

OPINIONS

by Sheldon Dingle
Los Angeles, California

We and thousands of our readers want to know your opinion on anything and everything that pertains to aviculture, ornithology, conservation, politics, birdwatching, pet trade or anything that touches upon birds.

Mail your letters to Op/Ed Page, AFA Home Office, P.O. Box 56218, Phoenix, AZ 85079. Letters must be signed and give the writer's address and phone number for verification (address and phone number will not be published). Letters of about 150 words will be given preference. Letters may be edited for length, grammar and clarity. We will not publish open letters or copies of letters to third parties.

You should indicate whether or not you want a published reply or response to your letter. If you are commenting on a specific *Watchbird* article, we'll try to get the author's response to your comment published alongside your letter.

In general, we want to have a lively, colorful Op/Ed page that will educate, entertain and address the myriad interests shared by our readers. I, your humble servant, Sheldon L. Dingle, will oversee this new section of *Watchbird* and I look forward to having a lot of fun and bringing important issues to the fore. Let's hear from you. Anything goes — well, almost anything. ●

■ Unweaned Okay

RE: Response to Edward L. Spenser, M.S., D.V.M., letter to the editor Mar/Apr '94 issue, pg. 30.

I also read the story of Stacy the macaw and was horrified by what had happened. But for Dr. Spenser, in his letter to the editor in the Mar/Apr '94 issue of *Watchbird*, to condemn all breeders that sell unweaned baby birds is extremely unfair and to me, personally, a grave insult. Granted, the numerous pet shops and breeders out there that sell the baby birds or any bird with no instruction or supervision on the care and handfeeding of that particular bird are unscrupulous and most likely out for the almighty dollar. These are the kind of people who also consider the "guarantee" of the bird to end the second the customer walks out the door. However, there are many aviculturists who genuinely care for the baby birds entrusted in their charge.

I hardly think comparing birds to cats and dogs is rational. Most dogs and cats will care for their young through weaning and, with proper nurturing from humans, become excellent pets. But our avian companions are not as easily kept tame while being fed by their parents so baby birds intended for pets are usually handfed by at least the third week of life till weaned. Point is, if hundreds of breeders, pet shop owners and bird enthusiasts handfeed baby birds, it is short-sighted to believe the average

pet owner, who has the will to start with a possible life-long companion as early as feasible for the bond you hear so much about, cannot manage the handfeeding and nurturing quite nicely with proper instruction and information. The key item a lot of people in the pet business fall short of is ensuring their customers are properly informed. It is just as criminal to sell a weaned bird with merely a bag of seed mix and a cage.

With proper guidance, we have found that new pet owners can take excellent care of their baby birds. The key is to place the baby with them at the proper time. Although we do place most species we breed while still being handfed, some species, particularly Eclectus, are best kept with the handfeeder until weaned because they do not adapt well to change while being handfed. Most baby birds do best if kept with experienced handfeeders until about 6 to 10 weeks of age depending on the particular species. At that age it is extremely hard for the busy bird breeder to give the baby bird the individual attention it needs. When correctly instructed, pet owners can participate in this wonderfully fulfilling "bonding" time with their new, adopted, feathered family member. Before a baby bird leaves our nursery, their new owners, if not experienced handfeeders, must complete our handfeeding course. They are required to participate in the handfeeding of their bird at least two to three times before they pick up their bird. During this time, we offer information on all phases of birdcare, we advise and encourage them to take their baby to an AAV veterinarian and help them pick out one in their area. When the day comes to pick up their baby, a special paper is prepared with all the information we have gone over, the bird birthdate, weight at time of leaving our nursery, feeding instructions, recommended handfeeding formula and preparation advice, along with warnings about burning crops and aspirating birds, cage placement, weaning advice and, most important of all, we tell them to call us

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anytime day or night to ask any question or advice. We encourage them to bring the bird back to us for its first wing clipping and grooming by offering the service free of charge; that way we can visually see how the bird is doing. Time and time again we have seen these birds that we have raised and placed in loving families, the bond that is there is rewarding to us. There are some people who do not have the time to handfeed and we have handfed their babies for them. These people would "visit" their bird on the weekends until it was ready to go home. The few individuals who wanted a young bird to handfeed but did not feel it necessary to participate in our handfeeding classes were advised to seek elsewhere for an avian companion.

To state, as Dr. Spenser has, that breeders and pet shop owners who sell unweaned babies are criminals is certainly true in some instances, but to condemn a whole industry because of a few uncaring, unscrupulous or ignorant individuals is not the answer. I realize that not all breeders or pet shop owners are as particular as we

are, but most do care and do go the extra mile to ensure that the person they are selling the baby bird to gets all the information they need to raise the bird correctly.

Sincerely,
John and Linda Meade
John & Linda's Aviary
Riverview, Florida

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■ Unweaned, No Way

When the March/April issue of *Watchbird* arrived, I was wallowing in avicultural self-doubt. The breadth and depth of several articles in the magazine helped me regain my vision.

First, Edward L. Spenser, D.V.M. is on target with his letter. Selling an unweaned bird (especially a large macaw) to a novice bird owner borders on criminal. At the least, it's unethical and immoral. The breeder was the real culprit in the referenced story (*Watchbird*, Aug/Sep '93) about Mr. and Mrs. Ragain and the tragedy of Stacey, an unweaned macaw sold to first-time bird buyers.

Even breeders who sell very young, unweaned chicks to pet stores need to examine their reason for being in aviculture. Too often, the pet store babies are sold before weaning age. Just as irresponsible, some of those old enough to wean continue to be handfed, for convenience' sake, until they are sold. In this environment, handfeeding numerous babies from multiple sources, the risk is greatly increased for an outbreak of avian polyomavirus, to which young psittacines are especially vulnerable.

