

# Protecting Your Birds From Fire

by Mary Ellen Le Page

**A**NOTHER SUMMER FIRE SEASON has begun. Parts of California have already been devastated with over 4000 fires and we have not yet reached the height of the fire season, September and October.

There is little we can do to protect our birds once the fury of wild-land fire approaches us. Look at the trees around you and figure that the flames will be 2-3 times the height of those trees and shrubs. With a breeze blowing live embers can spew many hundreds of feet or even up to a mile into the air. As the direction of the wind changes, so will the direction of the fire.

My aviary had to be evacuated once; a second time we were in the process of evacuating when the firefighters got the threatening portion of the fire under control. I know fire will come again! I also know that the time to protect my birds and myself is BEFORE THE FIRE IS STARTED!

## Protecting our Premises

In order to save our buildings and aviaries we must create defensible space around them. We must reduce the vegetation that fuels the fire and create a 100-foot (300-foot if on a hillside) clear space around our buildings, our entire property, or both. Avoid fuel "ladders" (grass leading to bushes leading to trees or buildings). Defensible space breaks up the continuous path of plants that would carry wildfire to our home. We also need to clear vegetation around the driveway so a fire truck can safely approach the structures. Defensible space gives firefighters a safe zone from which to fight a wildfire. Firefighters cannot save a structure that does not have defensible space.

In order to make our structures fire resistant, we should use fire retardant roofs, screened chimneys and stove pipe outlets, and enclose undersides of eaves, balconies and decks with fire resistant materials. Locate propane tanks and wood piles at least 30 feet away from any structure. It is wise to maintain an emergency generator and water supply.

## Preparing for Personal Evacuation

Properties should be marked with some type of reflective number sign at the entrance to the driveway so that firefighters will know there is a dwelling on the drive. I personally keep a sign, to be placed in view when fire approaches, indicating that we have turnaround space for a fire engine, where and how much water is available, and that I have defensible space. Fire engines will not go into a driveway unless they know there is a structure worth saving and that they can get back out.

Keep a list of items you want to take with you when you evacuate. This might include medicines, home owner's insurance, personal papers, pictures of inventory, computer back-up, bird records, etc. If you do have to evacuate, you should leave your lights and electricity on so that firefighters will be able to see your residence at night and from the road.

## Preparing for Bird Evacuation

To be prepared, we should keep sufficient carriers on hand to transport all birds during an evacuation. It is also best to keep them assembled so you won't have to waste precious time assembling them when



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it is time to evacuate. If space is an issue, try hanging the assembled carriers from the ceiling of your structures such as garage. If aviaries are locked, they should all be keyed to the same key so they can be quickly unlocked in an emergency.

When the time to evacuate arrives, you may need a trailer big enough to transport all the carriers, food, nursery equipment and personal belongings. Don't count on someone outside the fire area to bring you one because often the roads are blocked by the local Sheriff's department. They will let everyone out, but no one will be allowed in, even if they are a resident in the area.

During our last fire evacuation, which lasted five days, we could not even go for groceries because we would not be allowed back in despite the fact that we were not in the actual evacuation zone. Being a firefighter, I donned my yellow protective gear and was able to go a short distance for food to feed the firefighters and luckily they allowed me back into my property.

During the recent fire, I was lucky to have a neighbor loan me a humongous trailer and truck with trailer hitch. In the future I plan to get a closed trailer to park on the property just in case of an emergency. It will have to be a large one, because I know I will only be allowed to make one trip out and will not be allowed back into my property to make multiple trips. The trailer structure has to be ventilated and allow fresh air to enter. Having a large trailer will be a good place to store those assembled transport carriers and as many cages as will fit. After evacuation, the birds will have to be set up in larger cages to reduce stress.

When making evacuation plans, remember you will need a place to which you can evacuate. Although people respond with offers of help in times of emergencies, it is better to have evacuation sites pre-planned. If asked, many friends will offer garages and hay barns to board birds.

## Evacuation

When should you evacuate? Unfortunately there are no clear rules as to when to evacuate. No one wants to stress their birds needlessly by moving them, but we also have to allow ourselves enough time to catch them all and put them into transport carriers without putting them or ourselves in danger. Planning ahead is best. Put everything else that might be needed in the trailer, get all the carriers assembled and near the birds, then just wait until it is time to evacuate before catching the birds and putting them into the carriers.

If you are told to evacuate by the fire company, you need to respect their advice. Fire spreads or changes directions quickly with the change of temperature and wind direction. Also, even if the fire does not reach you, the smoke may kill birds. Watching the spread of the fire and the wind conditions may help you to plan the evacuation. Do not expect the roads to be passable if you wait until the last minute. They will be clogged with police cars, fire engines, other residents trying to get out, and fire. When in doubt—get out!

## Summary

You cannot imagine the panic of having a wildland fire threaten you unless you have experienced it. Having had to sit for three to five days watching a wild fire coming, then changing directions, then coming again, I can tell you it is very stressful. I did not expect to see 300-foot flames lighting up the whole sky around my property. After days of being threatened by fire and evacuation, and adding the lack of sleep, we were pretty well in a state of exhaustion.

Remember, the firefighters aren't going to save our houses – we have to save our own houses by preplanning and by creating defensible space before the approach of a fire. We are the firefighters before the Fire! With good planning we will be better able to save our home, structures, and birds from a fire.

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