

WEANING BABY PARROTS

INTRODUCTION

Weaning is a gradual process in which babies learn to eat on their own. Each baby is an individual so there is no set timetable or schedule in which to wean, but rather it is something that is done at the chick's own rate. Even siblings within a clutch can wean at very different times. Different species of birds wean in different general time frames, and larger species of birds usually take longer to wean than the smaller species. A baby parrot's weaning experience can affect it for the rest of its life. **AAV does NOT support the sale of unweaned birds and encourages that babies be fed by their parents.** However, when feeding by a parent bird is not possible, and being reared by human hands becomes necessary, it is up to the hand feeder to make it a pleasant experience in which the baby feels safe and secure and builds confidence and independence.

Preparation and General Tips

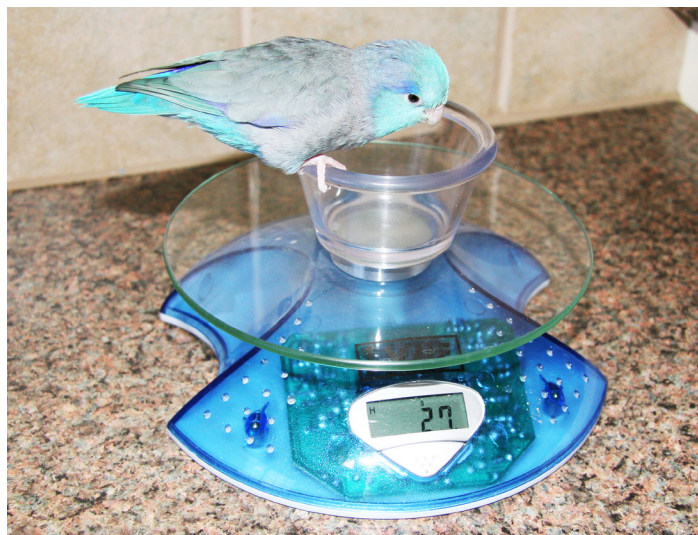
It is important that anyone hand feeding or weaning a baby have the appropriate skills and expertise to do this properly. Food should be adequately warmed to 101-104 °F (38-40 °C) and stirred to avoid hot spots and non-uniform temperatures. Additionally, an accurate thermometer must be used to assess the temperature. Using a microwave to heat food should be discouraged. While weaning, a baby could lose 10-15% of its peak weight. Keeping a journal of a bird's weight is necessary while weaning, and it is very important to have an accurate gram scale and a notebook. Prior to any handfeeding, the bird's weight should be recorded and its crop assessed for fullness. The weight can speak volumes in terms of how the baby is doing. It is also a good time to do a quick check of the baby and make note of anything out of the ordinary. Evaluation of alertness, eyes, nostrils, posture, breathing and body condition can be done and allow the hand feeder to identify any problems early.

Importance of Keeping Babies Well Fed

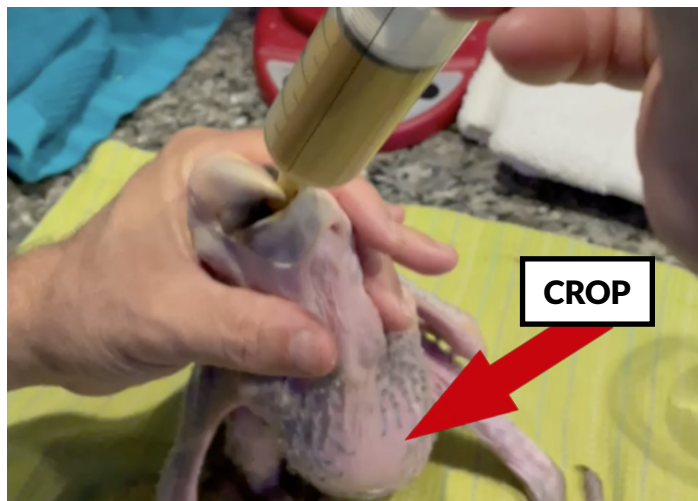
One of the most important things to do when weaning a baby is to keep him well fed. Hungry babies may be far too frustrated to try new foods on their own. However, when hunger is well satisfied, birds are happy and ready to explore and try new things. A full, well-fed baby will go over to a crock of food and taste or eat the food, whereas a baby that is hungry might just sit and cry waiting for someone to come feed him.



Crumbled or moistened pellets, cooked veggies, and low-sugar cereals are all good foods to introduce to birds during the weaning process.



Baby birds should be weighed at least once daily on an accurate digital gram scale.



Though this baby is too young to be weaned, the lack of feathers makes it easy to see exactly where the crop is. The crop should be felt prior to each hand feeding.



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Beginning the Weaning Process

Babies should be offered food long before they are actually able to eat it. As soon as a baby bird begins to show interest in the objects around them, it is recommended to place food items in the enclosure with them. Caretakers should be mindful of the size of any object in the enclosure with the bird to ensure no foreign material can be ingested as some babies are extra curious and consume items that are not food. Foods that are easily picked up should be offered, some examples include crumbs of birdie bread, low-sugar cereals, dry and moistened pellets and other items that are easy to break apart. Low-sugar cereals work well as does anything that is easy to break apart. Even a little hand feeding formula in a dish can be offered. The bird will explore and play with the food but eventually they accidentally swallow some and start to associate it as something to eat.

Food Placement

Babies do not know how to search for food yet, so it needs to be highly visible and easily accessible. Food dishes need to be heavy so they are not easily tipped over. Wide bowls with low sides placed on the cage bottom work well. Until the baby is seen eating on its own, water bowls may be withheld as water is being supplied in their formula.

