



A Different Pursuit

PARROT-KEEPING

Text and photos by
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Parrot-keeping can be a very satisfying hobby as parrots are attractive, colourful and highly intelligent; they can also be affectionate as each bird has its own individual personality. That is why they are called companion birds and affectionately “fids” or feathered kids by enthusiasts. A big attraction is that some can talk and interact with you! In this piece, A/Prof Cuthbert Teo speaks with Rupert Gwee, who holds a Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Microbiology which became very useful for his passion in keeping parrots but was only used very minimally in his working life, to learn more about his interesting hobby.

Could you start by telling us a bit more about parrots?

There are about 400 species of parrots ranging in size from the 7 cm parrotlet to the 1.2 m tall hyacinth macaw. The smaller species like budgerigar, lovebirds and cockatiel live up to between ten and 15 years. The larger species typically live around 40 to 50 years. The longest-lived documented parrot, a Major Mitchell’s cockatoo (*Cacatua leadbeateri*) named Cookie lived over 82 years when it died in 2015. In Singapore, we have a few species of native parrots including the Blue-Crowned Hanging Parrot.

Parrots are characterised by their strong curved bill which is often used for climbing, as well as manipulating and cracking/crushing food and objects. They have strong legs and four-toed clawed zygodactyl feet (two toes pointing forward and two backward) which some species use dexterously almost like hands.

Most males and females of the same species look the same and parrot breeders often depend on laparoscopy or DNA to determine the gender of their birds. An interesting exception would be the

eclectus parrot, where the males are bright green with an orange beak and the females are red with a black beak. For more than a hundred years, zoos have kept the males and females apart because they were so different looking, wondering why they never bred!

In the wild, most parrots nest in tree cavities, laying from one to seven white eggs at two-day intervals (which is why their eggs are paper white since they do not need camouflage). An exception is the monk parakeet which builds a colony-nest from sticks. Many countries classify monk parakeets as introduced pests, as escapees build nests on electric posts and overhead transformers, leading to electrical short circuits.

How did your interest in birds begin?

I have had three bird-keeping episodes in my life. My interest first started when I hand-raised a baby Javan mynah (*Acridotheres javanicus*) when I was seven years old, with some help from my dad. It was tame and would fly to my shoulders whenever I called it. Sadly, it got sick and died before it was a year old.

When I was 12 years old, my paternal grandfather started keeping and breeding canaries and I followed suit. After three years, he had more than 200 canaries and I had over 20 heads. We woke up daily to the singing and trilling of canaries. However, it became too much of a five-hour chore for him to feed and clean them seven days a week. He sold them off and I did likewise.





In April 2000, I decided to buy and hand-raise an African Grey chick. I traced its leg-ring to the commercial parrot breeding farm where it had come from.

Fateful day

It was a fateful day when I met Mr Patrick Tay, the executive director of Mandai Birds. We hit it off even though I had only about six months of experience and a handful of pet parrots, while he had eight aviary complexes and around two thousand birds. He invited me to visit whenever I wished and encouraged me to get into parrot breeding as many were endangered due to habitat loss and poaching.

This became a 19-year passionate hobby and I developed strong friendships with the farm owners and staff.

Sadly, I had to give it up when the farm moved to a much smaller location in the Neo Tiew area as the original site had to be returned to the Singapore Land Authority. At the peak, I had more than 1,100 heads from over 80 species and sub-species of parrots.

Over those years, I made many aviculture friends and met countless interesting people both locally and internationally. I was even invited to give a presentation at the 2005 AVES International Parrot Convention held biennially in Grafton, New South Wales, Australia.

Why move from microbiology to birds?

It was pure chance that my life sciences background came in very handy in my parrot-keeping hobby. I became interested in parrots as companion birds because they are intelligent, have personalities and some can even talk!

Though most speak just a few words, African Grey parrots are known to have a vocabulary of around 1,000 words. Even small budgerigars can speak quite well but at a much faster talking rate and with softer voices. One exceptional budgie named Disco, who was featured on *BBC Earth*, had a repertoire of around 130 phrases!

Parrots bond with their owners. They recognise and remember individual persons and even other household pets! I have personally experienced pet parrots showing signs of depression, such as refusing to eat, becoming listless and feather chewing/plucking, when their owners give them up or pass away.

How did you build your own personal bird collection?

