

# Arctic Aviculture <sup>(1)</sup>

by Jane Pender  
Fairbanks, Alaska



My entry into husbandry a few years ago was through the back door, in a state of near total ignorance and powered by two motives. First, I'm sort of a do-gooder and second, as my grandmother reminded me often, I was endowed with an outsize curiosity bump.

Up to the time of the trans-Alaska pipeline our community here was an outpost, at the end of a very long supply line, where consumer goods were often scarce.

While most of us had dogs and often cats, the exotic bird population consisted of occasional parrots or mynah birds which often reigned over isolated roadhouses, and canaries.

The boom stimulated entrepreneurs, and by '74 or '75, our single small pet shop had become three and large numbers of exotic birds went on sale at enormous prices.

At that time, not unnaturally, nobody knew anything about birds other than our indigenous ravens, owls, and edible par-

migan. A slight exaggeration, but in fact, the library had no books about exotic birds, there were few supplies and fewer experts. Our veterinarians in general had little information beyond whatever was contained in some mandatory familiarization course.

Pet shop owners at that time were as ignorant as the rest of us and this was what initially boosted me into the fancy. Even to my untrained eye, the birds on sale here appeared to be, if not actively mistreated then at least mishandled.

Thus, I acquired an African Gray for no better reason than that she spent her first few days here screaming. She was being fed parakeet food and occupied a cage which would have been small for a pair of mannikins.

My first pair of Lady Goulds came from a community cage which also held, as I recall it, about twenty Zebras, Bengals, Cordon Bleus, Strawberry Finches and a Pekin Robin. The hen died

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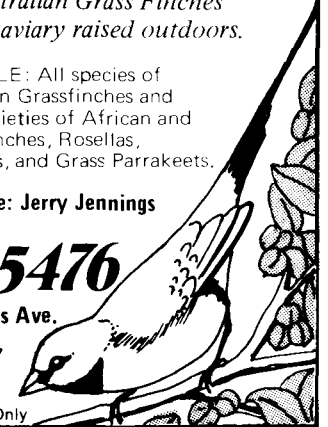
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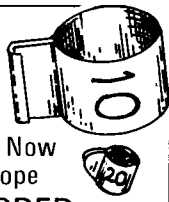
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two days after I got the pair home — for reasons nobody understood — a frustrating occurrence with which I became all too familiar.

Because they were ill housed or pretty, I subsequently bought other birds and eventually had a modest collection. I kept the birds in a little used dining area just across the counter from the kitchen, an arrangement which wasn't very satisfactory. For example, I had a pair of Pekin Robins which made me nervous because they were in constant restless motion. I moved them to a larger cage, then built a small flight for them, but even that seemed too small. We called it "the ghetto" because of a certain lower east side quality to the endless noisy conversation and occasional fights.

I go into all this to explain that launching aviculture here has been a case of reinventing the wheel. This, by the way, isn't all bad. Part of the attraction of living here is that few things that work well in more temperate climates do so here. As a result we live in a perpetual state of observing, adjusting and tinkering, which is stimulating. These are not personal characteristics but rather those of everyone who's had to make do in the more rural areas here.

As I watched and tended my birds, I became more and more dissatisfied. Even though I knew they were being properly fed and cared for, at least to the limits of my information, I got bored by the daily care of caged birds and then, as I considered the problem philosophically, became enlightened. Birds in cages, unable to fly and interact together weren't really fulfilling birdness, I thought. And that was the quality which interested me.

So, moved by these considerations and a general feeling that a touch of instant Hawaii might be pleasant in winter, I began to act out an old Alaska aphorism: "Do something even if it's wrong."

Now I have to back up a little and explain that we do have some peculiar environmental features here. Fairbanks is the coldest part of Alaska with winter temperatures which can sometimes hang for weeks at 40 to 50 below with occasional nosedives to 60 below and colder. In addition, winter here extends from mid-October to early May, give or take a week or two.

Because of our high latitude, our yearly light-dark cycle swings from 24 hour daylight the three summer months to the opposite in midwinter. The long heating season causes in-house humidity to drop to that of deserts.

Summers can get very hot from mid-July to mid-August but we can have ex-

treme temperature drops and long periods of chilly rain. So the Southern California mode of erecting outdoor flights is clearly unworkable here.

Accordingly I undertook to construct a habitat by converting one room and adding another in a place where I could watch birds while I made bread, sewed, and engaged in my occupation, which is writing.

