

# PARROTS AS PETS

By Derian A.L. Silva Moraton

Parrots are tremendously adaptable creatures. This is evident a number of ways. Here in south Florida, we regularly see a number of species—macaws, amazons, conures and others—that live in a concrete and steel jungle, feeding in parks and backyards and nesting where ever possible. Each morning I watch as a flock of Severe Macaws *Ara severa* feed on West Indian Almonds *Terminalia catappa* growing in a park near my house. The birds feed as cars, busses and trucks speed by on three sides and with major construction less than 300 meters away. I have seen, in a friend's backyard, as a Yellow-collared Macaw *Ara auricollis* and a Severe Macaw nested, producing two hybrid young. Obviously the Yellow-collared Macaw could not find a mate and satisfied its need to reproduce by pairing with another species. I have also seen hybrids between some six species of Amazon parrots. Populations are growing and birds which fit no description of a known species are encountered frequently, these representing hybrids. Wild populations of many species are also rebounding after having initially declined, this as they adapt to man. Some never declined and have prospered as a result of man's agricultural practices. The Galah *Eolophus roseicapillus* is a prime example. It has extended its range across Australia. This adaptability of parrots is also seen in captivity.

Since the earliest times, man has been fascinated with parrots. Ctesias, a Greek slave who became court physician to Ataxerxes II in 401 BC, wrote romantically of these birds. Columbus, Magellan and even Pizarro mentioned these birds in their diaries. No one that has heard a talking or has seen a tame parrot will fail to be enraptured by these birds. This led to a growing trade in parrots. Much of the demand is now satisfied with captive-bred birds, a fact that would have been unfathomable only twenty years ago. At the time the breeding of any large parrot was an achievement. Today is so common that it elicits little response. As breeding has progressed, so too has our understanding of these birds.

Decades ago, we knew little about nutrition and avian medicine. Most birds fared on a diet of sunflower seed with a little fruit or greens and a sick bird was generally considered a dead bird. With improvements in both fields, parrots have done much better in captivity and senescing birds are becoming commonplace. Our understanding of the way these birds think, behave and respond to our actions is also improving. Training, rearing and the owner's conduct all have repercussions that affect the bird's well being and his or her

rapport with the owner. Such areas as sexually induced aggression, egg-laying in the single bird, screaming and even feather mutilation are becoming better understood. No one has all the answers; indeed, like a puzzle, only the border pieces have been put in their place—the rest must now be filled in. But our understanding of parrot behaviour is increasing and this can allow pet birds to be more fully enjoyed.

For years, hand-reared birds were considered the optimum pet. They were given a lot of attention, had their wings clipped the minute they learned to fly and were sold often before being fully weaned. Problems soon arose with poorly socialized, insecure birds which made poor pets. It has taken many years to understand why the problems existed. We now know that young should be given the ability to fly for at least a few months after they have first taken to the air. This gives them security; it allows them to learn what they can and cannot do. This also allows them to develop proper musculature. Once a bird has fully learned to fly, it can have its wings clipped if it is a pet.

We also know that many behaviours are ingrained; how a macaw must reach for the uropygial gland does not need to be taught, nor does the ability to split open nuts. Many other behaviours must be learned. In the wild, a chick learns from its parents, siblings or nest helpers (additional birds that visit the nest to help rear the young, these often being progeny from previous years). Areas such as adequate behaviour—not pulling the feathers of a sibling, when it is proper and improper to vocalize, etc—are learned by watching. A chick being hand-reared alone learns on its own. Often the results are catastrophic. They cry for attention all day, fail to learn their limitations or even how to adequately preen. The bird may look dishevelled, having no idea what pattern must be followed to adequately preen. It may seek security in a human, which it attracts by calling incessantly. Chicks reared with other species may rely on each other for learning. In this way, a cockatoo may learn to call like an Amazon, or even to preen like a member of that genus. Clearly none of these psychologically ill birds are ideal pets. Young reared ideally in groups of their own kind and near an adult or adults of their species make the best pets. Their behaviour will be closest to that expected of their kind. Singletons can be reared also near adults of their own kind.

All chicks should learn certain lessons from a young age. Commands such as ‘come’, ‘up on the hand’, ‘down from the hand’ and more can be ingrained from pinning. When a chick comes for formula, the breeder should use the command ‘come’ and much praise. He or she should show that its response has pleased you. The same when it begins to perch on the hand and when it is returned to the perch. Play items should be introduced early. Teaching

how they can play involves some effort as the breeder displaces the attention the bird has focused on him or her towards a play item but it will result in a much happier bird as it matures. Teaching the young how to sit on a stand is also important. Praise during all of this is very vital; it achieves far more than negative remarks.

Behavioural training should also start from an early age. A young must learn that screaming will only result in you ignoring it; do not approach its cage, use verbal language, shouting or theatrics. Ignoring a parrot, which as a whole is a flocking species, can do far more good long term than screaming, pounding on the cage (which is nothing but abuse) or locking it up in a closet. It has, after all, achieved what it set out to do in the first place: it caught your attention. Ignoring it when it is misbehaving and lavishing it with praise, attention, toys and treats when it is behaving as desired will allow it to quickly learn what is and is not acceptable. The same applies to nipping. Many young go through 'teething' stages in which they learn the strength of their bill. Nasty bites can result. Displace teething towards objects that the bird can destroy. Fresh branches from an insecticide and pollution free source can work well. Should the bird bite you while it is perched on the hand, drop it (being careful not to cause any injuries) and walk away. Do not make eye contact, or scream, shout or say anything. Just walk away. Parrots are sociable and mainly arboreal. Being left alone and on the ground creates insecurity. The bird will think twice before biting again. Key is not making a comment, laughing or even letting the bird know that you are watching its actions. This applies to all behavioural training. If the bird even feels that it has achieved its goal—catching your attention or getting a response—you will have undermined all of the progress that you may have made. Consistency is also important. Never show off how loud or naughty a parrot can be, or even laugh at some comical misbehaviour. Again, if you do, all progress will have been lost.

Punishment does not work. Hitting a bird, throwing it in its cage, pounding on the cage or placing it in a dark closet are all evil methods of punishment that will fail to achieve the desired response. Patience, reasonable expectations and positive reinforcement will invariably be more productive.

Owning a parrot is a tremendous commitment. This is especially true when one is dealing with a pet. Realize this before you make a purchase. Are you prepared to adopt a child? Parrots, in many ways, are like children. Acquire one only if you are equally prepared to adopt a child, though this child may never leave the household and may have to be included in your will. A parrot can affect your lifestyle—from how frequent you take your vacations to when you wake up in the morning. Seriously consider the commitment

you will be making before you acquire one. Breeders should also make the same commitments and be prepared to be a nursemaid to young should they reproduce.

Parrots can make absolutely marvellous pets or aviary birds provided one is very cognizant of what one is getting into and one is prepared to make the commitment.