

OPINIONS

compiled by Sheldon Dingle
Los Angeles, California

■ Response to Spencer's letter

I am writing in response to Dr. Edward L. Spencer's letter in the Mar/Apr issue of the *Watchbird* and to the two letters responding to his in the Jul/Aug '94 issue.

As a breeder, I fully agree with Dr. Spencer. Unweaned baby birds *should not be sold*. I've seen too many babies with crop burns, malnutrition and terrible bacterial infections resulting from unskilled handfeeding.

I understand and appreciate what John and Linda Meade are doing by educating their clients regarding handfeeding and weaning their newly purchased baby birds. But very few breeders and even fewer brokers take the time to teach their customers how to handfeed. The avian vets see the sad results.

I get at least one phone call a week from new bird owners who purchased an unweaned baby and need help. These frantic people often tell me that the breeder they got the bird from "blew them off" when called for help.

The following points haven't been mentioned. First, the majority of baby birds on the market today are only one or two generations out of the wild. These species have not been domesticated for thousands of years as have dogs and cats but are still operating on the instinctive level.

Editor's Note: Due to several responses to Josef Lindholm's Jul/Aug 1994 *Watchbird* article on "Old World Sparrows and Related Weavers," there was some confusion of the scientific name of the Golden Song Sparrow. The up-to-date and correct scientific name for this species is *Auripasser luteus*, the "Auri" meaning "golden."

These babies are fed then weaned by their parents, taught to eat on their own then forced to leave the nest. The immature birds usually go off and flock together with others of the same species and age. They form bonds and find mates. I don't understand where the misconception came from that suggests if you finish handfeeding your baby bird you will get a better pet. That concept is *false*. If you wean the baby bird and teach it to eat on its own, you, in fact, become its foster parent. Instinct tells that the baby must *leave* the nest and its parents. This instinct contradicts our idea that the baby will be more loving if it thinks we are its parents.

Second, what about the guarantee? I sure wouldn't want to guarantee an unweaned baby that someone else was feeding, especially if that person was just learning. But I will guarantee any weaned baby that leaves my aviary.

As an aviculturist, I know the expenses involved in raising birds. This is the wrong business if you are interested in a quick buck. Whatever happened to the concept of species survival through captive breeding? And what about the idea of fulfilling the needs of the pet market with domestically raised birds to prevent the depletion of the wild populations?

I once read that five birds die during capture and transportation for each one successfully imported. Are these the statistics we want for our domestic babies? Will five babies be aspirated or have crop surgery for each normal pet? Don't sluff off your responsibility to your babies for the almighty dollar. If you don't want the responsibility for a living creature, sell used cars.

I applaud your opinion, Dr. Edward L. Spencer.

Glenn Reynolds
Springfield, VA ●

It Seems to Me...

by Sheldon Dingle
Los Angeles, California

Joe deAguiar is dead. But his vision for the AFA still lives in the memories of a few of us who worked with him in the formative years of the AFA. deAguiar was an AFA officer who envisioned the AFA headquarters in a skyscraper building situated in the midst of a park-like breeding facility. To him, the AFA was the leader in aviculture and avian conservation — the trailblazer and pathfinder. We've moved more slowly than deAguiar expected but it seems to me that his vision is becoming a reality. I believe that the AFA *is* the guiding force in aviculture and the entity that must set the goals, define the philosophy and bind together the tens of thousands of people and organizations who keep and breed birds.

Actually, many of you may not know that several times the AFA seriously looked around for a few acres that could serve as a breeding/rehabilitation center for birds and also house the AFA Home Office. At the time, quite a few years ago, property in Missouri and Oklahoma was considered but not found suitable for one reason or another. Consider, though, what could be accomplished with an AFA-owned, world class breeding facility. We may not be quite ready for an installation the size and grandeur of deAguiar's vision but please be thinking in these terms. Do not be sur-

prised to learn that AFA members have continued to quietly explore the possibilities of a highly professional breeding trust or foundation on AFA property.