Now this area is laughably small by "Outside" (of Alaska, that is) standards. New construction is also costly since everything has to be sheathed in insulation: twelve inches in the overhead, eight in the walls and under the floor. I also got carried away and installed skylights and a triple pane window overlooking the garden. These are very nice in summer but every October I hang heavily insulated outside shutters over the window and cover the skylights with insulated boxes. Not that light matters at that time of year, but the heat loss is enormous unless this is done.

This room is divided into two parts. The outer section is for the finches and is equipped with potted plants, mostly *Dracena fragrans massangeana* (corn plant), *Schefflera* and *Ficus elastica* (India rubber plant) which grow large and seem to survive quite well under the conditions, though they do require R and R in the garden in summer.

The hookbills occupy the part of the room closest to the rest of the house on the theory that they enjoy my companionship as much as I enjoy theirs.

Both rooms are lighted with vita lights. I'm not prepared to get into debate about whether such lights are necessary or not. But some variety of such lights have been used here for years to keep plants in good shape over the winter, and thus it seemed reasonable birds would also benefit. Certainly, for that reason, or others, they do thrive.

The floors are covered with quarry tile and the walls with vinyl wallpaper. The rooms are on a separate heating circuit so even when we go into our winter mode in the rest of the house we can maintain this one small habitat at a temperature the birds enjoy. We also use a humidifier here. We installed a freeze-up alarm which sounds when the temperature drops to 60 degrees. This gives us a 15 degree leeway during which we can get a small generator going. We frequently have power outages — generally at half-past one a.m. when it's 50 below and the generator produces enough juice to keep the oil furnace going for that room and provides minimal light elsewhere. For ourselves at such times we have a wood stove, oil lamps and a huge and heavy Austrian comforter.

Release day for the birds was great. Though they were hesitant at first to depart the safety of the cages, they learned quickly and their flying improved rapidly. Because I didn't know any better, I simply released all the birds I had at the time which included three Pekin Robins and a Canary, along with small finches. The arrangement of course didn't work and in time had to be amended.

The hookbills are housed in cages at night but free during the day. Later, I added a pair of Rosellas and am currently baby sitting a pair of Red Rumps.

The birds are visible all day and are a source of great pleasure — not merely aesthetic but also intellectual — as they began to interact in a more normal manner and eventually began to breed.

It's painful to my ego to have to report that the breeding of birds was not something I considered at the time I built my flight. In fact, I didn't even contemplate the possibility until one day a Lady Gould hen flew from the big pot which houses one of the cornplants and when I looked to see what could have brought her to that unlikely spot, I found four eggs resting on about six shreds of cornplant and three feathers. These babies flew the nest when it was minus 50 outside, and did well.

In fact, the Goulds do better than any of the other birds in the flight, including the Zebras, though the Green Singing Finches are trying to catch up. I breed the Zebras in cages, though I acquired them chiefly to serve as foster parents in case of need — an idea I now think is unsatisfactory.

The Goulds however, are the stars of my particular show. Their heaviest breeding period starts in January, or whenever I boost the humidity up to 70 to 80 percent following a long dry spell, and extends to June with some individual variation. To me, the most fascinating time of all is when there are weaned juveniles in the flight and new babies emerging and the whole group transform itself into a colony with a set of imperatives I find endlessly interesting.

I have to acknowledge my whole approach to this project has been haphazard, unscientific and less in aid of commerce than my own pleasure.

Still, it's a source of some modest pride that I'm probably the first to have successfully bred these birds in Interior Alaska, and most likely in all of Alaska. Since they travel so badly, dealers here now seldom have them shipped in, and so it's nice to have a small constant supply for fanciers who can and do travel some distance to pick them up and carry them home with great care.

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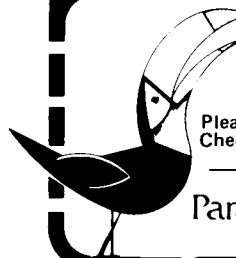
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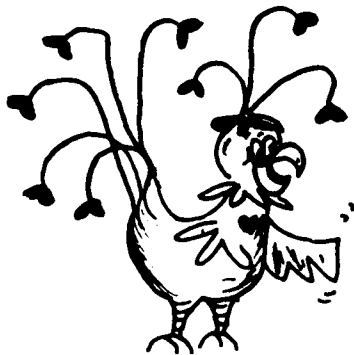
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