



The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

(Founding in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)

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A Guide to Parrot Keeping

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Introduction

After experience I encountered as a dealer selling birds to many newcomers, it became apparent to me the need for some guidance in this field. The suggestions and observations herein are to some extent my own, but many are from dedicated aviculturists whom I have been fortunate enough to know. These are people too numerous to list here and although some are well known, others not, they are all very capable men in their field.

Considerable space has been taken up in the following on the subject of aviary construction, because I feel that the correct aviary is a big step towards successful breeding.

This article was compiled generally to assist beginners towards establishing an aviary, or bank of aviaries to which it almost invariably leads.

Aviary Construction

The general trend, (myself being no exception) is to purchase a pair of birds first then worry about their housing. This is definitely putting the cart before the horse; so if the enthusiast can control the urge, he or she will do better to give careful thought to the building of an aviary prior to purchase of the birds. When in the process of such building, several factors must be considered.

Firstly, location should be examined. Where possible in the southern hemisphere an aviary with a northern aspect should be constructed. If space will not permit this, then try to make it face to the east; but at all times avoid having it face the south or the west. The reasons for determining these factors are as follows: I believe that birds, like most people, prefer the morning sun. With a northern aspect they have the benefit of this plus sufficient afternoon sun. Most important is that by facing to the north the risk of draughts is reduced to a minimum. It has been discovered by most of us that birds in good health as a rule can take both heat and cold, but will soon weaken if subject to draughts.

The next step is to determine the size and type of construction required. You must decide what species of parrots or parakeets will be kept. Bear in mind that with few exceptions most parakeets are best kept one pair to a flight for breeding purposes. For the smaller Australian varieties, such as [Turquoise](#), [Scarlet-chested](#), [Blue-wing](#) and the rest of the [Neophema](#) group, a flight of approximately 6 feet in depth, 3 feet in width and 6 feet or 7 feet in height is an adequate size. If the flight is much deeper than this, the birds if startled are able to build up too much speed and frequently hit their heads at the other end, resulting in serious head injury or a broken neck.

The next size group, comprising the [Red-rump](#), [Many-colour \(Mulga Parrot\)](#), [Blue-bonnet](#), [Western Rosella](#), [Hooded](#) and a few others are suited to a flight of approximately 8 feet in depth, but still remaining 3 feet wide and 6 to 7 feet high. The width and height need not vary until birds the size of cockatoos is reached.

The third size in the parrot/parakeet group takes in all the nine varieties of [rosellas](#), as well as the [Buln Buln \(Mallee Ringneck\)](#), [Cloncurry](#), [Port Lincoln](#), [King Parrot](#), [Crimson-wing](#), [Regent](#), [Princess](#), etc. For these 10 to 12 feet in depth is usually acceptable. I have dealt only with Australian species here, but this general rule should be applied to foreign parrots as well; although their flight for the most part is not as swift as the Australian varieties.

Last but no means least we come to the cockatoos. At this point the aviaries should be wider; anywhere from four to six feet, the latter being preferred. A depth of sixteen to twenty feet would be desirable here, although they are frequently bred in less space.

For the smaller parakeets, a timber frame aviary is quite suitable, however with larger parrots considerable chewing is liable to take place particularly with the cockatoos, and can conceivably reduce an aviary frame to splinters. Therefore where possible an aviary constructed of galvanised water pipe is best suited.

When considering the type of wire mesh to be used (woven or welded), I prefer the later, although it requires a little more effort to pull it out tight. The standard 1/2 inch x 1 inch x 17 gauge is the most suitable for all parakeets, but for the cockatoos a heavier mesh should be applied. I find 1/2 inch x 1/2 inch x 16 gauge is sufficient to hold [Major Mitchells](#) and [Gang Gangs](#). The 16 gauge is not always carried in stock by the local hardware store but can be ordered in, as can also the 14 gauge.

The walls separating the flight are best constructed of fibre cement, fibreglass or some other similar material to prevent the neighbouring birds from seeing each other. They do better in this manner because while they can hear each other there is no visual distraction and no fighting which can result in injury.

