

Raising Helmets Without Feeders By Mike Crawford

Over the years people have been talking about modern helmets having trouble feeding their babies. I have also had this problem and I don't have space to keep feeder pairs. To move past this problem I work with the helmet pairs to help them and hand feed babies. Over the last 15 years I have raised on average 30-50 birds a year with the following techniques.

In general it is best to let the parents do as much of the work as possible. If the parents are sitting tight you can let the squabs under them in the nest. I let the parents feed the babies as much as possible. If the babies are not being fed I will hand feed them from day one. If they are being fed I will let the parents feed first and then I will top off the babies. I have also found parents who are not good feeders at first and then start feeding at when the babies are 1-2 weeks old. Keeping the parents in the process helps them maintain their parenting skills and reduces the amount of hand feeding required. It is worth noting that hens feed for the first 10 or so days, then the cocks feed through weaning time. Watching when the babies are and are not fed will help you identify who is the poorer parent in the pair.

If the parents are not sitting well the babies should be moved. I use a small aquarium with an incandescent light to house and warm the babies that I remove from the nest. Babies can be kept in the aquarium from the day that they hatch until weaning time (3-4 weeks).

There are a number of good hand feeding formulas on the market. Most of the mixes have been developed and marketed for parrots and other cage birds. I have used Exact and Roudy Bush with good success. Most formulas come with clear instructions so I will not go into detail on mixing the feed. I will try to describe some of the techniques I use that are specific to pigeons.

I use various sizes of syringes / bottles in the hand feeding process. I try to group the babies into large, medium, and small sizes and choose the size syringe and feeding mix concentration accordingly. The pictures at the right show the types of syringes /bottles that I use. It is very important that the feeding syringe tips are not too sharp or pointy as they could cut or tear the mouth and throat of the baby you are trying to feed.

When preparing the hand feeding mix I use a very dilute mixture for the small



babies and make it more thick as the birds get bigger. I use warm water to make the mix. The warm water is not a shock to the small babies and it also helps the mix dissolve better.

To feed the babies tilt back and pull up, holding their head between your thumb and forefinger. Your hand will be over the back of the baby and then slightly extend the neck and put the head up. Insert the syringe or bottle tip into the back of the bird's mouth being careful to avoid the front hole which is the bird's wind pipe. When the tip is in place gently push in the feed. If the feed mix goes in easily the tip is in the right place. If it flows back out of the beak or is difficult to push, the syringe tip is not at the right place and you should pull out the syringe and then put it back in to try again.



When the babies are first hatched the trick is to get a small amount into the bird and not let any drain down into the lungs. A very little bit in a fresh hatch will go a long way. I feed twice a day. Some directions suggest that fresh hatches should be fed more frequently. However I have had very good luck with 2 times a day, morning and evening. The babies are most vulnerable in the first 2 weeks after hatching. This is where you need to be most careful and practice. As the babies get larger I increase the amount of feed and the size of feeding syringe. By the time the babies are a few weeks old I switch from the syringe to a feeding bottle seen here. The bottle holds more feed and allows me to quickly service the babies without having to repeatedly refill the syringe. Older babies should be fed until their crop is pumped full and nicely bulging. It should look and feel similar to a baby that is well fed under a good feeder pair.



While I work with the babies I try to evaluate their overall wellbeing. As I noted before, I try to keep the youngsters with their parents as much as possible. I carefully observe the babies when I feed in the morning and evening. It is especially important to check the crops to see if there is any feed remaining. I have found that babies who are not well covered by the parents and get cold usually have feed remaining in their crops at feeding

time. While it may appear that the parents are sitting well, the undigested food in the crop is your signal to move the babies from their parents to the aquarium.

The conditions in the aquarium should also be monitored. The light bulb wattage often needs changed based on the outside air temperature. If the babies are huddled together under the light, they need more heat. The amount of feed in the crop at feeding time should also be monitored. As I noted above, if there is food remaining in the crop between the morning and evening feedings, the babies are too cool. If the babies move off to the side of the light, that would indicate that it is too hot for them. I have had good luck keeping all sizes of babies in the aquarium together. Even the fresh hatches seem to do OK. I have had up to 8 babies in aquarium at same time and not same age. I have had new hatches and 3 week olds together, it doesn't matter. It is actually neat to watch new hatches crawl under 3 week olds just as if they are parents. As they get older the babies will learn from each other and help in the weaning process.

Weaning the babies is the key next step in the process. When the babies are 2 weeks old I start adding grains to the hand feeding process. I open the baby's mouth in the same way that I would to insert the feeding syringe. Then I carefully start pushing some amount of small grains into their throat. This simulates what the parents would be doing at this point in their feeding process. As the babies move from 2 to 3 weeks old I try to give them increasingly more grain. I also start to dip their beaks in the water dish to teach them how to drink. The key to weaning is getting them to drink. My goal is to wean the babies at about 3-4 weeks of age so they are eating and drinking on their own.

When the babies are eating and drinking I remove them from the aquarium or their parents. I put them into a small young bird pen where I keep babies that are recently weaned up to 1-2 months old. I don't keep them with old birds because the babies sometimes stop eating and will try to beg for feed and continue to rely, or hope to rely, on the old birds to feed them. By keeping the youngsters together they learn from each other but won't beg for feed and slow the process.

The one problem with extensive hand feeding and using the aquarium is keeping track babies and parents. The key challenge is watching the babies until they are ready to band. This can be very tedious and you may need to be creative if you have a bunch of babies at the same age. I have tried to use small separators or dividers in the aquarium with differing amounts of success. The best thing to do is keep accurate records of who was moved when and then sort it out the best you can.

I can take care of 10 babies in less than 5 minutes including mixing and clean up. It doesn't take long until the babies think you are mom or dad and they will be begging you to feed them. We all want our birds to be better feeders. Until that happens hand feeding can be a useful tool and help you raise lots of babies. With some patients and practice you can be very successful.