

“Once a Grey, Always a Grey...”

A cat made her lodgings in one of the nest boxes and brought up her kittens in it, and two of the grey parrots who had not been industrious enough to lay eggs and have a family of their own were seized with the idea that these kittens were their children. They kept up a constant warfare with the old cat, and whenever she left the box one of them used to get in and sit with the kittens, and they were constantly in attendance even when the mother was home.

Charles Buxton, England, 1880s



It has been over 290 years since the first documented captive breeding of a pair of African Grey Parrots by a western aviculturist. Millions of hookbill keepers have maintained a lasting love affair with this intriguing old-world psittacine. Demand for these vulture-looking grey parrots with the perceptive eye and the virtuoso voice seems to become only stronger with the years. Locating a new source for a handfed baby grey in a world market that never seems saturated is like trying to obtain singing male canaries in September. "Sorry, all sold, thank you!"

With regular success in certain quarters amongst the many timneh grey pairs set up during the heydays of import stations, one would think finding a grey parrot would be a bit easier. Not so. I have persons with several parrots e-mail me looking for one, declaring: "I've always wanted a grey. I've just been waiting for the prices to come down!"

That is certainly an ill-fated waiting game. Even handfed timneh prices are fully comparable to the larger red-tailed greys, while those mythical claims of timnehs as "junk parrots" among some unenlightened dealers near southern quarantine stations have long ago disappeared. T'was about time!

"Timnehs were customarily considered the poor man's grey," one experienced hookbill breeder related. "Yet we find our timneh chicks to be the nicest grey babies. They are outgoing, comical, more vociferous than our red-tailed greys—less likely to just sit there."

"I find the timneh personality calmer, less neurotic," explained another noteworthy hobby aviculturist in the Los Angeles vicinity. Half my breeders are domestic bred, half former wild-

caughts. The domestic birds may not produce as many babies for me, but there are no thrashings in the nest like during an earthquake."

Through the years, I have watched over many a timneh grey pet, and even had some breeding birds in my care for a time. I have to say conclusively that these smaller *Psittacus* are less likely to turn to feather picking in unhappy situations.

Picture this: Baby grey comes into his new home, is cuddled and fawned over by the family for weeks. Then begins a transition. Family routine settles back to normal; perhaps the kids go back to school. The new grey is like a toy whose first attraction has worn off. Extra food, treats and attentions are lessened. He spends more time in his cage. Presto! Boredom and frustration followed by feather picking. We've known of adorable red-tailed grey babies that are sold into seemingly agreeable pet homes, return with plucking habits barely 18 months later! Why greys, everyone is asking? And why the larger red-taileds in particular?

One long time parrot breeder and aviary consultant in the northwest explains the situation this way. "You have to remember there are a tremendous number of greys out there" he said. "In Amazons, if one bird in ten plucks, we think little about it. But, in greys, if ten birds in 100 pick, or 100 birds in 1000; then we call it a problem."

These psittacines have been under scrutiny so often and so long that pet owners and breeders are constantly debating their habits and propensities. For example, are African Greys more intelligent than many other parrots?

They certainly have been given opportunity to display talents. Dr. Irene Pepperberg's test gray "Alex", now deceased and just incidentally a feather shaver himself, was only one of a host of greys with suspected cognitive powers. The truth is, had scientists chosen to work diligently with Yellow-naped Amazons, Green-winged Macaws or Black-capped Lorries, the continued years of training would probably have brought somewhat the same exclamations of intelligence in these species. Since their first "discovery" by Frenchmen traveling to the Canary Islands in the 1400s, the African Grey Parrot has been given the best of chances to strut his mental stuff.



For over two decades, Feathered Friends of Santa Fe, New Mexico has made a conscious effort to specialize in Timneh Gray Parrots as pets. The owner, Darlene, has a lovely, sociable 20-plus-year-old timneh named "Pearl."

The fascination all began with a perhaps five-year-old

imported timneh named "Bingo" whose life had taken him from the wilds of West Africa to the importers, through a quarantine station, to a retail pet shop, to one owner, another owner, back to the shop and on to a third owner all within five years.

Bingo was amazing. He was in perfect feather. He would eat most diets. He stepped up on anyone's hand. He did not tremble, growl or bite. The more we touted Bingo's calm maturity, the more stories we began to hear about the adaptability, playfulness and speech talents of this grey subspecies. Many seasons of handfeeding and raising domestic timnehs has confirmed the hunch that this psittacine is a veritable bonanza as a pet. Being distinctly smaller than the red-tailed grey, the timneh is often decidedly more agile.

"A very convenient size for a shoulder pet," customers remark.

"Equally friendly to my husband, my kids and me," another buyer observed.

African Greys can be hesitant to jump onto the shoulder of a former handfeeder after months in a new home. Some seven out of ten red-taileds may refuse to get up on a previous keeper's hand without urging from their owner. Reluctant timnehs are fewer. Gregariousness seems to run in this group.

