

Welcome to Backstreet Birds Common Sense Guide to Handfeeding Baby Birds.

While the title may be laborious, throughout my years of handfeeding baby birds, I have found that common sense is the answer to many problems which arise. Contrary to what some breeders would like their customers to believe, hand feeding baby birds is not a mysterious process which requires years and years of training. It requires a basic and workable knowledge of the requirements of a baby bird: warmth, cleanliness, frequent feeding with proper formulas of the correct temperature, time, and a little instruction in technique. It requires a little practice because you can do harm. But with a little research, and maybe a few "hands on" demonstrations from your veterinarian or another breeder, you will be a pro in no time. The rewards are great. To see a tiny helpless creature less domesticated than a dog or a cat grow from a pink fuzzy thing no bigger than the tip of your finger into a beautifully colored winged creature which responds to human beings is an experience which can not be described in words.

In this book I have tried to address the areas which I personally found difficult or confusing in my early days as a breeder. If you are experienced, some of the sections may seem simple to you, but I hope that I have included enough new information to make this book valuable to you. If you are a novice, I hope that I have covered areas which will guide you through some of the problems you may encounter and stop you from making some of the mistakes I made.

I have purposely not included information on egg weight management, incubation techniques (wet bulb, dry bulb humidity tables), serum biological values for juvenile Eclectus parrots or any summaries of compar-

isons of significant variations of hematological parameters among different species. Aren't you glad? When I first started hand feeding my babies, that is what the books I purchased contained. They did not help - so I learned from experience, a lot of time, a lot of wasted money and some sad mistakes and wrote my own. I have had great success and have been rewarded by my creatures many times over. I hope you will too.

Setting up your nest box

Before we get into eggs, hatching and feeding - if you have not already done so, you should take some time to determine if your nest box is set up correctly and efficiently. In our earlier days as breeders we unfortunately subjected ourselves and some of our birds to some rather unpleasant experiences attempting to check a nest, candle an egg, or most importantly, remove a baby which appeared ill or not taken care of properly by the parents. Many novice breeders do not take the time to plan and set up the nest box in a manner which would make removal of the babies a safe and calm experience. I myself have two horror stories which are great examples of what not to do.

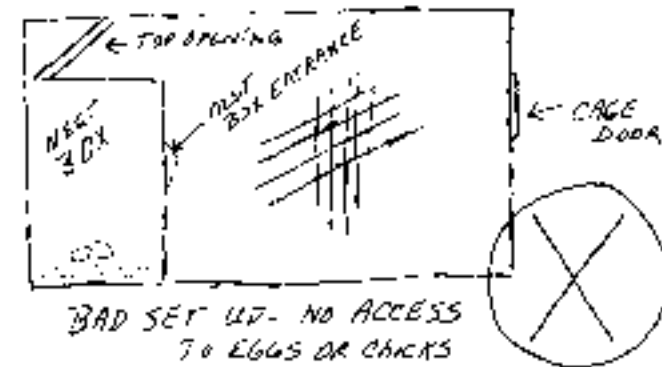
I have a pair of Rock Peblers which are in a flight measuring about four feet by five feet. However, there are only two small doors, one in the front which we use to feed and water, and one in the back which is not easily accessible. I was greatly excited when I found that the next box I had purchased for them "fit through the back door". I promptly wired it to the inside of the cage with the box entrance opening out into the center of the flight. I was equally excited when my pair began breeding and nesting. However, when I felt it was time to check on the box and their progress - I found that although I could stretch my head around and peek into the entrance of the box (and I saw eggs!), the "opening" to the nest box was on the top. The lid was designed to

lift up. But I found to my dismay that the roof of the flight was almost level with the lid of the nest box. Subsequently I could not lift the lid to look in. I dutifully waited the proscribed number of days to the anticipated hatch. The parents seemed agitated and were going in and out of the box frequently. I envisioned babies in trouble. I finally decided that the only way I was going to know what was going on in the box was to get in there somehow and find out. This entailed attempting to unwire the nest box while the two parents were alternately attacking me (defending their box and eggs or babies), and diving into the box and thrashing around. By now I was sure that any baby in the box had been injured or would soon be crushed. I finally got the box unwired and ready to take it out the back door of the flight, but the female would not leave the box. I was forced to seal the entrance of the box by stuffing it with a washcloth (so she would not escape as the flight was on the patio), and wrestle the box out of the small door while all the while jostling the contents and sending the female into a frenzy.

