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Success with Scarlets: The 2012 Breeding Season By Melanie Robinson

Introduction:

After a move from the hills to coast that resulted in limited aviary space we chose to proceed down the budgerigar line, no longer having the room to keep parrots simultaneously (except the misfits of course!). It soon became apparent that the location of my breeding cabinets was completely unsuitable and with much disappointment following a woeful breeding season I made the difficult decision to sell off my stock, cabinets and the majority of my budgie paraphernalia in order to return our focus to parrots. Based upon personal preferences and some sound advice from a very knowledgeable source (thanks Peter), we went about acquiring a pair each of scarlet chested parrots and western rosellas.

In contrast to our rosellas who produced only a single clutch of infertile eggs, our scarlets rapidly produced success with two large clutches and the intention to continue breeding had we not intervened. While we don't know exactly why we were successful – was the critical factor stock selection, husbandry or just pure luck? – what follows here are the details of our setup and care intended to act as a kind of recipe, if you will, for our success. I have chosen to share this knowledge in the hope that fellow members may do the same or, at the very least, may offer suggestions for further improvement to our approach.

Aviary set up:

I believe the aviary in which we breed the scarlets is larger than that usually recommended, being 4m long by 0.75m wide and 2m high, with a safety door that takes up part of the length but is not full height. This gives the birds a small section above the door where we have perches and place the food bowls. The floor consists of concrete slabs covered with a layer of sand. The roof and walls of the aviary are enclosed for approximately half of its length, the remainder being 25mm by 12.5mm (inch by half inch) mesh. The roof has a double skin for insulation. During the season we also added a double skin to the section of wall where the scarlets' nest box is mounted out of concern for the temperature inside the box. The wire between the aviary and the one which it adjoins consists only of a single layer, however, we have not had any problems resulting from having a pair of western rosellas housed next door.

We feed the birds via a seed hopper mounted undercover on the rear wall and deliver water in a large, glazed, ceramic dish mounted upon a pile of bricks to raise it off the floor. (Both the hopper and bowl can be purchased through the Accessories Shed.) Fresh food goes into terracotta or glazed bowls and is placed above the safety door, as mentioned above. Natural wood perches are mounted at each end of the aviary and positioned away from the feed and water so as to minimise soiling.

Pairing up the birds:

We purchased a one-year-old cockbird as the result of an online advertisement from a gentleman whose birds, upon inspection, were clearly healthy, well nurtured, good quality stock. A search for a mate led me to one of the bird dealers where I purchased a hen. Unfortunately, during bad weather I lost both the hen and a pet budgie (one of the misfits). At this point I was left to wonder whether our breeding season was over and done with. The year was getting on and I didn't know where to find a replacement hen.

Out of sheer luck I located one in a pet store not too far from where I live. I had gone in to look at dog collars and, naturally, had to check out the birds down the back of the store before I would leave. There, much to my surprise, was a lone female scarlet for sale. According to the staff she had also lost her mate, however, they did not know how old the bird was. (I suspect now that she had bred previously.) I took a chance and purchased the bird.

Once the birds were ready to be paired up in the breeding aviary, they took to each other almost instantly. Within three short weeks the first eggs were being laid.

Feeding During the Breeding Season:

In our seed hopper we fed the scarlets a seed mix consisting of equal parts of small parrot and premium budgie mix as purchased from one of the bird dealers. They also regularly received fresh fruit and vegetables, particularly silverbeet, celery, apple, bok choy and corn on the cob. Occasional attempts at introducing other fresh foods such as broccoli, brussel sprouts and kale were largely unsuccessful.

With respect to soft food, despite repeated attempts to deliver sprouted seed (be it large parrot mix, oats or wheat), unlike other species we had bred in the past, the scarlets did not take to it. This food source was abandoned in favour of trialling moistened, multigrain bread. With this we had gradual success at first, with it soon being devoured on a regular basis.

We took this opportunity to supplement the birds' diet by alternating between plain water, diluted calcium supplement (Calcivet from Vetafarm) and a diluted vitamin supplement (Avi-Drops from Aristopet) with which to moisten the bread. The main reason for doing this was to compensate for any shortfall in nutrients that may have resulted from the birds' diet as we had previously had some issues with respect to calcium insufficiency in some of the birds we had bred. Essentially we were trying to pre-empt and counteract any problems before they occurred.