Let us not mistake the purpose here. This is not a subjective "better or not" comparison between African Grey subspecies. In my estimation the well-raised, flighted, confident red-tailed grey parrot may well be the finest long term pet psittacine available in the U.S. marketplace today. What we are examining are subtle dissimilarities—tendencies that may prove important for a hardworking, preoccupied twenty first century pet owner; or a reclusive, studious keeper of a single parrot; or an active, high-energy, social night-life bird owner; etc.

A grey is a grey is a grey, right? Well, not precisely....

Take the rampant misuse of the word "Congo" for example. Even experienced aviculturists fall into the trap of calling the large red-tailed *erithacus* imported long in the past and bred to multi generations in captivity as the noble Congo Grey. In truth, few if any true Congo (i.e. Belgian Congo, now Zaire) parrots were brought to the U.S. after 1984 and fewer still were kept geographically pure in breeding pairs. Our present era of red-tails mostly derived from the Cameroons and originated far northwest of the Congo River basin. They are smaller by 100 to 150 grams than the true Congo and males are often darker in coloration, unlike the extreme silver/white of both genders in the real Congo.

"Once you see a true Congo you will never again be fooled," made clear my friend and the esteemed aviculturist Dale R. Thompson. "Most persons say WHAT IS THAT? I mean, they were HUGE! Six hundred to seven hundred grams."

African Grey subspecies tend to be widely separated by geographical boundaries; larger red-tailed birds from Ghana east into the rainforest; smaller birds west to the timneh's range in Sierra Leone, Liberia and nearby areas.

For centuries red-tailed greys have been valued as house parrots—first by the nobility, the clergy, and the wealthy and today by almost any hookbill lover taking the time to locate and purchase one. It is their talking ability and stately behavior which set them apart.

In this, the red-tailed parrot is a near perfect perch psittacine—able to live happily in a wire-free bird room or on an atrium tree without undue noise-making, chewing on woodwork (if given plenty of browse and not in nesting mode), or venturing beyond its boundaries. Given a peaceful setting, pet red-taileds tend to stay put once out of the juvenile stage when most pet birds go "exploring". A plate of interesting foods including oil-rich seeds and nuts, a large water dish, a variety of branches and perches to teach climbing skills and keep feet and beak trim; toys for diversion, perhaps a window or view of life beyond their space and some nice music. Voila! A perfect parrot.

Perhaps another reason this subtly-shaded psittacine fits in the pet market as a companion to young and old is the little recognized fact that African Greys develop very loose pair bonds. During the 1800s, observers in the wilds of Principe Island described colonies of red-tailed

greys in various stages of nesting, sometimes using two or three holes in a single tree. Not something you are likely to encounter with most South Americans!

Domestically, greys have been successfully colony raised; and some breeders noted solid results when hens were moved in rotation from cage to cage amongst male birds every year or two. Certain facilities used to breed row after row of African Grays in close quarters completely shielded from neighboring cages specifically because a bird in one cage might become enamored of a nearby grey and lose interest in producing clutches with its designated mate.

Such social habits among greys seem to contradict widespread conclusions that grays are "one person" pet parrots. Yet social interactions in a wild state are not necessarily comparable to social needs in a home environment. Many African Grey pets tend to be insecure. In the absence of siblings or colony, the easiest way to cope with insecurity is for a parrot to cling tightly to a preferred human.

For years we have been advising pet grey owners to expose their babies to new and interesting situations, introduce them to congenial people for handling, and teach them words and sounds of scary or dangerous things in their lives (i.e. a pet dog, horse, automobile, bicycle, flag, airplane, flashlight, stereo, etc.). Indeed this is the way to create a more adaptable well-rounded pet grey--not by protective routines, avoiding of all stressful growing situations, or giving in to early habits of a "one-owner parrot."

Greys can be quick to take a routine environment and consider it security. Deny your pet access to the bedroom or garage for months at a time, and you may end up with a grey frightened to enter either without jumpiness or stress at the new surroundings. Accordingly, to clip a young grey's wings and toenails before it has learned agility skills, hopping and landing, and the strength to climb or hang upside down is to risk turning your parrot into a trembling, timid dodo.

The secret of getting the most out of these marvelous psittacines as pets is patience and awareness that they will continue to learn year after year. The sky is the limit for this species.

It is not hard to assess all the long term benefits of such extrovert training: favorable results. We have known greys who love to ride in the car, for example; others who think nothing of climbing upon a stranger's hand. Truly, this *Psittacus erithacus* is a hearty challenge to any aspiring aviculturist. Above all else, the African Grey Parrot is *its own parrot*. To get it to do something it must want to do it; to get it to like someone, it must be enticed and its trust earned. Remember, as birds, these psittacines are neither black nor white. They must have it like this. As hookbill lovers and scholars, we should want it no other way....

Mahalo, EB