



Photo by Roger Bringas, North Hollywood, CA

This great structure is just the shelter end of a huge flight cage designed so that young birds can get all the flying exercise they need. The cage is 120 feet long, 50 feet wide and 35 feet high. It is large enough for the various species to mix and minngle together but each bird can associate with its own species.

AFA Visits... *Tropical Paradise for Birds*

by Roger Bringas, North Hollywood, CA
and Sheldon Dingle, Los Angeles, CA

Hidden deep within the urban jungle of metropolitan Manila, surrounded by millions of people, automobiles, buses, jeepnies and terrific traffic jams, lies a 15 acre oasis which gives sanctuary and provides an ideal setting for one of the largest bird breeding facilities in the world. Birds International, Inc. (BII) is the brain child and great love of Mr. Antonio deDios, a resident of Makati, Republic of the Philippines.

Since childhood, deDios has had a close association with and fondness for animals. As a youth he had a variety of pets, though he never quite focused on a particular animal or species. As a young man he married then joined his brothers working for his father's transportation company. A short time later deDios realized that the rapid development taking place inside the Philippines offered great opportunity, and with the support and help of his wife, Ruth, he established his own business dealing in automotive supplies, later moving on to heavy equipment.

With the business doing well, deDios and his family purchased a new home in an exclusive area of Manila. This is where he finally decided on the kind of animals he cherished

the most—birds. He acquired his first macaw, then an African Grey then another bird and yet another. Most of you know the feeling. At length, the house was full of birds, then the yard. With so many pets at hand, deDios realized what curious and wonderful creatures birds are and decided to direct his efforts from pet keeping to breeding various parrot species.

Neighbors' complaints about noise prompted deDios to take action. He purchased land in Quezon City, an area near Manila that was once filled with rice paddies but during the last 20 years has developed rapidly. The farm was meant to be "a place in the countryside" far from the hustle and bustle of Metro Manila. A place where he and his family could enjoy themselves in a peaceful setting and where the collection of birds could be housed without disturbing any neighbors.

As time passed, the collection of birds grew and grew, finally representing species of birds from all over the world. An organized plan was settled on and eventually a full time staff of craftsmen was employed to design and build aviaries, cages, dormitories,

kitchens, nurseries, an incubation room, offices, and an animal hospital. An elaborate filtration system was installed to assure the quality of the drinking water and two large diesel powered generators now guarantee a continuous source of electricity during the "brown outs" that take place on occasion. A five hundred ton refrigerated warehouse maintains imported pelletized foods, vitamins and other perishables at an ideal temperature while fresh fruits and vegetables are delivered daily.

Over time, an on-going effort to become more knowledgeable and efficient as a large scale breeding farm has brought about many renovations and changes in aviary design and husbandry procedures. Today, the majority of the parrots housed at the farm are kept in aviaries suspended above the ground. Remodeling continues daily as older style cages are replaced with the new, improved design. Stainless steel food and water cups are inserted at the front of each aviary, while in the rear section hangs the nest box which can be serviced from the outside.

BII now employs some 150 full time employees, and changes in various protocols are made when a better system is determined. All employees wear



Roger Bringas interacting with hand raised Victoria Crowned Pigeons in a huge exercise aviary. The African Crowned Crane looks on.

color-coded tee shirts that identify their specific duties and responsibilities. In an effort to promote continuity and a peaceful routine, breeding areas are considered off limits to most employees and visitors alike. Only the assigned caretakers wearing the appropriately colored tee shirts are permitted to enter their specific, assigned breeding areas and then only at certain times of the day.

The tropical climate of the Philippines is generally hot and humid. This provides for growing a wide range of excellent fruits and vegetables, but it also presents a few problems. Tests have determined that bacterial growth can be found on food three hours after it has been prepared and exposed to outdoor conditions. Because of this, at BII three separate meals are prepared each day for each pair of birds. Individual diets are created to reflect the different nutritional requirements of various species, and a quality vitamin-mineral powder is used to supplement the main diet. Serving approximately 1,800 pounds of food daily, the workers start the initial food preparation early in the morning. The kitchen is equipped with industrial grade appliances allowing the staff to prepare the various foods as efficiently as possible and in as large a volume as necessary.

The first meal of the day is a "mixed salad" containing an assortment of fresh fruits and vegetables. The second

meal contains mixed sprouts, beans and legumes. The last meal is a mixture of pellets and seeds which remains in the aviaries until the following morning. The stainless steel feeding dishes are collected and washed after each meal. By the day's end some 27,000 bowls have been rotated through the washing facilities.

The collection of birds at BII is impressive, to say the least. Although some hornbills, pigeons and pheasants are kept, the bulk of the collection is made up of psittacine birds ranging from tiny fig parrots to the huge Hyacinth Macaw. More than 2,500 pairs of birds are set up for breeding, encompassing some 200 species in total.

A fully equipped avian hospital capable of analyzing serum chemistry, microbiology, and microscopic examination for parasites is staffed by a full time veterinarian. Once a year, every bird on the premises goes through a thorough physical examination and any necessary procedures are implemented at that time. There are separate off-site buildings where new birds are quarantined and tested for possible diseases. A special air conditioned incubation room was designed and built to handle the requirements of the farm. Individual rooms house numerous brooding units in which hundreds of baby parrots are raised each year by a well seasoned staff of dedicated handfeeders. Eventually the baby birds

graduate to a small cage enclosure and are placed into dedicated weaning areas. Once weaned, the birds are relocated to larger flights or aviaries where they can fly and exercise. Just recently a new macaw exercise aviary was built measuring 50 ft. wide, 35 ft. high and 120 ft. long.