Social Considerations

Eating is a social event in the wild. Therefore, it can be much easier to wean babies when there is more than one. With a group, often when one tries something, it can pique curiosity of others and they may try it too. Allowing the babies to watch a calm weaned bird, or even a human, eat their meals, is another helpful activity to entice a baby to try a new food.

Adjusting as Babies Mature

The consistency and variety of food offered changes as the chick matures and his eating skills develop. Pellets are great options to offer after the baby has started to crunch up bird bread or non-sugary cereals. Pellets can be served warm and wet and they offer balanced nutrition. When offered in this fashion, they are readily accepted by the chicks because they closely resemble what the parents were feeding them.

As the bird matures, other foods can be added as well. Soft, easy to eat foods like beans, rice, cooked veggie mash, small pieces of banana or apple, cooked pasta, and cooked sweet potato can be offered. This type of food spoils fast so be sure to change or remove it after about two hours. As their eating skills progress, the foods they are given should become more challenging for them to eat on their own. Once they are eating the soft foods well, they can be given fresh fruits and veggies rather than the softer cooked ones. These are served in larger pieces. Try to offer a wide variety of healthy foods daily as this could help prevent them from becoming finicky eaters as they get older. Fresh millet spray is another good food item for baby birds to try.

Importance of Observation and Gradual Discontinuation of Formula

Observe babies carefully every day to see about how much food they are actually eating. When it is time for their mid-day feeding, check their crop by feeling gently along the lower region of the neck for a soft bulge to see if they have been eating on their own and get an idea of how much food is in it. When one consistently finds that the baby has eaten a fair amount of food, reduce the quantity of the mid-day feeding gradually until it is no longer needed.



Food dishes need to be heavy so they are not easily tipped over. Wide ceramic bowls with low sides make it easy for curious babies to explore new foods.

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For example, if one is normally giving the bird four syringes of formula per feeding, eliminate one syringe per day and then stop giving the mid-day feeding completely as long as the bird is maintaining weight and eating on its own.

As the chick's eating skills continue to improve, the next feeding to taper off and then remove is the morning feeding. Start by giving them a bowl of foods to eat on their own first thing in the morning followed by their formula an hour or two later. As they start eating more on their own in the morning, start to decrease the amount of formula given. Most of the time, they will naturally do this on their own. When they start to refuse to eat handfeeding formula or regurgitate it up, they are telling you they have fulfilled their hunger. Note however, these signs can also mean the chick may be ill. It is important that the bird's weight is being maintained and it is still bright and active. If not, the bird should be taken to an avian veterinarian immediately. Eventually they will likely refuse the morning feed and just run away and go play.

The nighttime feeding is always the last one to be dropped. Babies generally don't eat at night and this meal will help keep their appetite satisfied until morning. When the baby no longer wants the formula, he will simply refuse to eat it or will regurgitate it. Once the baby has not had any formula for two weeks and has maintained his weight, he can be considered weaned.

Weaning Regression

Weaning regression will sometimes occur when a baby goes to a new home. He may feel nervous and insecure and need a little extra nurturing. This is simply a natural occurrence, like when a person feels a bit nervous when starting a new job, and should not be mistaken for "forced weaning" or not being completely weaned. Offer extra food; feed some warm comfort foods or a bit of formula using a spoon, your fingers, or a syringe. Eat your meals with him and offer him food. Talk softly to him and handle him gently. The bird will soon learn that it can trust you and its confidence and eating skills will quickly return.

Finding an Avian Veterinarian

There are several good ways to find an avian veterinarian near you. A comprehensive list of avian veterinarians can be found on the AAV website; visit www.aav.org, then click on "Find a Vet." Other bird owners as well as local bird stores and clubs can also be good sources of information.



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AAV: Setting a Standard in Avian Care Since 1980

Avian medicine is a distinct and very specialized field that requires extensive training, advanced skills, and facilities specifically designed and equipped to treat and hospitalize birds. The Association of Avian Veterinarians was established to provide veterinarians with this special education, and to keep them up to date with the latest information on bird health. The AAV holds an annual conference on avian medicine and publishes the peer-reviewed *Journal of Avian Medicine and Surgery*. AAV also makes annual contributions toward avian conservation and sponsors studies advancing the understanding of avian medicine.

For More Information

For more information on birds, ask your veterinarian for copies of the following AAV Client Education Brochures:

- Avian Chlamydiosis and Psittacosis*
- Veterinary Care for Your Pet Bird*
- Basic Care for Companion Birds*
- Behavior: Normal and Abnormal
- Caring for Backyard Chickens
- Digital Scales
- Feather Loss
- Feeding Birds
- Foraging for Parrots*
- Injury Prevention and Emergency Care
- Managing Chronic Egg-laying in Your Pet Bird
- Protecting Your Pet Bird from Household Dangers
- Signs of Illness in Companion Birds*
- Ultraviolet Lighting for Companion Birds
- When Should I Take My Bird to a Veterinarian?*
- Zoonotic Diseases in Backyard Poultry*

*Available in multiple languages. All others are available in English only at this time.

Online Resources

Follow AAV on Facebook (www.facebook.com/aavonline) for great tips and the latest news for pet bird owners. You can also find us on Twitter (@aavonline) and YouTube!

Our website, www.aav.org, offers a Find-a-Vet tool to help pet bird owners locate avian veterinarians around the world. We also offer a variety of resources such as basic bird care instructions and more. Visit the website today!

Special Thanks

This handout written by Pat Pecora. Photos provided by Brian Blonshine (syringe feeding/crop notation, p1), Dr. Darius Stark (baby birds, p4), and Laurie Laskiwski of Parrots Parrots Parrots Aviary (all others).

