



Parrots for Dollars : Rare Is Desirable

(Part 2)

Ask any American parrot keeper whether they would rather be given a Rose-breasted Cockatoo or a Nanday Conure and most likely their reply would be, "The Rose-breasted, of course."

But what if imported Rose-breasted Cockatoos were available at \$99 each; and the Nanday Conure was the last known female in the USA?

It's a funny business, this aviculture for dollars.

For some reason within the depths of human psychology, the rarer an object – or creature – the more desirable it often becomes. Even prior to Egyptian times, the noble, the wealthy, the fortunate collected and displayed unusual objects or animal species to obtain oohs and aahs of esteem from their fellow humans. I do it. You do it. We all do it. Rare is desirable.

But why? And to what end?

"It is the old five-year cycle in the bird trade," explains Rick Gerd, a devoted and decidedly uncommercial breeder of Australian parakeet species in Southern California. "A friend calls you up and says 'I can't find any such and such species.'

'Well, I have one pair.'

'Do you want to sell them?'

'No.'

The word gets around and soon everyone is looking for that species. The price goes up. More people buy them and set them up. Within four or five years these pairs begin to produce babies. Then someone comes up with 20, 40, 100 babies they cannot afford to feed and house. They dump them on the market. The price goes down and we begin again."

Whew!

Economically this is a working free enterprise system. But is it aviculturally sound? Danger exists at the low end of a cycle when a species supposedly becomes undesirable. Older pairs con-

tinue to die off; the gene pool dwindles; and if the bird world is not careful, species once imported freely are lost forever to captivity. This is avicultural failure.

"Always the species which were imported in great numbers suffer the most on the breeding end," advised avicultural leader Dale Thompson. "The Gray-cheeked Parakeets, the Nanday Conures, the Cherry-headed Conures, the Orange-winged Amazons. Unfortunately most of it is financial."

On the personal level, it is a "feel good" sensation to be the owner of a newly acquired Leadbeater's Cockatoo or Queen of Bavaria Conure. Human conditioning – we get caught up in having something the other guy does not. It is not easy to remember there are always those who have something better. There is always someone who is happier with what he or she has.

While speaking on the grass-roots-bird-club circuit, I have marveled at the devoted interest amongst small hobby and pet aviculturists. Each meeting brings a wonder of new faces, new ideas, new friends. Early on, I noticed that bird clubs encourage visitors to stand up, introduce themselves and state what species of birds they keep.

"My name is Jane Doe," a new member says quietly, "and I only have one pair of Society Finches."

"I only have a Cockatiel," another visitor explains. "Oh, but I love all birds, and would like to get a bigger parrot someday." Always the humbling "only."

The implication is that those who own rare species are "above" the run-of-the-mill Budgie owner.

I found myself always quoting my name and then my rarest species first. "Hi, I'm Eb Cravens' ego from Santa Fe, New Mexico, and I have Cape Parrots, Yellow-crowned Amazons, Gold-capped Conures and blah, blah. . ."

"Be proud of the pair of finches you keep," I began saying to bird club friends. "To keep one pair of Zebras with immaculate care, close observation, happy birds, and if fortune allows, a long lifespan, is aviculture with class."

Nowadays I list my common species if forced by club protocol; then encourage appropriate introductory questions such as "What areas of aviculture most interest you?" or "Which fascinating behaviors have you observed or learned from your pets or breeders?"

Rare is desirable, right? So is knowledge, dedication, love. . .

"Many breeders of Cockatiels choose to work with status birds," said Diane Grindol, Cockatiel specialist and publisher of the highly conscious BIRD WORLD MAGAZINE. "They breed yellow faced, dominant silvers, pastels. My focus has always been to breed common Cockatiels which I think are pretty and make calm, steady pets – grays and pearls mostly."

"I wonder how many aviculturists would desire to own a Black Palm Cockatoo if these birds were available at 50 or 100 dollars," she went on. "They are not necessarily attractive, just rare."

"It is the nature of mankind to want the most, the best, the most expensive," one experienced Northwestern aviculturist observed. "If people could afford a Mercedes, many would own one. It's an addiction. If Hyacinthine Macaws were as commonplace as Cockatiels, I wouldn't have them."

"The problem for responsible aviculture comes when rare birds fall into the hands of the money oriented novice."

Parrots for dollars. I love my birds. I also love it when I sell a healthy, well-raised, personable offspring to a good home. How to resolve the two variables into a solid avicultural foundation. . . ?

There are times when I want to advertise my Princess of Wales Parakeet babies at \$125 or so and jump into the market to encourage American pet owners to accept, purchase and enjoy this "gentleman's Cockatiel." Princess have not been spotted in the wilds of

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Australia for nigh on 10 years. I consider them rare though they have been bred to many generations in Europe and in the US for decades. Yet, I realize to undercut the price of a psittacine with intent merely to sell can be extremely detrimental to the future status of that psittacine in captivity.

"Common species have to be bred, too," echoed Grindol, Thompson, Gerdl and others. "When Senegals were \$40, who wanted to breed Senegals and produce a parrot worth \$40?" Years later there are never enough Senegals to

supply the pet trade even at \$200, \$300, \$400.

One interesting aspect of "rare is desirable" is that acquisition of a single bird or pair of birds of rare type is sufficient to satisfy the new owner who can then tell everyone about the Hawk-headed Parrots, Painted Conures, Hispanolian Amazons or Abyssinian Lovebirds. The net result is breeders with many commercially common, salable, pet-oriented birds now often own one pair each of several kinds of rare hook-bills.

Aviculturally, this works only if these breeders; 1) share knowledge of their ownership and breeding processes of such rare species with other aviculturists; 2) freely trade and distribute offspring of such species to maintain a diverse gene pool, and; 3) keep babies of rare species out of the pet trade.

"People look at me in amazement," Gerdl explained. "I have 26 pairs of Australian "Twenty-eight" Parakeets. If I lose a pair for some reason, it is not a catastrophe. People call me to say that they would like one pair. But often there is little communication between breeders, no direction. The bloodlines - that's what is important. A commitment to the species. Sometimes I spend a whole day just going through 20 babies to try and decide which one or two I will sell. I mean, they are all so beautiful!"

I am most comfortable with my psittacine species which are never even considered for the pet trade - a breath of fresh air from the handfeed and sell syndrome.

"US aviculture is so different from European aviculture in values," Thompson noted. "I would not sell Hoffman's Conures in the American market. Some breeders, though, might put them into the pet trade."

"Rare is desirable" values in the US encourage production of hybrids—mules and distortions of natural genealogies. Lust for rare mutations can result in fewer pure species being found in captivity as is becoming true with the Fischer's Lovebird. Production of prime "show birds" for trophy recognition has led to some species becoming anatomically exaggerated to a point far removed from wild morphological types. It is doubtful that some show winners could even fly!

A new era for American aviculture is dawning. An era when commitment and openness and learning are esteemed above first breedings and the hodge-podge number of rare pairs one owns. Our values are changing. They must change. And there is a wondrous light at the end of this tunnel!

Parrots for dollars, yes. I too am forced to choose this option. But should any wealthy, ethical Samaritan provide 200,000 acres of predator-free habitat for feral parrot introduction somewhere in the USA, I will be among the first to send him or her free pairs of offspring.

That's love over money, I guess. And an aviculturist's dream come true. ➔

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