



Hand rearing of parrots

by Elisabeth(NDIPVettech) & Sjirk Geerts(BSc Hons) and Deon de Beer(B.V.Sc)

What does it mean to hand rear a parrot?

In order to obtain a tame parrot it needs to be hand reared. This means an egg is incubated and as soon as the chick hatches humans feed it. Hand rearing can also be done from the age of 15 days when chicks are removed from the nest, for hand rearing. It is a big privilege to be able to hand rear a parrot correctly. Bear in mind that hand rearing equipment can be expensive.

Why hand-rear a bird?

There are a couple of reasons for hand rearing parrots:

- A hand reared parrot bonds closer to people through handling and dependency on food, resulting in tame and trusting pets.
- Particularly in rare and valuable birds it stimulates the hen to lay again, which helps to increase the numbers of rare birds.
- When parents abandon their chicks due to a variety of reasons (cold, too many chicks etc.) we have no choice and are forced to hand rear. Just remember once you have started to hand rear a bird, it is completely dependent on you, and you will have to complete the feeding process. Furthermore hand rearing is very time consuming with one-day-old chicks being fed and cleaned every 2 hours.

Equipment

The following equipment is a necessity:

- A brooder to keep the little chicks at the right temperature and humidity.
- A scale to weigh your bird daily in order to control its weight.
- A clean area where you will be able to feed your bird. Hygiene is of utmost importance when hand rearing birds.
- A spoon or syringe.

Spoon feeding is time consuming and messy. The advantage of spoon-feeding however that is you can use thicker food towards the end of the hand rearing process, quickening the weaning process. Syringe feeding is faster and cleaner. In using a syringe the amount of food consumed can be accurately determined. Choose a size you and the bird is comfortable with. For example, do not use a 50ml syringe on small birds like a cockatiel, as you and the bird will struggle. Crop feeding is a very quick method of feeding. A piece of pipe is fitted in front of the syringe and inserted through the beak into the crop. This can be a dangerous way of feeding and is only recommended for breeders with a lot of experience.

Tel.: 021 875 5063

Fax: 021 875 5089

Email: info@animalzone.co.za

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Husbandry

There are three important H's regarding Husbandry: heat, humidity and hygiene:

Heat:

Younger birds have fewer feathers and therefore need to be kept at warmer temperatures. A one-day-old chick is kept at 33-35°Celsius. Lower the temperature until weaning age with 1-2°C every week until room temperature is reached (23°C). Ascertain your bird is comfortable at the set temperature. If too hot the chick will pant and if too cold it will shiver.

Humidity:

To prevent dehydration in your baby bird the humidity should be between 30% and 50%. As the baby bird gets older, lower the humidity.

Hygiene:

Within the brooder it is important to keep your bird on the correct nesting material. A 1-day-old chick is kept in a little bowl on unbleached kitchen paper rolls. Rather use unbleached paper kitchen rolls as bleached or coloured paper may react with the parrot's skin causing a rash. These towels need to be changed at every feeding. Do not use cotton wool, because it will stick to the bird. Birds of 2 to 3 weeks old can be kept on wood shavings, discards of maize mix or Animalzone cat litter (replaced daily). Be aware of the fact that the chicks sometimes eat the bedding material, thus check your chick daily, for this can cause blockages in the digestive system.

When not in use always keep syringes, spoons, cups or any other feeding utensil in a bowl with Animalzone Citro-natural disinfectant or F10 (water changed daily).

Hand rearing

Proper preparation of the food is necessary: there is a couple of do's and don'ts when mixing the food:

- Ensure the water is free of harmful bacteria, either use cooled down boiled water or in extreme cases distilled water.
- Make sure your mixed food is the correct temperature; between 38° and 40° Celsius. Chicks are very sensitive to temperature, if the food is too cold they will not eat, if the food is too hot, they will burn their crop.
- Never use the microwave to heat hand-rearing food; this creates hot spots, resulting in a burned crop.
- Never use leftover food (by storing it in the fridge) to prevent bacterial infections, mix new food for every feeding.
- Always disinfect all your feeding utensils before and after feeding.

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There are certain warning signs when rearing your chick; lets discuss a couple of them before we start on the hand rearing:

- Firstly, before feeding determine whether the bird's crop is empty. If not, wait a while (1-2 hours). If the problem persists seek medical advice.
- Chicks that constantly sneeze or have breathing difficulties probably have a fungal infection and it is best to call your avian veterinarian.
- Observe your chick's faeces every day, if blackish or slimy; contact your avian veterinarian.
- Never feed your chick when you are uncertain about the temperature of the food. If the food is too hot you will burn your bird's crop. A burned crop will not be noticed directly after feeding too hot food. The burned spot will create dead tissue. This dead tissue will fall out leaving a hole in the crop where the food will start leaking through. This can be life threatening to your chick. Contact an avian veterinarian as soon as possible.
- If you encounter sudden unexplained deaths in your hand rearing facility, seek medical advice.
- Examine your chick's toes closely (especially if you remove them from the nest box at 15 days) if one or more toes are thickened at the end, take your bird to the vet.
- Leg deformities are a very common problem in chicks. A splayed leg is often seen when the chick is kept on the wrong nesting material. This can easily be corrected if the problem is acted on at an early stage.

