

## INCOMPATIBILITY - CAUSES AND CURES

by Linda Greeson

The placing of a hen and cock together in a cage with a nest box does not automatically insure that baby birds will be produced. Those of us who have been involved in breeding dogs or cats soon learn that breeding birds is an entirely different undertaking. You can pretty much depend on a male dog being attracted to any female dog in heat. Few of the females are fussy over your choice of mates when they are ready to breed. Not so with birds.

Many of the larger species and a fair number of the smaller ones may take years to bond to each other. Once they have established a bond many more years may elapse before mating and the production of fertile eggs.

Stumpy, our Blue and Gold Macaw was such a beautiful example of this species we decided to provide him with a mate. Henrietta, the large hen we found for him, was friendly from the start. It was years before Stumpy even allowed her to sit near him on the perch. He had been our pet bird, indulged by the whole family as he developed to maturity. This made his bonding to another bird an even slower process than usual.

Over the years their friendship finally developed into love. Stumpy fed and pruned Henrietta and talked to her the way he used to talk to us. We were hopeful but the eggs she laid were all clear. We began to suspect that because of his congenitally deformed feet Stumpy was unable to manage fertilization even with a willing and experienced hen. Ten long years after their being placed together they finally rewarded us with a beautiful Blue and Gold baby. They fed and cared for it with skill and devotion and seemed as proud of it as we were.

It may even happen that a bird will never become compatible with the mate selected by its owner. This may be an insurmountable problem when a closely bonded pair is separated. I have not personally experienced the loss of the remaining bird as I have heard does occur,

but I know how close we have come on a few occasions. There are times when separation is inevitable. When given a choice the owner must face the dangers of the stress involved in separating a strongly bonded pair and not undertake this lightly. Many times the loss of one results in the loss of both.

The hen may be more interested than the cock and give up on her attempts to be fertilized. She then goes about nesting as usual, but lays and tries to incubate clear eggs. Some cocks are intensely territorial and concentrate on defending their cage space rather than on their mate.

More often an eager cock finds himself with a reluctant hen. He may be so insistent and so tired of his mate's "having a headache" that he drives her into the nest box and may keep her there without food and water. A special "T" shaped nest box with an alternate escape route has been designed for use with Cockatoos where this type of aggressive behavior is common.

Occasionally a hen is badly plucked by a domineering cock. I have one pair where the female stays stripped of feathers about the head and back during the entire breeding season. I find their nest box carefully lined with her soft feathers. Both parents are attentive to the babies so I accept this as part of their mating behavior.

We also encounter the "next door syndrome". The cock ignores his own hen and spends his time actively courting the hen in the adjoining cage. When this behavior persists over a period of weeks wife swapping is all that is left to do.

I have a big Cinnamon Pearl Cockatiel hen I have set up with a total of four different mates. Each choice was made after careful study of pedigrees and a search to find the right characteristics to compliment hers. I was anxious to breed this lovely hen and each time gave her many months to adjust to each new mate. On the fourth try she immediately fell in love and went right to nest with fertile eggs.

One pair of Cockatiels whose nest box I had flagged "apparently incompatible" and was about to give up on surprised me with a clutch of

nine eggs and hatched six babies. I had never observed them to be courting or even to be on friendly terms but they had obviously gotten together at some time.

Unless they are dimorphic (visually different males and females) all breeding pairs need to be either surgically or DNA sexed. The DNA method is less expensive and so convenient I now rely on it almost exclusively. Surgical sexing is valuable in determining if the bird is sexually mature and physically capable of reproduction. Even educated guesses by experienced breeders have been proven to be wrong. Two of the same gender will often be completely compatible and bond together with a promising affectionate relationship, but, of course, no chicks.

If money and space permit an excellent method of insuring compatibility in your pairs is to place a number of sexed birds in a large flight and observe their preferences.

If this natural selection is not a practical option have found that placing two new birds together in a single cage immediately upon obtaining them can be effective. They will both be frightened and find security with each other. By the time they settle down they become friends. This should not be attempted without keeping the birds under close observation for a long period of time. It is not an infallible method.

The most effective way of all to ensure compatibility is to place two youngsters, just out of the weaning stage or still requiring some hand feeding, in a cage together. Allowed to grow up together without too much human attention to confuse them, they bond closely. They usually become sexually mature at an early stage in their development.

Quite often the solution to achieving compatibility in a pair is just the passage of time. "Let's give them another year." is our frequent decision and it is often the right one.