

In Memory of an Old Friend

by Jean Delacour

Editor's Note: on the occasion of the Centennial of the Avicultural Society, we are privileged to present an article that first appeared in the Avicultural Magazine, November-December 1942, Series V, Volume VII, Number 6, pages 172-174.

Long before his death at the age of 95 in 1985, Jean Delacour held an awesome reputation as an ornithologist, aviculturist, explorer, conservationist, zoo and museum professional, and author. This has only grown in recent years. Aviculturists who did not have the privilege of knowing him (no one was more approachable!) or who are unfamiliar with the 281 articles and notes he wrote for his beloved Avicultural Society, from 1916 to 1982, most likely think of him as the authority on pheasants and waterfowl that he certainly was, based on the monumental works he wrote on these birds. His knowledge of and delight in birds covered all forms, however, and the following article may reveal a side of him that many may find unexpected.

—Josef Lindholm

No other birds can make better pets than Parrots, or be more intelligent. In the course of many years spent among birds, I have had dozens of tame and amusing ones, but none has left me a more vivid impression, nor more bitter regrets when it passed away, than the very intelligent and most affectionate Red-headed Conure (*Aratinga rubrolarvata*) which I had from 1922 to 1930.

The majority of tame mammals and birds which become attached to their owners usually do so as a result of clever training, petting, and offering of

tempting food. But sometimes one meets with a case of spontaneous attraction and no doubt this was the case with my Conure.

In 1922 I received a consignment of birds from western South America and this Parrakeet was in it — a biggish bird, bright grass green, with scarlet head, bend of wings and thighs, a large white beak and a white ring around the eye. The species is found from Colombia to Peru. The bird, undoubtedly a male, was neither very beautiful nor rare. It did not look wild. We had several more interesting specimens to care for in the consignment, so we cut the feathers on one of its wings so that he could not fly, and let him out on some bushes along the balustrade of the terrace. He stayed there, coming in to feed, and looking very happy.

I had noticed that the bird was tame and even rather aggressive, but there were several other Parrakeets and small Parrots living there under the same conditions and I paid little attention to him, aside from giving him some tit-bits whenever I passed him on my way. After a few months, his flight feathers had grown again and he began to fly. No sooner could he move about with ease than he unhesitatingly picked me out of all people at Clères, following me everywhere I went and settling on my shoulder as often as I permitted.

There was no other reason but his own fancy for the Conure to act in this way. I never gave him anything special to eat, except a few breadcrumbs when I fed other birds in the park, and his proper food was offered to him by keepers whom he never particularly noticed. But, of his own choice, he had taken to my person. Although devoted to me, he kept showing a hot and impatient temper. When I tried to grab him or to chase him away, he never hesitated to bite, but always lightly, never seriously enough to hurt, at the same time expressing his anger by little cries and contortions. With other people, it was a different story. He proved quite ferocious, attacking savagely and fetching blood. He became furious whenever anyone came close to me while he was sitting

on my shoulder.

One day, as I was walking in the park with friends, he appeared flying high, stooped down and alighted on the shoulder of Prince Paul Murat. At that time we were both much of the same build and the Conure mistook him for me. My friend started calling me and as soon as the bird heard his voice and discovered his mistake, he bit the Prince on the neck as hard as he could, which stopped all jokes about the shifting of his affection!

My Conure lived at Clères for eight years at complete liberty, summers and winters, flying all about the place. When I was at home, no one else counted for him. Early in the morning, he was watching for my appearance at a window of my bedroom and followed me from room to room, from floor to floor, never coming in, as he realized that he had not the right to enter the house. As soon as I came out, he was on my shoulder and went everywhere with me. When I was tired of carrying him, he would follow from tree to tree. But if I went too far from the house — over a mile — he would suddenly leave me and return quickly on the wing. He hated being too far from his usual surroundings. He gave me every proof of his affection, warbling at my ear, gently picking at my neck, playing with my fingers and even offering me food, the politest of all gestures in a Parrot. When I sat down, he would first play on my knees, then cuddle himself in my arms and go to sleep.

Every autumn and winter, during my long trips abroad, the Conure would take again to an independent life; he would sometimes come to Mr. Fooks or to some keeper and demonstrate to them. But they were ignored as soon as I returned. Even after a year's absence his feelings remained unaltered. As soon as I landed from the car, he was there to welcome me home, showing extreme pleasure and excitement.

Alas, during one of my long absences, in 1930, my Conure died after a few days' illness, I was told. He might have been old, as he was adult when he had arrived. His loss was a real sorrow to me.

AFA is most grateful to Professor J.R. Hodges, Chairman of the Council of the Avicultural Society, and Frank Woolbam, Honorary Editor of the Avicultural Magazine for permission to reproduce this article. ●



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