening and fuss loudly.

Once the baby birds get to be about 3 weeks old, they really start to develop personalities, added Joe Lastella, a budgerigar breeder in Florida. "All of the chicks are very playful when they are old enough to leave the nest," he said. "They will play with toys and one another all day. They will actually tumble upside down and also make friends readily with other youngsters. They are a delight to watch."

Budgies are usually fledged and eating on their own by 32 to 42 days of age. At this stage, "some will actually annoy the parents a little, as they will first exercise their wings inside the nest," Lastella said. "Upon going out of the nest and into the breeding cage, they will hold onto the wire and flap their wings like crazy. This is a method of exercising in small quarters." When he sees this behavior, that's when he knows it's time to move the chicks into the baby flight. And as soon as he does, the birds take right off into flight. Usually both the fledging and weaning stages go quite smoothly with budgerigars, Lastella said.

Caiques

Texas aviculturist Mark Moore describes baby caiques as extremely outgoing, mischievous and inquisitive. "They will eagerly investigate anything in their vicinity," he observed. "They want to climb around and explore – and usually they're everywhere but where they should be."

Moore will put 4-week-old caique chicks in a bucket in the brooder (without a lid on the bucket) and turn around a few minutes later only to discover that the caiques have climbed out of the bucket and now they're visiting the chicks in another bucket. "They'll run over to another bucket and start pestering a species like an Eclectus that likes to sleep all day," Moore said. "They'll crawl all over it, get under it, push it around in the bucket and drive the other bird crazy."

Caiques sleep and eat a lot during their first week of life, but from that point on, they're basically "little bundles of personality," said Penny Smith, a breeder in Connecticut who specializes in caiques. "During the first week, they make more noise at feeding time than I thought a chick that size could make. As soon as their eyes are open, they are very curious, fearless and have the strongest feeding response I've ever seen. I call them 'Hoovers' because they just inhale whatever is placed in front of them."

Canaries

Most baby canaries are parent-raised, resulting in birds that have imprinted onto their parents rather than a human hand-feeder. Barb Theeke, a bird breeder in Michigan, has hand-raised a few canaries over the years and found that, as with most hand-fed birds, they do become imprinted on humans.

"The babies take to the food very well, lowering their heads when enough food has been presented and nestling comfortably until the next feeding," she said. "As fledglings, they recognize you as their own, even though they seem to maintain a wild nature that some of the hookbills do not; they will fly to you and rest on your shoulder, not staying very long." Without constant human attention, however, even hand-fed canaries do "return to being a canary," Theeke said.

Cockatiels

During the first week and a half of life, cockatiel chicks are like any other young psittacine in that they are totally helpless and blind. Mostly they just sleep, beg for food and huddle together in their nest box to stay warm.

Courtesy Veronica Atlantis, Massachusetts

Baby cockatiel chicks

It doesn't take long, though, before their true "cockatielness" comes to light, said Elizabeth Douglas, a cockatiel breeder in Connecticut and editor for the North American Cockatiel Society. "After a few days in the nest, they are able to lift a foot to scratch their heads, ruffle their feathers and shake, sway back and forth, and hiss," she said. "I have observed three hatchlings wrapped around each other for warmth and almost 'group dancing' as they made their way around the nest box. It's one for all, and all for one. They totally rely on each other."

On the 12th day of life, their eyes begin to open and they start to develop fears. At this stage, many breeders will peer into the nest box to find the babies hissing and rocking back and forth in order to scare off "predators." That's been the experience of Julia Allen, a cockatiel breeder in Florida, and president of the National Cockatiel Society. "They may also

scurry to the farthest corner of the nest box as I look in," she observed.

Throughout babyhood, cockatiels are very vocal about being hungry – even to the point of being obnoxious about it. "Cockatiels are the polar opposite of African greys, which are slow eaters," Soucek said. "It is impossible to feed cockatiels fast enough. If you're not quick, they'll become frustrated and start pumping the other chicks. Or, they'll climb over each other and go crazy." Even older, weaned chicks are very food-oriented, she said, and "will beg piteously at the sight of any human or animal they think might feed them – even if they have full crops!"

Cockatoos

Cockatoos develop quickly on a physical level. New hatchlings often show a little pigment in the nails and beak, and their ears open shortly after hatch. Their eyes open more quickly than many other bird species.

Courtesy Sammi DiTomaso, Florida

Young cockatoo

"Baby cockatoos are usually outgoing and curious," Soucek said. "Cockatoos are often bold at an early age. They like to be the center of attention, and will escape from the weaning cage and come looking for people. They are playful and loving, but they are also 'drama queens.' If anything upsets them, the whole world will hear about it."