Nesting:

We used a robust, top opening, wooden nest box with a log spout and inspection door and lined it with bark nesting material. (Both the nest box and nesting material are available from the Accessories Shed). This was attached to the sheeting on the side wall of the aviary with the log spout facing inwards, towards the centre of the aviary.

First clutch:

As mentioned above, it took only three short weeks following pairing for the first eggs to be laid. This clutch consisted of five eggs of which all five hatched and were successful raised by the parents.

We monitored both the eggs and chicks by accessing the nest through the inspection door. We tried to make this as minimally invasive as possible, for instance by checking the nest box when the hen was off feeding.

The aviary was soon filled with four youngsters learning to fly and feed for themselves, the fifth being a little sluggish to leave the nest. The cockbird was just as diligent teaching his young clutch to feed as he had been in feeding his hen whilst she was nesting. Eventually number five made it out into the big, wide world, just as the first eggs of the second clutch began to appear.

We left the fledgelings in the breeding aviary with the parents for a few weeks until we were confident that every chick was able to feed itself. Just as we were about to transfer the young to a holding cage we began to notice the first signs of intolerance from the cockbird. Whilst not out-and-out aggression, it was definitely a signal that it was time to move the first clutch along.

Second clutch:

The second clutch consisted of six eggs of which all six hatched and were successfully raised. Throughout the process we continued to monitor the nest box as described above. As the outside temperature began to increase we propped open the top of the box in order to increase air circulation, concerned about the temperature inside.

This clutch proceeded in much the same manner as the first, soon resulting in six fledgelings eagerly following the cockbird's example. Each time fresh food was placed into the aviary it was a feeding frenzy of young birds led by their eager father, devouring everything in sight.

Winding up the season:

As the second clutch were fledging it became clear that the hen was ready to go down for a third time. At this point we made the decision to remove the nest box in order to prevent further breeding for the season due to two main factors. Firstly, we were concerned by the timing, worrying that the weather was getting too hot for a full clutch of young to be in a nest box. Secondly, we were concerned about the condition of the birds, particularly the cockbird. Eleven youngsters had run him ragged and he was visibly losing some condition. Still, not a bad effort for a first year bird!

We housed the two clutches of young together, each clutch with its own coloured leg rings so they could be told apart, waiting for the young birds to colour up. After a few months the first red feathers began to show through on the chests of the cockbirds. Not long after, the second clutch began to show its colours also. Once we were confident of what we had we went about selling the birds to society members and at Open Day.

For the record, our first clutch produced four cockbirds and one hen, the second produced two cockbirds and four hens.

General Information:

Have room for your offspring (i.e. at least one holding cage). If you are successful you will need to remove the first clutch of young, once independent, from the breeding aviary in order to allow the parents to focus on the second clutch. (Once independent, you may even need to remove the

second clutch so that they can focus on the third.) You must have room to house these birds or you risk causing undue stress and even aggression.

Looking Ahead to this Year...

The upcoming 2013 breeding season presents a number of challenges, including, but not limited to:

- 1) The need to keep better records. I used to keep meticulous records with respect to my birds, especially when I was breeding budgies or hand rearing. I need to make a concerted effort this breeding season to return to my habits of old and record as best I can dates and details that may assist me in the future.
- 2) The task of starting over with young birds. I've been told that I'm mad having recently sold my breeding pair. Instead I've chosen to put together a young pair featuring a cockbird from the second clutch and a hen I acquired via a trade. I'm aware that the birds may be more of a second year prospect, possibly being too young to produce much success this year. The challenge will be in determining by the end of next season (2014) whether it was the pairing that led to this year's success or whether it was the method described above.
- 3) Success with the western rosellas. If the scarlets can not only survive, but thrive, it's time to get the 'rosies' living next door to do the same. Hopefully this time next year I will be bringing you an article called, 'A Win with Western Rosellas: The 2013 Breeding Season'.

Conclusion:

I've laid it all bare. There isn't much that we did or didn't do this past season that isn't recorded above. Hopefully this information will be useful or at the very least interesting to those of you who have taken the time to read it.

I further hope that this article may serve as an example of one (not the only) way to write about your birds and that others may take up the challenge, sharing with us all their own methods and results.

May I finish by saying that, in my opinion, scarlets can be delightful, little birds to keep.