

Dangers to Aviary Birds

Spiders, Snakes, Hawks, Owls, Falcons and Other Wildlife

by Joyce Baum, Tucson, Arizona

Black Widow spiders just love to hide in nest boxes and other dark areas in the aviaries, so they need to be checked on a regular basis.

Here in Arizona snakes are everywhere. On occasion we see Gopher snakes around the aviaries, but leave them alone, as they are just hunting for mice. We also have numerous "resident" King snakes that live around the aviaries, constantly hunting mice. As long as you don't have any little guys on the ground, such as Button Quail, these snakes won't bother the rest of the birds, except, of course, if the little Finches decide to spend time on the ground when a snake is around.

The snakes to really watch out for are the racers, both red and black. They very fast, and they climb anything, and can get into the nest boxes!

Rattlesnakes are, of course, dangerous to all. With the drought we've been in, I think they have come down out of the mountains more into residential areas. Last year we killed 5 of them—4 were around the outside of the aviaries, and I was INSIDE! Hadn't seen any this year, until tonight (October 18), and when I went out to do a last check on my birds after 10 p.m., he was curled up in plain sight, trying to keep warm. They usually disappear into holes in the ground when it gets cold, so I guess he was hungry and still out hunting when the sun went down and he got cold. Tonight he may be a meal for a coyote or bobcat. If not, tomorrow I'm sure the Vultures will enjoy him.

At night we have owls that will, on occasion, come visiting. Of course they are hunting mice and other rodents also, but they do sometimes frighten the birds. If any are hanging on the wire and the owls see them, they will go after them. If I hear them outside, I go

out with my flashlight to chase them away.

Many years ago I had an aviary on my front porch which was fully covered by a roof, and the aviary was in a corner, well protected. About 11 pm I heard the Cockatiels in the aviary having "night fright" and causing a big commotion. Upon checking them, I discovered 2 males sitting on the bottom. I picked them up and discovered each one had a complete leg missing...all the way up into their bodies. The owl had apparently grabbed a foot through the wire and the whole leg came off. The following day the one died of stress, but the other one lived and is still alive and healthy. He was not able to breed anymore, but he helped take care of babies in the nest from other pairs of Cockatiels until I gave him to a friend who had a female and she didn't want her to have babies. This was a perfect situation as they love each other, and have no babies!

During the day the hawks are out and about all the time. They seldom come around due to all the activity outside with the dogs, but at times they come pretty close. We keep complete roofs on the tops of our aviaries for protection from predators, other wild birds, and the elements. We also have protection on the sides from the roof down about 20 or more inches. This gives the birds a place to get up out of bad weather, and also to hide at night. They feel more secure with this shelter.

We also have a "resident" Falcon, if you can believe that! Several years ago we discovered him sitting on the ground near the aviaries. We walked quite close to him and he just sat and looked at us. We figured out he was young, and possibly starving, since he didn't seem to know how to catch any food. We had pans of water out for the

wild birds, so he would often be sitting there.

My husband got the pellet gun and went hunting for rats or small ground squirrels. Then he would whistle for the Falcon, and when he got his attention, he would throw the dead animal along the ground, as if it was running. The Falcon would grab it and go off and eat it. Pretty soon, all my husband had to do was go out the door with the gun in hand, and the Falcon was flying circles over his head, waiting for his food! This didn't help any, as he would chase all the small animals into their burrows!

This went on for a couple of months, and finally the Falcon seemed to disappear. Amazingly enough, he seems to go to a cooler climate during the hot summer months, and then he's back again. He has come back every year since.

We do enjoy him, but we also had to train him to leave the birds alone, as when he couldn't find anything else to eat, he would fly at the aviaries and frighten the birds. He did manage to grab legs of a couple of English Budgies and kill them...they didn't frighten at all when he lunged at them...so we covered the one side of their flight with plexiglass to protect them. On occasion we hear the birds screaming (and they all pitch in!) Then we go outside and chase him away from the aviaries. Soon he realizes we don't want him to bother them, and he leaves to hunt other animals, or goes after the wild pigeons that live around here. We've watched him hunt them also, and it's really something to see him go after them in flight—he's very fast!

Last year we also had a Sparrow Hawk (American Kestrel) who came to visit us every morning, looking for mice to eat. We would find and kill some mice and throw them on the roof of an aviary and he would swoop down from the top of the electric pole where he sat to get his meal. Then he lost his fear of us, and we would just throw a mouse into the air for him and he would

catch it in mid-air and go back to the top of his pole to eat it. We named him Charlie.

Last October Charlie came back, and he's been here all winter! He had migrated, probably into Mexico for the summer, and now he's back with us. First thing he caught a mouse in mid-air. What a sight to see! Since then, another male has come and tried to chase him away, and his mate comes with him for food too.

There are many Roadrunners here in Arizona, and they also hunt for mice. When we catch mice we also feed the Roadrunners. When we are able to trap a lot of mice and/or rats, we take them to a local wildlife rehabber, who is always in need of these rodents to feed wildlife such as bobcats and raptors.

Living out in the "country" like we do, we also have lots of other wild animals. Someone up the road from us lost a dog to a Mountain Lion or Bobcat this year, and on occasion a Bear is spotted in the area.

We seem to have a family of "resident" Bobcats living close by, as we see them quite often, even close to our house, and have gotten close enough on occasion to take pictures. They are not afraid of us at all.

Javelina are also in abundance here. At one time last year we had 8 of them visiting us every day to eat the wild bird seed put out for the Quail and Doves, as well as get a drink of water. Sometimes they would bathe in the water and lay around in our front yard...just about 12 feet off our front porch! We watched them bring their babies to eat and drink, and watched them grow up. Since we got our two new dogs (Alaskan Malamutes) we had to fence in the front yard, so now the wild birds are fed and watered up the hill behind our house a ways. We can sit in the kitchen and watch them, and see the Bobcats and Javelina come in for water up there now.

Living in the country isn't for everyone...but we surely do enjoy it.