What had me even more distressed though were people who think themselves psittacine breeders but don't bother to educate themselves. It was before the arrival of *Watchbird*. I'm in the clinic of an avian vet. A man has a sick 10-week-old Green-winged Macaw chick which he is handfeeding. The vet is prescribing medication to be administered per body-weight units. The owner doesn't know how he's going to weigh the chick. He has no scales. Doesn't he keep feeding and growth records? No.

My vet is becoming frustrated, so I step in and tell the man he can buy a

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good gram scale within about 5 minutes of the clinic. The owner allows as how he isn't sure he needs a scale, already he has been trying to wean the bird a couple of weeks (starting at eight weeks?). Thinking, if I've involved myself this far, I might as well . . . So, I whip open my Franklin planner and pull out an extra copy of the Aviculture Institute's weight gains and food intake chart that Dale Thompson provided before I hatched my first macaw.

The man takes the chart and scans it. In thanking me for it, he says it probably will be helpful since his breeding flock includes three of the macaw species listed on the chart. "Yeh, I'm a aviculturist," he says.

I walk away, my psyche deeply wounded. That part of my mind not totally blown away is overrun with cascading questions, punctuated at times with searing self-doubt.

- Is a puppy mill mentality the reality of U.S. aviculture?

- Where is accountability and responsibility?

- Does anyone with the money to buy breeder birds automatically become an aviculturist?

- Is this why critics oppose captive breeding by "nonprofessional" aviculturists?

And then along comes *Watchbird*. My equilibrium is restored. My resolve is steeled to do what is right. For the birds.

Eb Cravens shared some excellent ideas in "Fine Tuning the Psittacine Aviary." There should be more attention paid to the quality of life and less emphasis on the mass production of babies. Some people contend that a hen has the capability to lay only a certain number of eggs in the bird's lifetime. If this is true and breeders concentrate on annual egg production, what are they going to do with the hen after they've used her up?

Human imprinted birds may make better companions. Regardless, there should be consideration for Cravens' proposal that breeders be allowed to fledge at least an occasional clutch. Certainly so, if the breeders come from a highly stressed wild population. And the parent-raised babies would be excellent candidates for breeder stock expansion or replacement.

And then there was David Sefton's article "IRS and the Aviculturist." Is it

time for an under-the-table industry to accept accountability and responsibility? Most of my breeders were bought with personal checks, credit cards, or, at the worst, cashier's check. Twice though, the seller has insisted on a cash-only deal. Have you ever driven alone across a very large and violent city with stacks of hundred dollar bills in possession? It was scary, but I badly wanted that pair of birds. I came out of that event feeling like a dope dealer. Dirty as hell, even though the birds were legal.

Kathy McGregor made me realize I'm not just an aviculturist. I am actually in love with my birds. If her "Guyana — Land of Green Mansions" had been published somewhere other than *Watchbird*, a lot of people would be yelling "animal rights propaganda." Some may still. But how I hurt for those poor Green-winged Macaws.

Dragged in kicking or finding the right path ourselves, it doesn't matter. Aviculture no longer can shun accountability and responsibility. That means to each other, the government and, last but not foremost, to the birds.

We've made progress, albeit in stutter steps. There is the voluntary, minimal Model Aviculture Program (MAP). It may not be enough, but it's a start in the right direction.

In the written testimony presented in the 1992 hearings on the Wild Bird Conservation Act, there was one letter that interested me more than the rest. It was from an aviculturist identified as Fred Bauer, owner of China Prairie Farm, Etterburg Star Route, Garberville, CA 95542. He says he's a 15-year aviculturist producing 300 psittacine offspring per year. He further identifies himself as coordinator of The Study Group for Avicultural Certification. I would like to know more about The Study Group for Avicultural Certification.

I wonder if he's thinking that maybe people should have to demonstrate some basic knowledge of breeding and raising birds before they would be certified aviculturists. How would he certify? Like a driver's license? Or the state bar, the CPA board, or real estate broker exam? Or an ornithologist's thesis or doctoral? Is he thinking that maybe the best way would be to go state by state and keep the feds like FWS out of the picture?

Could he be looking for personal validation through a courtesy certifica-

tion? Or, maybe he's not about any of this.

Whatever, I would like to know more. Perhaps, Mr. Dingle, a *Watchbird* article by Mr. Bauer could further our building on the foundation you laid for us in the last issue. Could Mr. Bauer be a modern-day pathfinder for those conflicted aviculturists like me who believe the old way of the industry is dead or dying, but who are not sure of the way "in out of the cold"?

Sincerely,

Laney S. Rickman
Cuero, Texas ●

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■ Animal Rights?

I have learned that some so-called [animal rights] charitable organizations will lie and deceive people in order to manipulate and use them. They take advantage of the fact that no one has the time or resources to be informed about everything. When they lie, they betray the trust of the very people willing to follow their direction. If they lied about the bird-trade, what else have they lied about?

Don't get me wrong. I am as much against the needless suffering of animals at human hands as I ever was. I will continue to protect and defend them. The change is that I will no longer do it through [the national animal rights] organizations, because they cannot be trusted to be ethical in their behavior toward people. They cannot be trusted to tell the truth.

How can we deal with the problem of animal abuse without these organizations? Concerned citizens at the local level need to join together to stamp out abuses. Aviculturists and bird clubs must be responsible for monitoring the conditions in which birds are kept in their areas. They could even develop a committee of standards to accomplish it.

When we take the responsibility for policing our own, there will be no niche for [the various animal rights organizations] to fill. If we don't stop the abusers ourselves, however, animal rights activists will continue to threaten us as they are doing now. In fact, they could very well put an end to aviculture. They have already planted the seeds.

Gloria Scholbe
Greenbay, Wisconsin ●

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