

Hand Raising Lorikeets: How lorikeets make amazing ambassadors

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What are your most memorable moments from visiting zoos? Feeding birds in a walk-through aviary is probably high up on that list. People usually think of animal ambassadors being in formal presentations, but individuals in walk-through interactive

exhibits still deserve that title of animal ambassadors. Here at Nashville Zoo, we have a walk-through lorikeet aviary that is home to about eighty lorikeets of eight different species. The species that call Nashville Zoo their home are blue-headed lorikeets

(*Trichoglossus haematodus caeruleiceps*), green-naped lorikeets (*Trichoglossus haematodus*), Swainson's lorikeets (*Trichoglossus moluccanus*), perfect lorikeets (*Trichoglossus euteles*), Weber's lorikeets (*Trichoglossus weberi*), ornate lorikeets (*Trichoglossus ornatus*), Goldie's lorikeets (*Psitteuteles goldiei*), and Rosenberg's lorikeets (*Trichoglossus rosenbergii*). The Lorikeet Landing aviary has been open since 2005. Numerous chicks have been hatched here since then, and each and every one of them have been hand raised. Throughout this article, you will read about how Nashville Zoo hand raised their chicks as well as how the lorikeet chicks continuously make great ambassadors for their species.

Once breeding season comes around, the lorikeets try to nest in every small, tight space they can find. They are cavity nesters so they look for any small spaces to nest in, and some of them are very opportunistic in their nest choice. They try to dig under rocks, hide in the vestibule, and tuck themselves in guest's pockets. To deter these unwanted behaviors and encourage proper nesting behavior, keepers place nestboxes with shavings throughout the aviary. If a bird wants to nest, it will find a box and



Lorikeets being social



Nestbox in aviary



Rocket and Vampire with eggs



Wrigley and Ivy after hatching

have that as its territory. Usually, it is our larger species like our green-naped, Swainson's, and blue-headed that take up residence in the aviary boxes. If we want our smaller species to breed, we have a separate breeding space behind the scenes for them. The keepers check the nest boxes daily for eggs. When an egg is seen in a box, we have to make a decision to either pull it or leave it with the parents. We make that decision based on how well the parents are sitting on the egg. If we pull the egg, we will either place it in an incubator at 99.5 degrees and 55% humidity, or we will place it under another pair of birds that are not paired properly, but are great parents.

In 2023, Nashville Zoo hatched eight successful lorikeets chicks. The first two of the year were Green-naped chicks named Wrigley and Ivy. Their parents, Rocket and Vampire, are one of the zoo's most productive lorikeet pairs. Since they are dependable parents they kept their eggs, and keepers closely monitored them until hatching. For all parent-reared chicks, once the eggs hatch, we let the parents take care of the chicks for the first three weeks. The three week point is the sweet spot that we pull all chicks to

transition from being parent-reared to hand-reared. This is when they start to become more aware of the world around them. Waiting longer usually causes the chicks to be more skittish and jumpy. The parents cared for the chicks the first critical days of development, and keepers cared for the chicks after to create a bond with the chicks. This led to the chicks becoming acclimated to human contact and became more comfortable around people. Keepers also exposed them to a variety of sights and sounds they will be around as adults, so they are less likely to be frightened easily. Since they are going to be in close contact with hundreds to thousands of people daily, there is a benefit to hand raising. This is the important part of becoming an ambassador animal.

After we pulled them, we started hand feeding them. For three-week-old chicks like Wrigley and Ivy we started out feeding them every two to three hours. We continuously watched their crop to see how much they needed to be fed, basing our next feed on how quickly their crop emptied out. When we fed chicks, we mixed Higgins Premium Pet Foods® inTune Hand Feeding Formula Hi-Energy for Baby Macaws with

lorikeet nectar and a little bit of fruit or vegetable baby food. This gave them the boost from chick formula, as well as offering the different tastes they have been used to from their parents. We started out by syringe feeding into the side of their beak. Then we moved on to pan feeding by hooking their beak on the side of a metal pan and tipping the warmed food to the side so they can guzzle it down. Once they caught on to pan feeding, we set a warm pan of food down in front of them and encouraged them to put their head down and eat on their own. If they were dependably self-feeding from that pan in front of them, we would stop hand feeding them. Each chick progressed differently.

While chicks are at this stage, my favorite part is to bring them out into the aviary. This past summer, I placed Wrigley and Ivy in a bowl and brought them out to see the public. The guests enjoyed seeing a baby bird, and I enjoyed educating them about bird breeding and chick rearing. This also benefited the chicks because they got to experience social grooming from some adults in the flock which were willing to help care for these chicks. This experience helped socialize the chicks.



Wrigley and Ivy a few days old



Three-week-old Wrigley and Ivy



Five-week-old Wrigley and Ivy

As the chicks got older and figured out how to fly, they were no longer allowed to go out in the aviary in their bowl. We didn't want to risk that they would fly away from us at such a young age. We took as much time as we could to continue socializing with the chicks behind the scenes. When it starts to get warm enough outside where they can be left out, they were introduced into the aviary with the rest of the lorikeet flock. The lorikeet chicks learned how to come in by watching the adults and following them when they are shifted in for the night. If they did not figure out how to do that right away, the chicks stayed outside overnight until they did.

Once the lorikeet chicks are adults, they become great ambassadors for their species. Because we hand raised every single chick, they are comfortable around people and are gentler with guests. We tried to expose them to anything that could potentially scare them. With and without food, the lorikeets land on people. They preen guests' hair and lick the perspiration off their arms. Guests become very enriching for the birds, and they seek out human interaction. The guests



Perfect lorikeet Kili grooming Wrigley and Ivy



Wrigley and Ivy in aviary

make wonderful memories, and the birds are mentally stimulated with human interaction. Eventually, the lorikeets we hand raised become great parents themselves. Having a close bond with keepers does not interfere with breeding. Since we have multiple chicks per year, we end up sending some out to other Association of Zoos

and Aquariums (AZA) accredited zoos. Because of all the time and dedication we put into hand raising our lorikeets, we not only inspire Nashville Zoo guests, but we inspire numerous guests around the US. I look forward to seeing how much of an impact Wrigley, Ivy, and the other six chicks from this year will have inspiring others about conservation. 🦜

Animal Keepers' Forum