As the ecological crisis grows throughout the world, more and more plants and animals are threatened with extinction, primarily through loss of habitat. What can be done? The first step to take, obviously, is to preserve as much natural habitat as possible. But there are many factors that militate against complete preservation of the primordial environment. Desperate, indigenous peoples with a survival mentality will continue to encroach upon the pristine forests and wilderness areas just to stay alive. And not only those people. We civilized, industrialized people also want our "necessities" such as oil, minerals, timber and water, most of which are gotten from deeper and deeper in the primitive areas of the earth. Many countries have set aside huge tracts for national parks and wilderness areas. And other entities such as The Nature Conservancy have purchased thousands of acres to keep them pristine and untouched. All of these efforts are very commendable and deserve our support. They are the first line of defense.

But these efforts only slow the trend, not stop or reverse it. We are still losing too much wilderness too fast. And many plants and animals with it. What else can be done? Well, I'm in favor of anything that buys time. It may be that the destruction of the environment will eventually decrease and perhaps even stop. I don't expect it in my lifetime, however, and I'd like to do more *now*. It seems to me that keeping as many bird species alive now is a better proposal than to abandon them to their precarious fate. Several world renowned zoological organizations have already addressed this situation by establishing conservation-oriented breeding and research facilities in addition to their traditional public displays. There are also several excellent private foundations whose very reason for being is to preserve certain species of animals through captive breeding.

But what about the vast resources of the tens of thousands of private aviculturists? The private sector can do vastly more avian education, research and conservation than can the public.

The private aviculturists, however, still seem to be somewhat diffused; scattered, perhaps, is the better word. The AFA, on the other hand, seems to be coming into sharper focus day by day.

The AFA is the guiding light in the avicultural world and is changing the individual bird keeper from consumer to conserver. And this is how it's being done.

- The AFA advocates and enhances the captive breeding of common and domesticated birds for the pet market. This relieves some of the demand for wild-caught birds. Very soon, domestically raised pet birds will be the only ones on the pet market.

- The AFA initiated a strong campaign against smuggling birds. It has provided anti-smuggling posters that are on display at all the border crossings between the U.S.A. and Mexico. It has aired a TV public service announcement against smuggling and it sells anti-smuggling T-shirts. AFA members have cooperated with various authorities in "sting" operations to arrest smugglers and, of course, many anti-smuggling articles have been published in AFA literature to expose the evils of smuggling.

- The AFA has awarded thousands of dollars to worthy research programs, from health and nutrition studies in the universities to field studies in the jungles. Recently, the AFA initiated its own field study of the Red-fronted Macaw and has highly respected professional biologists in Bolivia as I write this. This is only the beginning.

- AFA members have been involved in numerous captive breeding projects that have *increased* the number of individual specimens of many different endangered species. Just a few of these species include the Scarlet-chested Parakeet, the Turquoise Parakeet, the Bali Mynah, the Nene Goose, the California Condor, the Black-hooded Red Siskin, about 15 species of pheasants and many other species of birds. The number of these birds alive today is much greater than would have been the case without aviculture's helping hand.

- The AFA's Red Siskin Consortium serves as a model of cooperation among private aviculturists in an effort to bring back from the brink a critically endangered bird. Several AFA member clubs have begun their own consortiums to work with species particularly appropriate for their own

circumstances. This commendable trend is growing.

- The AFA is leading a campaign to bring aviculture out of the dark ages and into the era of high-tech professionalism. The MAP program, the AFA Exotic Bird Registry (both explained in detail elsewhere in this volume) and the use of sophisticated molecular sciences (DNA fingerprinting, etc.) are constantly advocated for the upgrading of AFA members' aviaries and techniques of avian husbandry. In short, the AFA is showing its members how to become world class professional aviculturists.

Many other good things could be said about the AFA but this Editorial/Opinion page is not the place for a full-blown history. I feel, though, that it is important that you get a broader understanding of what the AFA is really about. According to the AFA's original charter, it is "dedicated to conservation of bird wildlife through encouragement of captive breeding programs, scientific research and education of the general public." We are fulfilling these goals more and more every day. Joe deAguiar's vision is closer than ever to realization. ●

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