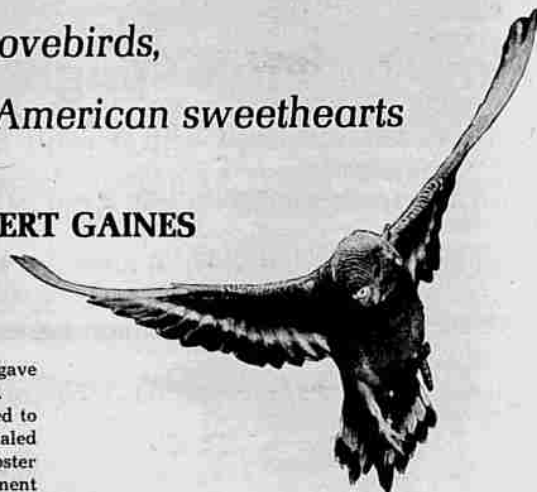




Parakeets for Valentines

Experts claim they're not really lovebirds,
but you can't prove it by American sweethearts

By MARYA SAUNDERS and ROBERT GAINES



A MILWAUKEE ATTORNEY recently dropped in to the pet shop of an old friend and asked plaintively, "What can I get him for Valentine's Day?" "Get who?" his friend yelled, trying to shout a large cage of brightly colored birds.

"Oh, you know who.

The only one I know who loves me for myself—Petie, my parakeet."

The pet dealer nodded sympathetically. It was an old story to him. The shell parakeet or Australian budgerigar is one of the most affectionate birds in the feathered kingdom and has been a favorite pet and love gift throughout the world for more than 100 years.

In 1925, for example, a Japanese prince visiting England was given a pair of blue budgies by King George V. He brought them home as a love gift for his prospective bride.

A craze for giving parakeets began among well-to-do Japanese sweethearts that soon boosted prices as high as \$1,000 a pair. It was during this period that the parakeet first became known in the United States and was often incorrectly sold as a lovebird.

The real lovebird, according to Sylvia Gray, who has bred and distributed 150,000 shell parakeets in the past 15 years, is African in origin, larger than the budgie, and not even in the parakeet family. He is sullen, irritable, and capable of pecking out his mate's eyes. While the 11 million parakeets found in American homes today are not officially lovebirds, they are by nature more lovable birds.

Once they mate, the parakeet pair will remain together for life and can pine terribly if separated. When offered genuine affection by humans, the parakeet responds with an enthusiasm practically unmatched in the bird world.

Parakeet owners usually become as attached to the bird as the bird to them. Some even take them to bed at night, and others never go visiting without budgie coming along in his little carrier.

How much a man can love his parakeet was demonstrated several years ago when New York City police arrested a prominent mobster for the brutal slaying of one of the city's worst loan sharks. They questioned him for 24 hours, but he wouldn't

say a word. Exhausted, the detectives finally gave up and said the man could make a phone call.

They were amazed when the criminal rushed to the phone and instead of calling his lawyer dialed a local pet shop. In a worried voice, the mobster asked the owner to hurry over to his apartment and feed his pet parakeet, who hadn't had any fresh water or seeds in a day.

Another indication of America's love for the "lovebird" is that we spend \$60 million a year on birdseed and parakeet toys. In return, we get not only a bird kiss but—if budgie is trained properly—even a "thank you," since the parakeet can imitate a large number of human sounds.

According to "All Pets Magazine," the first report of a talking budgerigar came from Germany in 1877 and from America in 1930, when a nine-month-old bird spoke 20 words. A couple of months ago, an English woman claimed her bird had a vocabulary of some 2,000 words.

Compared with other birds, the parakeet is unrivaled in his enthusiasm for human affection.



If you plan to buy one of these birds, here is what Sylvia Gray advises you to look for:

1. A healthy parakeet: he should be active, not puffed up, and should have a completely dry rump with no sign of diarrhea.

2. A young bird: the stripes should still be on the head and should reach the cere, which is the soft top of the parakeet's beak where you see the nostrils. The cere should not be a strong blue or tan, which indicates that the bird is a mature male or female, and the beak should be black.

3. A plump and fully feathered bird: if you can feel his bones when you hold him, he is probably not eating well and will not live long.

You'll also find that the current love affair between parakeets and the human race has the endorsement of many doctors. Some recommend parakeet breeding as an excellent form of rehabilitation for cardiac patients because it requires so little heavy work.

Many psychiatrists encourage parakeets for children with speech defects. The careful, slow enunciation needed to teach a parakeet to speak is as beneficial to the child as it is to the bird.

Recently, a psychiatrist in Austin, Texas, was visited by the worried parents of a seven-year-old girl who kept running away from home. The psychiatrist suggested the child have a pet. A parakeet was best for their small apartment.

"Let the child care for the bird herself," the psychiatrist said. "When she realizes how dependent it is on her, she won't want to leave home. You just can't walk away from love."

Which gives you an idea why another parakeet phenomenon is growing in the United States—giving a budgie as a Valentine's Day gift.

You can't get much more love in a four-ounce, feathered package.

Free Parakeet Booklet

If you would like a free copy of "Parakeets Are Fun!" a 32-page illustrated booklet on the care, feeding, and training of parakeets, write to Parakeets, Family Weekly, P. O. Box 4616, Chicago, Ill.