There are two stages from which one can hand rear a parrot. Firstly from day one or secondly, chicks taken out of the nest box at ± 15 days of age.

Hand rearing from day 1

To hand rear a chick from day 1 is a very caring task. We discuss the first 3 days separately:

Day 1

After hatching, place a small amount of betadine on the navel, this dries out the umbilical cord and prevents bacteria from entering. Just before hatching, the yolk is pulled into the abdomen through the navel and will serve as food for the first couple of hours. Therefore it is unnecessary to feed a chick directly after hatching, but be sure to feed it within 4 hours after hatching.

The first feeding consists of clean *Ringers Lactate* only. *Ringers Lactate* contains many electrolytes to boost the little chick. From this point onwards feed your bird every 2 hours. The second feeding also consists of clean *Ringers Lactate*. For the next 24 hours feed for every 2 hours a watery mix of *Ringers Lactate* and a small amount of *Animalzone's Hand Rearing Food*.

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Day 2

A little bit of food can now be mixed with cooled down boiled water. Ensure that the mixed food is still watery for the next 24 hours.

Day 3

Start to mix the food thicker gradually in the next following days until yoghurt consistency is reached. The crop will empty very slowly if the food is mixed too thick and very quick when the food is too watery. Feed every two hours; always check with the next feeding that the crop is empty or near empty. If the crop is not empty, it is best to wait a while.

Summary

Before we proceed there are a couple of important things:

- Always disinfect all your utensils before and after feeding.
- Clean the bedding material daily or if necessary after every feeding.

The next 3 points are of utmost importance:

- Wipe the spilled porridge from the chicks face after every feeding with diluted *Animalzone Crop Treatment* or F10.
- Mix *Probiotic* in food every second day. This boosts the immune system and helps to maintain normal gut flora.
- Give *Animalzone Crop Treatment* twice a week. This will help to prevent fungal infections.

Day 4 till day 14

For these 10 days feed your chick every 2 hours during the day till late evening at about 11pm. Feed once at night at about 2am and again from the next morning 6am onwards until about 11pm.

Day 15

Chicks can be hand reared either from day 1 or from day 15. If this is day 15 for you, take the chicks out of the nest and place them in a 28-29° Celsius incubator with humidity between 30-40%. Wait until the chick's crop is almost empty before feeding it.

From this day on the chick only need 4 feedings a day, which will be breakfast, lunch, dinner and lastly late at night before you go to bed.

The birds will grow either faster or slower according to the species. For instance a macaw will grow much slower than a conure. Thus from here we will concentrate on feather growth rather than specific weeks or days, as it will differ from species to species.

The chick is fed 4 times a day until it is 60% feathered. At this stage put him in a cage during daytime

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and in the brooder at night. Remember to place perches low in the cage, as your bird is still clumsy and unable to climb on a high perch. Use *Animalzone's clay perch* to shorten your bird's nails whilst your bird is sitting on the perch. Also include some toys in his cage so he can entertain himself. Include a bowl of *Animalzone Cereal* mixed with fruits (cut in small pieces) in the cage, as well as a water bowl. The *Cereal* is a wet food, creating a softer food, which is easier to eat. *Animalzone Fruit Chunks* (African grey size and bigger) or *Bits* (smaller than African grey) can also be used. It can be mixed with the *Cereal* or used on its own. This is a very colourful food, attracting your parrot's attention to investigate his food. He will get curious and start playing with the food. This is the time to put your bird on three feeds a day, breakfast, lunch and dinner.

As soon as you observe your bird playing with the food, and digesting some of it, reduce the number of feedings to breakfast and supper. When continuing with three feeds a day for too long your bird may start regurgitating the food, or refuses to eat hand rearing porridge; now you know he only need two feeds a day.

From this point onwards it is easy. When you detect he is eating enough on his own, reduce to one feed in the evening. Examine his food bowl and crop every day, as soon as you see your bird eats enough and you can feel the solid food in his crop, it's not necessary to hand feed him anymore. It may also happen that your bird doesn't want to eat the hand rearing food anymore due to the fact that he is eating enough food on his own. Change some of the perches in the cage to a higher position.

Enjoy your own hand-reared bird!

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