In the wild, a baby Moluccan cockatoo doesn't leave the nest until it is 12 weeks old, according to aviculturist and cockatoo specialist Katy McElroy. The nest hole in the tree is fairly dark; the only food that the baby cockatoo would get is what its parents regurgitated for it, so it has no idea what food looks like. Fledging comes way before weaning, McElroy said, because "the bird has to fly really well before it can even think about coming with its parents on foraging flights."

McElroy has monitors in the nest box in her aviary. When the baby cockatoos get to the age that they're ready to start flying, "you can see the parents come into the nest box to try to feed their babies, and the babies will refuse to eat; all they want to do is get out of that box and fly," McElroy said. "It's not until after they've fledged that they really start being interested in food again."

Conures

Most conure babies will be trustful and calm toward humans while in the nest until their eyes start to open at 2 to 3 weeks of age. Then, "some species will begin to show fear or recognition, depending on the species and how the parent birds react," explained Cheryl Burns, president of the International Conure Association and a conure breeder in Texas.

By the time the chicks get to 3 to 4 weeks of age, they tend to recognize that people are not birds. "Many will show fear by running or screaming," Burns said. "My half-moon (conure) chicks have a continuous scream that they start if you upset them, and they will continue it for several minutes." That is with parent-reared chicks. If instead the chicks are taken from the parents for hand-feeding at 2 to 4 weeks of age, "they will quickly adapt and soon be wanting cuddling and loving in addition to the hand-feeding formula," Burns said.

Julie Morriss, nursery manager and bird nurse for Julie Burge DVM's aviary in Grandview, Missouri, finds conures to be very flock oriented, more so than Amazon parrots and African grey parrots. "It is not unusual to find a clutch of babies huddled on the floor in a corner of their cage preening and muttering to each other, although they are completely weaned and well on their way into adulthood," she said. "This seems to be their preferred sleeping position, and they will continue to sleep this way for three or more months if they are kept in a group."

Another quirk in baby conure sleeping styles is they often like to sleep on their backs with their feet straight up in the air. "This will give even the experienced breeder a start because they look dead at first glance," Burns said. "Many of the conure species feed their chicks while they lie on their backs this way. The chicks simply fall asleep in that manner because they are so full and happy."

Eclectus

Tiny Eclectus chicks are naked, without down, so they are vulnerable to cold and need the warmth of the hen to keep healthy, according to Laurella Desborough, an aviculturist in Florida, who specializes in Eclectus parrots. If they are being hand-reared, they need more warmth provided in the brooder than Amazon parrot or African grey parrot chicks (which have some down).

During hand-feeding, "Eclectus take their formula much slower, as they swallow it down differently than most other parrot chicks," Desborough said. "It can take up to 10 minutes to feed one Eclectus parrot chick."

From Saydak's experience, hand-feeding an Eclectus chick is "like trying to feed a moving target." That's because of their

very sensitive and uneasy disposition during the hand-rearing stage. “They need to be handled gently and fed in a quiet, secure area, or they will display an instinctive lunging behavior, which can make feeding very difficult,” Saydak said.

Another rather unique behavior in *Eclectus* is that “the fledged and weaned male youngsters will fly to the brooders and try to feed the feathered babies if the babies ask for food,” Desborough said. “This seems to be an instinctive behavior, because it is very strong.”

Lories

Two words Moore uses to describe baby lories and lorikeets are “outgoing” and “persistent.” “They have a high-pitched attention call, and when they see you in the nursery they’ll start screaming for food, and they’ll keep screaming until we go over and feed them,” he said. “Sometimes they’ll keep screaming even after they’ve been fed.”

Lories and lorikeets tend to develop much faster than other birds their size. Moore’s weaned a lot of lories in his nursery, as young as 6 weeks of age, and lorikeets at 5 weeks of age. “They develop fast, and they’re very easy to wean,” he said. “As soon as they’ve got almost all of their feathers, all you have to do is put a bowl of warm formula right in the middle of the cage and stick their heads in it, and if there’s a group of them in the cage, they’ll spend the whole day cleaning each other’s head off, and at that point they’re basically weaned.”

One reason lories wean so easily, Moore speculated, is that they’re very inquisitive and mouthy. “They’re willing to try new foods,” he said. “As soon as you reach in the bucket, the first thing you have is three or four beaks beaking your finger, gently, but trying to get food out of it.”

