

Basic Care of African Owls

I have been raising African Owls for 11 years now and have experienced many highs and lows during that time. Raising this breed is more challenging than anything else I have found in the pigeon world. That's one thing that really endeared me to the breed. The fact that I was going to have to be more hands-on with this breed than others I had bred. I like having to keep a close eye on the birds to make sure they are okay. I like handfeeding the babies to get them to weaning. I like trying to manipulate all of the little details of the birds' features in the breeding program to try to get that perfect specimen. They are not the easiest breed to work with and they are not a good breed to try to start with in pigeon raising. But once you are comfortable raising pigeons and you're looking for a real challenge but also a very docile, friendly, attractive breed to work with, African Owls may be just what you're looking for. Here are some things you need to consider when breeding African Owls.

1. Get your stock from someone who is winning consistently. This ensures that you are getting a good bloodline of birds. One thing that frustrates many new breeders to the point that they give up the breed is the fact that African Owls do not always breed true to type. What I mean by that is in many breeds, if you get a really nice looking pair of birds, the genes are so consistent in those breeds, that they will breed you nice looking, show quality birds. African Owl genes are nearly all recessive so even if you have some good looking birds, that is no guarantee they will breed nice youngsters. By getting birds from a consistently winning loft, you increase the chances that your birds will breed you nice youngsters.
2. Get a good stock of feeder birds. The feeders you get are as important as the Owls you get. African Owls have very short beaks. The parents cannot feed their own babies past a couple of days old so you must "foster" the babies out to another breed to feed the rest of the way. Usually, this is done by switching the eggs shortly after they are laid. You match up the African Owl pair with a pair of "feeders" or "foster parents" that have laid within a day or two of the Owls, and you switch the eggs. After 9 or 10 days you throw away the feeder eggs under the Owls and let the Owls lay again. For this reason, you usually need two pairs of feeders for each pair of Owls. Some people also like to have only one Owl baby under each pair of feeders so they have additional pairs of feeders to do that. I have never found that to be necessary personally. The usual breeds people use to feed Owls are Racing Homers and Flying Flights. Both are big enough to do the job, calm on the nest, and diligent about taking care of babies. Many other

breeds have been tried. Some work okay and some don't. Some people use crosses of two or three different breeds. As long as they will feed Owl babies and not give up, go ahead and use them if you like. You have to be careful not to get a breed that is too big or too small. Rollers are generally too small and Utility Kings are too big. If you can get your feeders from an established Owl breeder you will be way ahead of the game.

3. No one raises African Owls successfully without doing some handfeeding. There is a wide range of extremes on this. Some people handfeed the babies from the time they are very small all the way to weaning and some people try to do as little handfeeding as possible. I like to handfeed my birds because it makes them tame and it also allows me to use fewer feeders. I take the babies from the feeders when they are about 8 to 10 days of age and put them in a brooder type box with a light in it to keep them warm. I then handfeed the babies for 7 to 10 days until they have a good covering of feathers and can get up and walk around. At this point, they are ready for the weaning pen. They usually wean in 3 or 4 days. Many others do not handfeed unless they have to and if they do, they will leave them in the nest with the feeders so the feeders will continue to feed them some. You can do either extreme or anything in between. It's up to you. You will have feeders sometimes though, that will not feed the babies and then you will have no choice but to handfeed them. If you get a system of handfeeding down and determine that you are going to enjoy the job, you will have success at it.
4. There are as many methods of handfeeding as there are different breeds of pigeons. Many people use a plastic ketchup bottle that has a long nozzle on the end. They mix up the feed, open the babies mouth and squeeze some food in. The babies learn very quickly to just suck it all in without choking on the food. I prefer to use a syringe. I like to use a 20cc because it fits my hand well. On babies about 10 days old, 20 to 30 cc's is all they need. At 20 days, they usually take 40 to 60 cc's. I like a syringe that has a little plastic tip about 1/2 inch long on it. I stick that in the beak and fill the baby up. The type of food I use is Kaytee Exact Baby bird food. It was originally made to feed baby parrots I think but it also works well on pigeons. You mix it with warm water until it is soupy and then feed it. There are some other brands of the same type of product such as Roudybush. These work well too but I have an easier time getting Exact where I live. Some people grind up pigeon or turkey pellets and feed those. They are cheaper to use but it is more labor-intensive to do that. They also do not work well with the type of syringe I use. They clog up the tip. Again, whatever works well for you. Talk to several breeders and get their opinions, then settle on what works best in your situation.

5. Owls need a dry loft and plenty of sunshine. African Owls are more subject to getting respiratory problems than other breeds so it is doubly important to have plenty of fresh air and a dry loft. Try to keep no more than one bird per 1.25 square feet of loft space if possible. Owls are friendly, non-aggressive birds but if you overcrowd them they will get sick easily. If you keep their loft clean, dry and uncrowded, you will rarely see disease in them.
6. Clean water is very important for healthy Owls. Since Owls have short beaks, they end up putting their whole noses into the water to get a drink. This makes them more susceptible to getting sinus infections. Try to keep the supplements you add to the water to a minimum and change the water every day. Your birds will love you for it.
7. Look for birds with wide, square beaks and noses, not pointy ones. You will never be successful at the shows with pointy-nosed birds. You must get birds that have more square noses to compete well. If you breed from birds out of winning lofts, you will be more likely to breed square-nosed birds. This is the most scrutinized part of the whole show bird. If you can get this feature in your birds early on in your breeding program, it will shorten the time it will take for you to be a winner. There are many other parts to a good African Owl but this is the most critical one.
8. Trim the beaks on a regular basis and your birds will be ready for the shows. The beak and nose of an African Owl are evaluated more by the judges than any other part of the bird. The beak must be trimmed so the upper and lower mandibles meet evenly. The beak must not be pointed on the end. I try to keep clipping the beaks all through the summer with a fingernail clipper so they do not get out of hand. If you do this, you will have very little filing to do on the beaks when it is show time. You will only need to round the front off a little. Use a common, women's fingernail file to smooth the beak up so the front is rounded off and even on both top and bottom. This is the main part of show preparation on an Owl. Other than this, all you need to do is make sure the bird is clean, in good condition, free of bugs, and not missing a bunch of feathers.

If you have any other questions about how to raise African Owls or want to inquire about getting started in them, contact me and I'll be happy to try to help you. Good luck!