I live in a seven-room Housing Development Board apartment in Yishun and had initially only wanted to keep parrots as companion birds.

However, the more I visited and saw the different aspects of how parrots were bred at the farm, the more I became intrigued with breeding them as a hobby. My previous experience breeding canaries provided an added nudge.

I then took the plunge and bought a proven pair of eclectus parrots in September 2001 and was elated when they produced their first pair of chicks just two months later. I became hooked and decided to register as a home breeder with the then Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority of Singapore in February 2002.

Thereafter I rapidly increased the number and species of my parrot collection but continued to house several breeding pairs at home as it allowed me to closely observe their breeding behaviours. The rest I kept at Mandai Birds. Over six years, I bred just over a hundred chicks in my living room before I moved all the breeding pairs to Mandai Birds in 2008.

I also found the gamut of do-it-yourself aspects to the hobby very satisfying, especially hand-making and marking my own open brass and closed aluminium leg-rings, assembling heater-circuits, etc.



What are some of the challenges in large-scale parrot breeding?

Parrot breeding is manpower intensive. When you have eight aviary complexes and approximately 3,000 birds to feed and care for, standardisation and templated processes must be followed for hygiene and biosecurity purposes. Good record-keeping is also a must. Food preparation and feeding of the adult and fledged birds in the aviary complexes starts at 7 am and by 10 am, all birds must receive their food-rations and fresh water. Afternoons are for alternate day cage and floor jet-spray cleaning of the aviary complexes, general maintenance and repairs. Nest boxes are inspected on the 5th, 10th, 15th, 20th, 25th and 30th of each month and some eggs are collected for artificial incubation, especially for the more valuable species, in order to encourage pairs to produce a second clutch of eggs. Aviary work ends around 5 pm each day.

Power of observation

Keepers must be vigilant to spot behavioural changes, sick birds, incompatible pairs, aggression as well as changes in food intakes and faecal droppings. Coupled with good record-keeping, we discern patterns pointing to problems or tips on what works. One time, I noted an unusually big drop in the monthly egg-laying. I spent a few afternoons at the farm and realised that instead of later in the afternoons, the

keepers went into the aviary complexes immediately after lunch and the change in routine had upset the breeding pairs. Another time, when a pressure pump became noisier than usual, there were suddenly no eggs laid.

Disease outbreaks do happen from time to time. The use of chicken dung fertiliser in surrounding areas can increase the number of flies which can cause sickness when they contaminate the food bowls. It is heart-breaking to lose proven pairs and rare specimens. We once had a bad experience when a water pipe behind our complex was accidentally damaged by other parties but the contaminated water continued to flow by gravity. We only discovered it because of the low water-pressure. In all, about 60 birds got sick and around 20 died because of it.

Artificial incubation

Temperature and humidity control during artificial incubation are crucial for successful hatching of fertile eggs. As we have a limited number of incubators, several species may be incubated together. It takes experience to hand turn the eggs and make the adjustments needed to maximise the hatch rates of each species.

Nursery management

Handfeeding the chicks in the nursery starts at 7 am and is done at two hourly intervals till 11 pm each day. As the

number of chicks may balloon to more than 200 during peak periods, hygiene, human mistakes and mix-ups are a constant worry. The hand-feeding formula needs to be warm enough but not too hot, or else the chicks will develop a burnt crop. Toes may end up being caught in the wire-mesh or bedding, resulting in torn-off toenails or constriction injuries. Sometimes chicks will get slow or sour crop, where hand-feeding formula does not move to the stomach. The crop must then be pumped out and the chick rehydrated with fluids, medicated and kept under close watch. Splayed legs may also occur, and they would need to have a splint applied or their legs kept taped together so they don't overspread. It is amazing how early intervention can improve the quality of their final adult condition and quality of life! ◆

Those interested to find out more about parrot-keeping and local breeders can reach out to Rupert at rupert.gwee@gmail.com.

Legend

1. Dusky Lorries
2. Black Palm Cockatoo pair
3. Aviary complex – outside
4. Blue and Gold Macaw chick
5. Bird flock's playtime

A/Prof Teo is trained as a forensic pathologist. The views expressed in this article are his personal opinions.



Rupert graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Microbiology from the National University of Singapore in 1995 but did not use much of it throughout his 40 years of working life. However, it came useful in his passion of keeping parrots. He is married with four children and is heavily involved in voluntary work despite his job commitments.