Lovebirds

The types of behaviors seen in baby lovebirds depend on whether the birds are being parent-raised or hand-fed. If parent-raised, “peach face mothers roll the babies onto their backs to feed them during the first week,” noted Doree Bedwell, a breeder in Indiana, and an “at large” board member of the African Love Bird Society. “This sometimes scares new breeders if they disturb the mother during feeding. If she leaves the box, the baby may still be on its back and appear to be in distress. If you watch for a minute, though, a healthy chick will succeed in getting itself right side up.”

Nestlings automatically seek out their clutchmates in the nest. “They will snuggle with their necks crossed over each other, all the heads to the center of the pile,” Bedwell said. “The youngest, smallest, chicks will bulldoze their way under the older ones to keep warm.”

If they are being fed by parents, they stay in the nest box for the majority of their time as babies. “Lovebird chicks do not usually even stick their (beaks) out of the nest box until a few days before fledging,” Bedwell said. “Their mothers won’t let them.”

If they are being hand-fed, the chicks will often be pulled about 2 weeks of age. As the babies begin to mature, they begin to see the hand-feeder as their protector and “Mom,” said Barb Theeke, Chairman of the African Lovebird Society. “They recognize the sounds of the microwave warming their water and begin to chirp. When older, they run back and forth in the brooder. They recognize the sound of the stirring of the formula in the cup also.”

Hand-fed lovebird babies usually are ready to go into a small cage by 5 weeks. They usually fledge around 5 to 6 weeks and wean a week or two after that. Allowing parents to rear the chicks generally lengthens the fledging and weaning stages by about a week.

Macaws

As hatchlings, “macaws are quiet, not fussy, and sleep a lot – often on their backs,” Soucek said. “Macaws are inquisitive but a little shy at early ages. They get bolder as they reach weaning age, and then they can get really boisterous and mischievous. They love to romp and wrestle on the floor like a puppy.”

In terms of physical development, macaws are slower to develop feathers than many of the other birds, and they stay naked for a relatively long time. Also, the average, healthy macaw loses between 18 and 19 percent of its peak weight at fledging, according to Csaky. “The percentage is much greater with macaws than with other parrots,” she said. She has also bred African grey parrots in the past. “With greys, they get up to their peak weight, and then they lose a little weight, but it is very minor.” Csaky speculates that the reason macaws lose so much more weight at fledging is because they’re bigger birds, and it’s more difficult for them to get lift.

Baby macaws will regurgitate food for their clutchmates and try to feed them, or will even throw up food to try to feed to their hand-feeder or new owner. This behavior catches new breeders and owners off guard and is right about the time

baby macaws start weaning (and this can last several months after weaning). This is just a typical childhood behavior, according to Csaky.

One other unique baby behavior seen in hyacinths is what Csaky refers to as “stimulation overload.” What happens is the baby will suddenly see someone – typically a stranger but it could even be the hand-feeder – and then will flip over on its back and start kicking. “That is the minor version of it,” Csaky said. “The major version of it is the baby jumps up into the air, flips over on its back, and starts kicking like it’s moving the pedals on a bicycle – and while it’s doing this it’ll scream. Then suddenly it’ll go stiff and just lie there.” This behavior can occur in hyacinths as young as 8 days old – when their ears start opening – but usually it starts happening at about 3 weeks of age, when the bird’s eyes open. It can be a common behavior in hyacinths up to adult size.

Parrotlets

With the exception of spectacled parrotlet chicks (which are usually quite “wooly”), “parrotlets are hatched almost naked except for a very thin covering of sparse down,” noted Sandee Molenda, an aviculturist in California, and secretary of the International Parrotlet Society. “To keep warm, the chicks will pile on top of one another – with the smallest on the bottom.”

Generally speaking, most parrotlet species are quiet and do not cry or beg unless they are being fed. “The oldest youngsters will often force the smaller chicks out of the way for feeding, and therefore, most do not survive large clutches unless the older chicks are pulled for hand-feeding,” Molenda explained. In the wild, out of a clutch of 8, it is very common for only four to survive to fledging, she said.

Baby parrotlets start showing an interest in their environment around 3 weeks of age, often peeking over their containers and making eye contact with the human feeder. They also learn the sounds of preparation for hand-feeding and recognize the hand-feeder at about this same age. “They demonstrate this recognition by eye contact and opening their beaks usually accompanied by crouching and sometimes flapping of wings,” Molenda said.