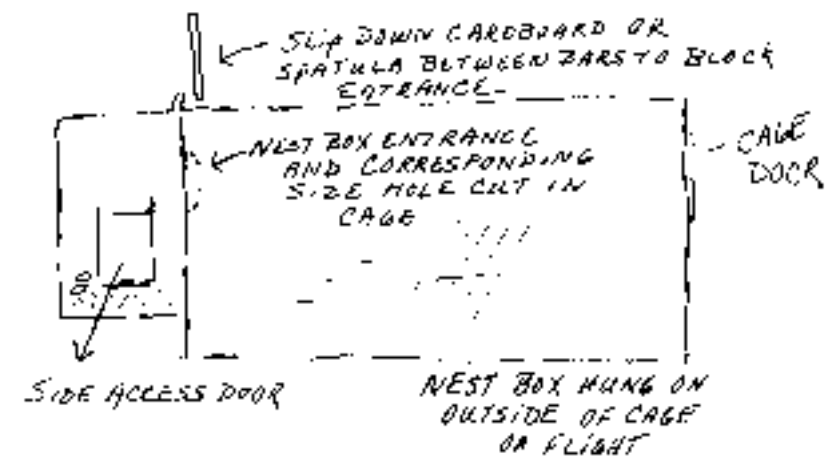
In a panic I rushed the box and its unknown contents to a small bathroom where I was finally able to lift the lid and peek in to see what destruction I had wrought. Luckily, the clutch of eggs had not been fertile. The two that were not damaged were completely clear when candled and one which had cracked had clearly never been fertile either. But the moral of this story is that I did not plan my set up. What I should have done is taken the time to cut a side door in the box and a corresponding small opening (with a removable door) against the back of the flight. Then, I could have opened the small flight door, slipped up the side door on the nest box and checked the contents.

If there had been a baby to pull, I could have inserted a spatula or other instrument to gently push

the mother away from the baby and out the opening of the box (or at least towards it). I could have then reached in and safely removed either the eggs or any babies.



On the subject of nest boxes, I have never seen a top opening box work for large birds. The top openings seem to work fine for some cockatiels, parakeets or conure sized birds but never for a cockatoo or macaw if you plan to intervene.



Once without thinking (again), I placed a very large, very heavy nest box in with a pair of umbrella cockatoos. Since by chewing on it they had made the opening quite large, I actually had no problem "checking" the nest from a distance with the aid of a small mag lite without disturbing the birds. The problem

came when their egg hatched and I heard it cheep.

The baby was the first for this pair. I had no idea how well they would care for it. Naturally, I fussed around the cage for hours after I first realized the chick had hatched, agonizing over whether or not to pull it. After about six or seven hours my decision was made for me. The "cheeping" was getting weaker. I could peek through the box opening and see the chick weakly begging for food while the parents stared at it as though it was an alien. After another half an hour when they still had not fed it, I got myself ready to pull it. Easier said than done. While their cage was easily large enough for me to enter, again the nest box opening was on the top of the box (the top lifted up). There was plenty of room to open the top, but now what? Both parents were in the box and would not leave. I found that when I even attempted to reach my hand down INTO the box (which was three feet high - an awkward position under the best of circumstances), the parents went berserk! They now feared leaving the box because I was in their cage. Further, even should they have wanted to get out - whenever I put my hand down they felt I was blocking their entrance (or escape) and they had no where to go. They could not go up because I was there. They could not go out because I was there. The only place they could go was round and round in the bottom of the nest box.

At the onset of their frenzy, which resembled a dog fight, I had heard a tiny peep from the baby. By this time I was in tears and was sure the baby was destroyed. I threw aside all judgment and without gloves picked up each bird and tossed them out of the box. Their fear caused by my ill planning could have easily cost me a finger, but for some reason I did not get bit. To my dismay, I saw no sign of the baby cocka-too. I began sifting through the shavings in the bottom of the box and felt a small lump about an inch and a

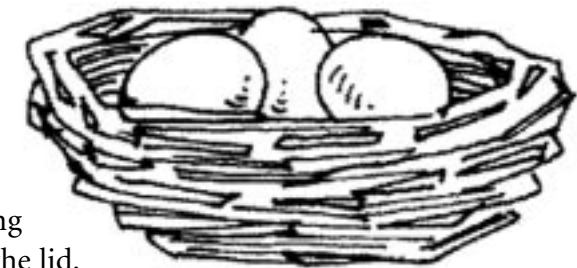
half down. I gently lifted the baby who lay still. But by some miracle it began moving. I rushed it to the brooder I had prepared and within a few minutes it came around. I prepared formula and feed it, and except for a small bruise on its back (which healed), the baby flourished.

During all of this I neglected to latch the door to the adults cage and the female escaped. Again, by some miracle I was able to retrieve her. But the obvious moral to these stories is when you set up your nest box, plan. Be sure that you have easy access and some way to restrain the parents while you are doing whatever you need to do.

Make sure that your access door to the box is large enough to not only get your hand in, but get it out with the baby in it. Make sure you can do all of this without the adult birds escaping. Picking the right nest box, the right flights or cages or by making some modifications you can make the difference between life and death for a baby.

There are eggs in the nest

As soon as you determine that your pair has laid an egg (or eggs) it is a good practice to begin "peeking" as unobtrusively as possible. Lift the lid of the nest box slowly and quietly and glance at the egg(s) for a few moments.



If the parent(s) get upset and begin thrashing in the box, slowly close the lid. Try again after a few hours or so and continue to "peek" throughout the incubation period.