Attention should be taken when fitting the roof to allow sufficient light to enter. While open flights may enhance the bird's appearance they are a hazard, in as much as the birds will frequently roost out in the open area leaving themselves prey to cats and owls, as well as hawks by day. Also some will sleep out in the open - rain, hail or shine. I have found the most suitable methods to fit a corrugated fibre cement roof, interspaced with clear fibreglass sheeting to allow for light. It is not advisable to use all fibreglass because it becomes too hot in summer; the same applies to corrugated iron. Where a deep flight such as is used for cockatoos is constructed a few feet of roof in the centre may be left open with only wire covering, but make sure that all perches are under the sheltered areas at each end.

Concrete floors are all very nice but also very costly and I feel unnecessary. For my own aviaries, I simply cover the floor with a few inches of sand. Then all that is needed is to rake the sand from time to time in order to remove old seed and husk. I have found sand to be little problem as far as worms are concerned that propagate in the ground and in turn infect the birds, one common type being [Ascaridia hermaphrodita](#), a large [roundworm](#) whose eggs are taken into the birds while they are feeding on the ground.

Sand should also help reduce the incidence of [Coccidiosis](#), a parasitic disease of the intestine which thrives under damp conditions.

Feeding

For seed-eating parrots and parakeets the diet doesn't vary very much from one to the other. With few exceptions a basic mix of canary seed approximately 70% with the addition of [sunflower](#) and [Hungarian millet](#) is the usual diet. Fruit, spinach and seeding grasses also make up an essential part of their diet. [Shell grit](#) should be made available because, although the birds gain some mineral value from it, the grit plays a big role in helping the bird to digest the food taken into the crop.

There are some birds that must be watched because they tend to become overweight. A few worth mentioning here are the Neophema genus e.g., Blue-wing, [Rock](#), [Elegant](#) etc. Also some others with which I have had problems are: Regent Parrots, Crimson-wings, and Hoodeds. Where this problem sometimes occurs the sunflower seed should be reduced considerably, if not completely and replaced with [millet](#). I have witnessed a case where [Galahs](#) became overweight and although the keeper removed all sunflower the birds still remained in a very unsafe overweight condition; so the keeper then removed a large proportion of the [canary seed](#) and replaced it with [wheat](#). This helped to a certain extent but one or two of them still have to be fed with care.

If it becomes necessary to place a pair of birds on this restricted diet, be sure to replace the sunflower when breeding takes place because breeding pairs feeding nestlings consume a lot of energy and need a lot of food.

Ensure always that feed dishes are placed in a dry spot and not directly underneath perches. If seed is allowed to become wet and sour a fungus can develop that is very dangerous to the birds feeding on it.

[Lorikeets](#) of which there are several varieties comprising the [Rainbow](#), [Red-collared](#), [Scaly-breasted](#), [Musk](#), [Varied](#), [Purple-crowned](#) and [Little](#), all require a specialist diet because they are basically nectar and pollen feeders.

Rainbows and Scalys have been known to do quite well on a diet of sunflower seed, [hulled oats](#) and [apple](#), but to me this is a starvation diet. The smaller lorikeets will surely die if this diet is used exclusively. Breeders all over the world advocate a variety of different feed mixtures but from my own personal experience a basic diet of [Farex](#) (a baby cereal) made *very* sweet with the addition of sugar and then mixed with water until it reaches the consistency of porridge is quite good. Added to this some seed should be made available to those that want it. Most important, a liberal quantity of fruit such as apples and [pears](#) should be given.

Obtaining Stock

This phase of the game is to most people far more interesting than the business of aviary building but requires a lot of care to ensure that only healthy birds are purchased. If you are fortunate enough to know a private breeder who has for sale the birds you wish to keep, then this usually is the best approach because he will endeavour to supply you with birds that are healthy and not too closely related to each other. If you belong to a club then frequently a member may be offering some for sale. Alternatively there are dealers. Most of these will do their best to supply you with healthy stock. Unfortunately there are a few who will not only deliberately sell you rubbish, if they think that you are a newcomer, but have a very scant knowledge of parrots themselves. Therefore it is wise to ask a friend if they can recommend a reputable dealer to you or in fact go to the dealer with you and assist in your selection.

It is wise to purchase young birds generally, because this will eliminate the possibility of buying old birds that have been culled out for various reasons.

Sexing

The job of picking a true pair can be very difficult where there is no [sexual dimorphism](#) present, and this is so of many of the parakeets, particularly with immature birds. The [Indian Ringneck](#) is a very good example of this, because although adult birds are clearly distinguishable e.g., the black ring displayed around the neck of the bird is absent on the hen, whereas immature Indian Ringnecks all look similar to the hen. However there are one or two approaches towards sexing some parrots.

