"Dear President Clinton"

(Or How to E-mail)

by Carole Grace Menefee

John sat at the kitchen table, a cup of coffee cooling, staring at the paper in front of him and the salutation he had just written. He felt torn between the hundred and one things he needed to be doing (clean the next block of flights, mix up more feed for the coming week, check the infirmary to see how the baby Blue and Gold is, call about...) and trying to write a letter to the President as he been urged to do at the club meeting last night.

Letters to Washington

He knew that letters to Washington were important. It was his *voice*, right? But the people at the meeting knew the words to use and right now John was having trouble even remembering what the subject had been. Wasn't it something about the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service changing the rules on the WBCA? And the WBCA was ...umm...Wild Bird...?? The phone was ringing but one of the kids would get it. Maybe it's that customer who wants those six African Greys. Have to get the shipping papers ready for them or maybe Mack could drive them down and make a couple of errand stops...oops back to this letter. Let's see, "I want to voice my concern..."

John's son Andrew walked into the kitchen, grabbed an apple and walked over to see what his dad was doing. It was unusual to see his dad writing a letter when there was so much to be done. John explained that officers at the bird club meeting he had attended last night had stressed the importance of writing letters to the President, congressmen, and senators to voice opposition to regulations that would impact on his (John's) breeding operation. Andrew commented that they ought to use e-mail and wandered out into the yard, munching his apple as he went. Mystified, John watched him leave, wondering to himself, "e-mail?" Sighing, he returned to the letter, still worrying.

E-mail?

Andrew had the answer to his father's dilemma and that of many other hard working, concerned Americans. Recently added to the list of powerful tools for the commercial breeder as well as the casual pet owner is the communication tool known as e-mail. It involves a computer and can be thought of as a form of faxing. Instead of using a fax machine, this process uses a modem (in the computer) and the now familiar "Internet." Done as a club activity, e-mailing can take the labor and fret out of the famous "writing a letter to Washington."

How it Works

E-mail works something like this. John's bird club chooses a member who has a computer with a modem (hopefully they actually volunteer, right?). Internet software and a dial-up service are next. Letters are written voicing the club's stand on current exotic bird legislation (or any subject that warrants the club's attention) in Washington D.C. or in their own state. At the general meeting, attended by the club members, the numbered letters are on display with signature sheets. Each member reads the letters and then signs, printing his/her name and address, indicating by number, which letters each person wants his name attached to. The volunteer adds each person to the bottom of the particular letter they picked, dials up the Internet, and using the e-mail "addresses" the volunteer has already obtained from various sources, sends the letter electronically to each addressee. Any civil servant who does not have an e-mail address can be faxed from the computer as well.

Various Uses for E-mail

Obviously, e-mail can be used for any purpose. Many families members, living distances away, communicate weekly, even daily, by e-mail. E-mail is cheaper then a phone call or a fax and quicker then a phone call or writing by hand. A person with a computer and a modem can install the software, obtain

a dial-up service (there are many to choose from, several cost only $20 a month) and have immediate access to the most powerful communication tool since the phone. Additionally, a breeder can e-mail a seed order, converse with other breeders, check the upcoming weather (day or night), "talk" with family members, and contact potential customers having put an ad on the Internet for the birds ready for sale. A very useful tool.

White House E-mail Trivia

Recently, the following trivia was released by the White House. President Clinton, the first president to have an e-mail address, receives, on the average, 100,000 hand-written letters weekly but only 10,000 e-mail messages during the same period. Now we all know what happens to the letters, but what happens to the e-mail messages? It's not much different than how the letters are handled. An aide reads the messages, compiles a list of the subject matter, number of messages on that subject matter and occasionally selects a random letter or two as representative.

This same process is carried out in the office of every elected and appointed official in the country. The consensus of opinion is that each person who writes counts for 50 voters of the same opinion. Let's see, there are an estimated 14 million birds in the U.S., if 10% wrote or e-mailed the president that would be 1.4 million and if each person represents 50 then 7 million people will be represented. Hmmm. Think that would get Bill's attention?

More Trivia

Here is some more trivia. A standard letter takes 10 minutes to write, with no interruptions, and 32¢ to mail not including the cost of the letter and envelope and takes an average of two days to reach its destination.

Letters to be e-mailed take approximately 2.5 minutes to write, the average cost per letter is 9¢ and takes an average of 22 seconds to go from the modem to Washington.

The power of e-mail is not only its low cost and speed but also its simplicity. Once set up, the letters can be

sent every day, every other day, or every week. Even if a person were to make copies of a personally written letter to mail repeatedly, the stamps cost 32¢ each letter and mail time is two days. E-mail is truly a win-win situation.

Form Letters

The question of form letters is usually raised when I talk to groups about the use of e-mail. I checked with our local congressman's office and was told that a single letter signed by more then one person (similar to a petition) is considered a form letter. However, if they receive 20 copies of the same identical letter, each one with a different persons name, that is considered 20 letters. The letters, e-mailed or faxed do not have to have the actual signature on them, the name and address of the person is acceptable.

Now I'll get a little more technical for those readers who are interested in doing this kind of e-mail. Input the letter you will be e-mailing using whatever word processor you have and addressing the letter appropriately, "Dear President Clinton," etc. On the bottom of the letter, below where you will be typing the name and address, add the following line, "Original signature on file with Club Name, City, State."

Now, duplicate the letter below itself as many times as you have signatures so that the file contains, say, 20 copies of the original letter. Starting with the first copy of the letter, type the name and address of each person on your signature sheets. Save the file as "Text only" using a file name that will easily tell you which letter the file contains, e.g. clntn1, gore1, etc. Your word processor should allow you to take the letter to Clinton and save it as a new name, then all you have to do is change the salutation from Clinton to Gore, saving all the time necessary to reinput the same letter and signers for each person you are e-mailing.

Once you have the same letter set up for sending to all the politicians you are contacting, go into the software you are using for your e-mail. Most programs allow you to compile mail before you sign onto the system, saving you on-line time and money. Address the first one to Clinton, attach the file

you created in your word processor and click on "send later" or whatever your particular program uses to queue mail, and go on to the next person, repeating the same process until you have all the letters ready to go.

Now dial-up your service, tell the software to send the mail and watch it fly! Usually you will get a message back from the White House telling you that your mail was received while you are still sending to the other parties. One caution, if you are a member of America On Line, their e-mail system has a file size limitation of 27K which makes group e-mail projects like this one impossible to send. I use Netscape. The next time you want to send the same letter (I send each letter once a week), all the hard work has been done. Simply change the date on your letters using the global change option, go into your e-mail program and start addressing!

Keep it Short and Sweet

Letters should be short and sweet. Remember, you're not talking to a family member who will avidly read every word you write. These letters will be read by an aide who has a lot to accomplish. The less time he needs to spend getting the gist of your message, the better the chances are that your message will get through. Retire any letters that are no longer relevant. I have numbered the letters our club has sent, retiring letters and their number when appropriate. Also keep the signature sheets filed in a book and never throw them away. The signature sheets represent the club's permission to use the members' names on the letters.

A Mighty Roar

E-mail is an extremely powerful tool. Like walking softly and carrying a big stick, it can turn a single voice into a mighty roar, heard for thousands of miles and by thousands of people. It is simple, inexpensive and deceptive in appearance to the casual observer. Used properly and often, our jungle squawk will not be ignored.

Let's face it. The WBCA clearly indicates Uncle Sam wants our birds. Are we going to let him have them?

Just how loudly are we going to say "NO!"? ➤