Parrotlets generally start fledging at 4 to 5 weeks of age, and wean a couple weeks later. Typically the females in the clutch are the first to eat on their own. “Many females, especially Pacifics will begin feeding younger parrotlets,” Molenda noted. “This is not an ‘attempt’ but actual regurgitation, and it is my belief this is done to prevent predators from hearing begging chicks, which can endanger the entire clutch.”

Pionus

Pionus hatchlings are basically “little hungry things that just want food and warmth,” observed Bob Queen, an aviculturist specializing in Pionus. “The older chicks love to cuddle and are very vocal when they’re hungry.”

Moore also raises Pionus, and finds the babies to be very shy – especially during the period when their feathers are coming in. “Before they get their feathers, they’ll stick up their heads and actually ask for food,” he said. “But once they start getting their feathers, they tend to get a little more timid. Some of them will even hide under another bird or bury their head to try to get away from the hand-feeder.” Once they’re fully feathered, they’re back to being less shy and they don’t hide anymore, Moore said.

Senegal Parrots

For the most part, adult Senegal parrots tend to be very shy. In contrast, “the babies are usually outgoing and a lot more accepting of the fact that somebody’s reaching in the cage and grabbing them,” Moore said. “They’re also more curious, and more apt to try different foods when they’re a baby.”

Once they get to the weaning stage, though, all that can change. “Then they seem to make a decision about whether they want to be sweet or stick together and be a team against the hand-feeder,” said Moore with a chuckle.

Like African grey parrots, Senegal parrots tend to be slow eaters. “Baby Senegals like to take a small mouthful, ‘chew’ it, look around the room, take another sip, etc.,” Soucek said. If you try to cram too much food down them too fast, they will regurgitate it.

Toucans

Toucan babies are considerably different from parrot babies. The most obvious physical difference is probably the beak. “A toco toucan is about the size of an adult human thumb in length and diameter when it hatches and its beak is about the size of an adult human’s little finger nail. In one year that beak’s going to be as big as the bird itself – 10 inches long, so the beak really grows a lot during that first year,” noted Southern California aviculturist, Jerry Jennings. He has been raising toucans for nearly 30 years.

In general, toucans develop much faster than the parrots do, Jennings said. The weaning age on many of the medium to large parrots is around 15 to 16 weeks. In contrast, the toucanettes are all weaned by 7 weeks and the large toucans are weaned by 8-12 weeks. Toucans also leave the nest at an earlier age. "A toucan will fledge the nest in 6-12 weeks on average and a macaw will fledge in 3 months," Jennings said.

Another physical difference is that toucans do not have crops (whereas parrots and finches do).

"Hand-feeding takes much more time and care with toucans, and it's very easy to aspirate babies if you don't do it right," said Amado Summers, a bird breeder in New Mexico, who specializes in toucans, toucanets and aracarís.

Because toucans don't have crops, they need a lot more hand-feedings (than birds the same age) because the food goes right through them. On the other hand, Jennings said, "with a parrot, you can fill up its crop and the food will trickle out, like a gas tank, and you don't need to feed them quite as often."

As far as behavioral differences, Summers believes toucan babies are easier to handle than parrots. "Baby toucans, unlike parrots, don't really have the power or leverage to bite hard," he said. "I can reach into any toucan nest, or brooder, and pull babies with no worries. I have had baby parrots give me severe bites when they were startled."

Baby Birds - Same, Yet Different

Keep in mind, the information included here is a generalization. There are bound to be individual differences, even within a species. Elizabeth Douglas, for one, sees unique qualities in every cockatiel she's raised. Even clutchmates with the same parents can have opposite personalities.

One of Douglas' recent clutches consisted of three males and one female. "Although their upbringing was identical, they are dissimilar in behavior," Douglas said. "The brothers are sweet and gentle, extremely vocal and outgoing, and laid back, respectively. Their sister is aloof and usually crabby – one characteristic she inherited from her father."

Although the general "rule" is for smaller birds to develop faster than larger birds, Cheryl Burnes has seen individuals in some of the larger bird species that wean or fledge earlier than average while some of the smaller bird species will sometimes be slower than usual. "The important thing to understand is that averages can be used as a guide but should not be considered a hard, cold rule," she said.

Certainly the information presented in this article can give you a general idea of what to expect in different bird species and help you better work with the birds you keep. Not only that, but learning how different bird species develop can be totally fascinating! Of course, just when you think you've got a particular bird species figured out, you're bound to come across one individual that doesn't "fit the mold." And really, when you think about it, figuring out how the "mavericks" tick can be equally intriguing.