

HAND-RAISING SPINIFEX PIGEONS - WITH A LITTLE HELP!

By Josie Pyle

Introduction

I have been keeping the Red-bellied Spinifex Pigeon for about 3 years now and, like Dan, have not had any success with the parents rearing their own chicks; or even sitting on eggs consistently. My birds will fuss around the corner behind a large rock for 3 or 4 days, make a nest and lay one egg in it. The second egg turns up 2 days later elsewhere in the aviary. I have tried extra grasses and rocks but am now planning to re-design the entire aviary to provide a balance of open areas, vantage points and areas of grassy cover.

I (and at least one other Spinifex Pigeon keeper) have shared Dan's problem with late embryo death in artificially incubated eggs. However, since the button-quail eggs in my incubator were hatching effectively, I was reluctant to play with the humidity settings and so sought another solution – foster parents.

My first attempt was with Barbary Doves, but was not successful. The Barbary's seemed to be too big and clumsy for both the eggs and the single chick they did manage to hatch... and later squash. I now keep a variety of small doves including Diamond, Peaceful, Masked and Talpicote. The last species has proved especially useful.

Rules for Foster Nests

1. Keep records of which egg you put where and when and the fate of the egg/chick. Do not rely on memory as such data will help you pick the best foster parents. Remember that by law, any egg of a species protected under permit removed from the nest must be recorded in your permit book, whether fostered or incubated.
2. Chose nests that are easy to access so that you can check the foster parents are still sitting and the progress of the egg.
3. Chose your foster parents with care. They should be dedicated brooders, not flighty and tolerant of nest inspection. Some aviculturists recommend choosing young birds that have never raised their own species and removing any of their natural eggs so that the foster parents imprint on the Spinifex

Pigeon chick. In my experience both Diamond and Masked Dove pairs have successfully fed Spinifex chicks despite having previously raised their own offspring, indeed the Masked Doves cared for their own chick and a Spinifex squab in the same nest.

Finding the right foster parents is usually a case of trial and error. My most successful foster parents (a pair of Talpicote Doves) build their nest on the food dish hung on the inside of the aviary door at a convenient height, return to the nest within minutes of being disturbed and are happy to feed whatever squab hatches underneath them. Such birds are to be valued highly.

The Second Half

After about 7 days from hatching Spinifex Pigeon chicks develop wanderlust, a trait that even the best foster parents of the above species will not adapt to. They expect their chicks to stay put if they want to be fed! So at 1 week I remove the Spinifex chicks for hand-rearing.

The squabs are brooded in a Brinsea™ Parrot Brooder, initially at a temperature of 37⁰ C, reducing by half a degree daily. Once the squab is fully feathered, it is moved to a budgie cage with a heat source (40W globe in a desk lamp) on one end. In this way the squab can chose its own temperature. Once weaned from the heat source, the squabs can be moved outside.

I use an “artificial pigeon beak” to feed the squabs. Normally a squab will feed by putting its beak into the beak/mouth of its parent and drinking food regurgitated from the adults crop. This situation can be reproduced easily through the use of a modified syringe. The end of the syringe is cut off at the junction with the barrel, leaving a small rim. The hole and barrel should be large enough for the chick’s beak to fit inside and open thus allowing the chick to drink. If the hole is too small, the chick may develop a sore on the top of its beak and so the size of the syringe used will increase with the age of the chick. I start with a 3ml syringe, change to a 5ml and then to a 10ml size as the chick grows. The advantage of this method of feeding is that the chick will only take as much food as it needs so overfilling the crop is not a problem. The disadvantage is that the chick will manage to coat its beak and head with the feeding mixture, which accumulates no matter how carefully you clean up afterwards. Because of this problem I have started to crop-feed once the chick is over 2 weeks old, using an intra-venous drip (or “Butterfly”) catheter tube cut to size. Chicks were fed when the crop was empty and before bed.

I use Passwell™ Hand-rearing Formula, initially just thick enough that it does not run out of the syringe when stood upright and gradually thickened to the limit of passing through the feeding tube. I add a small amount of yoghurt to the hand-rearing mix to discourage candida growth in the crop. To wean the squabs, I spread Budgie Mix and Quail Crumbles on the floor of the cage.

With both quail and pigeons I have found that chicks do better when they have a companion in the brooder. Not only is survival rate improve, birds are faster to wean and become independent, and it is easier for them to make the transition to the outside world. In this way, the Barbary Doves are useful!

Finally

Spinifex Pigeons may not be the easiest birds to breed, but they are a challenge worth attempting. Should the parents be reluctant to raise their own squabs, hand-raising is a viable option.