Many of the Australian varieties; rosellas, Buln Bulns, [Twenty-eights](#), are best sexed by the bird's general size and brightness of colour. The hen usually will be smaller in the head and beak than the male and the colours less brilliant. I believe the best guide for sexing lorikeets such as Rainbows, Red-collared, Scalys, etc., is to feel the distance and flexibility between the pelvic bones. A hen will usually have the bones spaced further apart than the cock and a small amount of flexibility will be present. To carry out this method of sexing, considerable practice is required. The procedure is to hold the bird on its back with one hand, placing the bird's neck between the index and forefinger to prevent the bird from biting. Using this method of holding the bird the chance of being bitten is reduced to a minimum. At no time should the bird be held too tightly around the body or neck so as to cause injury. Once the bird is held properly use the index or forefinger of the other hand and very gently feel for the pelvic bones just above the vent. After trying this technique on a few birds you will have some chance of sorting out a true pair. It must be pointed out that this method is not foolproof but is only a guide. It is even more difficult to practise this method on immature birds as the variation is less noticeable.

The pelvic bone method is also the only chance we have of sexing [African Lovebirds](#). If several birds of the once species are purchased, then in some cases they may be placed in an aviary together and allowed to find a mate for themselves. Unfortunately, the few African Lovebirds that may be sexed visually are not available in this country.

Acclimatisation

Having purchased the pair or pairs of birds required, the next step is to acclimatise them to their new surroundings. If they have been bred in captivity the task is much easier. However, assuming they have been trapped (under licence of course), much more preparation is required. (*All native birds are protected in NSW see legislation [NSW Environment & Heritage Bird Keeper's Licence](#) for further information). The birds should be placed in a small cabinet approximately two or three feet long, two feet high and eighteen inches deep, closed in on all sides leaving only the front open. In this manner the birds are less liable to injure themselves if they are inclined to be nervous and flighty. They need to be kept under these conditions for three to four weeks in order to settle down. Added to this a course of antibiotics in the drinking water is advisable, the most commonly used antibiotic being [Aureomycin](#) soluble powder which is produced in veterinary form for this purpose. The antibiotics serve a dual purpose. They act as an anti stress which is needed at this time, and on the other hand they help to kill any bacteria the bird may be carrying. Normally the birds have an immunity to the various bacteria, but in the process of being moved, and due to the stresses involved they become very susceptible to any germ that they may contact.

The Aureomycin should be placed in the drinking water for about three consecutive days taking care to replace it every twenty-four hours. After this I usually give them plain water for about two days and then repeat the procedure for another three days. At this stage I finish that treatment. Although there are some instructions as to dosage on the container it will suffice to simply place enough Aureomycin in the drinking water to just slightly colour it. At this point it should be noted that the drinking receptacle be of glass or enamel; avoid galvanised or other metal containers because the metals may react with the medication.

The birds should also be treated for worms, but this matter will be mentioned shortly.

Being satisfied that the birds have settled down after their move, they may be placed in an aviary. This is best carried out in the morning on a fine day so as to give them the rest of the day to find their way around the flight.

The size and type of nesting box or log vary according to the species kept. In most cases the person from whom you purchased your stock will be able to tell you the most suitable for the respective species.

Having reached this stage your chances should be increased towards successful parrot keeping. After that, a little luck and a lot of patience are needed.

Worming

In recent years breeders have found that parasitic worms account for a lot of the mortality and low breeding rate of birds. Therefore thought was given to find a suitable drench to combat the problem. By trial and error it was found that a cattle drench by the trade name of [Nilverm](#) was suitable for the job. Nilverm is far too strong in its initial form to give to birds, so to break it down to a safe strength it is mixed one part Nilverm to four parts of water. Of this mixture we give the affected birds one or two drops, preferably direct to the beak, repeating dosage approximately two weeks later to affect a satisfactory remedy. The Nilverm may be placed in drinking water but this way we have no way of knowing the bird's intake and this could well lead to trouble. It is advisable to treat your entire collection for the possibility of worms every three or four months.

Do not force any fluid down a bird's throat too suddenly as the risk of it going down the wind pipe and into the lung is ever present. If this happens the bird will usually die very quickly.

Summing Up

To simply throw a parakeet into a cage and forget about it is not enough. Your conscientious effort will be a step further towards successful aviculture and the preservation of a species in captivity.

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