Breeding many rare and endangered species, BII has had exceptional success with the production of the Spix's Macaw. To date they have raised 22 baby Spix's (to the third generation) and are holding a total of 24 which is 68% of the world's population of this species. BII is cooperating with the government of Brazil in the "Spix's Macaw Recovery Project." Indeed, the lone wild bird (a male) was given a female companion in 1995 and the two were seen flying together for a while—the only pair of Spix's not in captivity. A female Spix's Macaw from BII replaced the bird that was released. Unfortunately, a recent report suggests that the two Spix's in the wild are no



The odd-looking Pesquet's Parrot is uncommon in aviculture.



Photos by Sheldon Dingle, Los Angeles, CA

A beautiful pair of Hawk-headed Parrots.

longer together. Additional details will be reported as they become available. The point is, however, that BII has almost single-handedly been responsible for the significant increase in the number of Spix's Macaws and without the dedication and great skill of Antonio deDios the species recovery program would be set back immeasurably.

Some of BII's other notable successes have been breeding and hand rearing the Pesquets Parrot, the Black Palm Cockatoo, the Guaiabero Parrot and Victoria Crowned Pigeons to name but a few.

On-going efforts are being made to gain more success with other species of parrots, especially those endemic to the Philippines. There have been good breeding results with the endangered Red-vented Cockatoo which is endemic to and today found mostly on the Philippine island of Palawan. Indeed, Mr Edward Hagedorn, the mayor of Palawan's capital city, Puerto Princessa, is quite aware of the problems of deforestation and is determined to safeguard the natural environment of his island. Both authors of this article have visited and are familiar with Palawan. It is a beautiful island relatively untouched by the ills and problems afflicting most developing areas. A year ago when Sheldon Dingle stepped off the plane in Puerto Princessa a band was playing. He thought "How nice. How did they know I was coming?" Actually, the

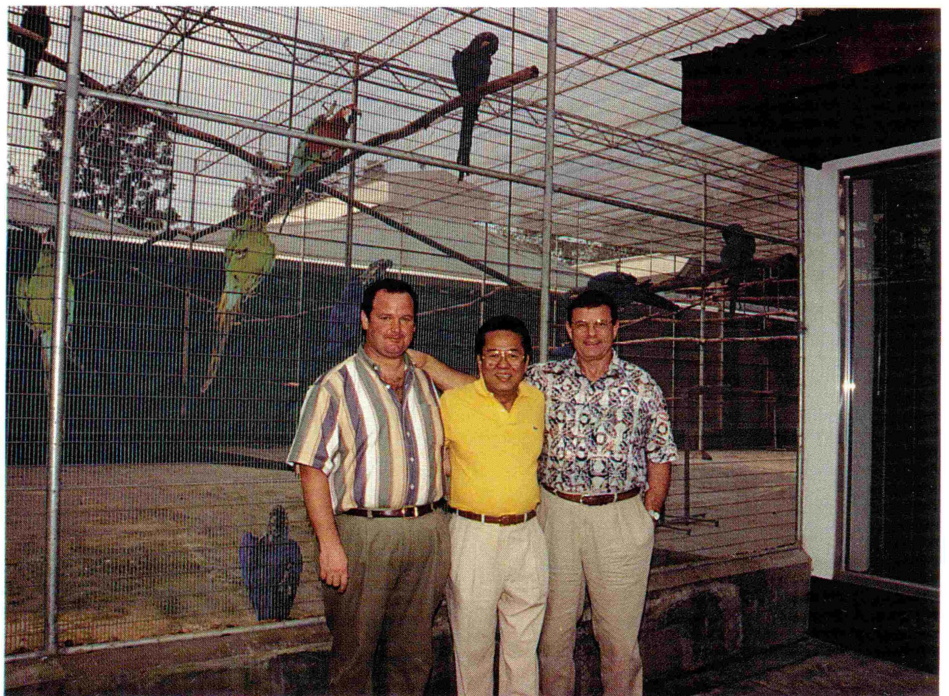
band played for Mayor Hagedorn who was just returning from Manila where he received an environmental award for having the greenest city in the Philippines. Mayor Hagedorn and Mr. Antonio deDios are investigating sites on Palawan hoping to establish wild bird sanctuaries in an effort to conserve some of their precious natural flora and fauna.

It could be said that BII and the related wildlife conservation efforts are

the result of a hobby gotten out of hand. It is obvious to even the casual observer that today, even after so many years of birdkeeping, Antonio deDios continues to love his birds. There is a visible joy in his eyes when he handles and plays with any one of the beautiful birds raised at his facility. Keep in mind that BII is not a public bird park. The few visitors are always considered guests and are accompanied by deDios himself or by his daughter Gina. It is a private breeding facility that actually costs more that it earns but is a labor of love—as are many of our hobbies.

Mr. and Mrs. deDios have one son, Joey, an attorney who works alongside his father at the family's main business, and a daughter, Gina, who, after graduating from university, has become the manager at BII overseeing the day to day operation of the farm. The goal of BII is simply to produce healthy, captive raised birds to ensure that future generations will be able to enjoy and appreciate these exotic, wonderful creatures—both in the wild and in captivity.

[Editor's Note: both authors have visited Antonio deDios and BII on numerous occasions. Bringas has been visiting for many years and has watched much of BII's development. Dingle has been to BII several times and always found Mr. deDios a warm and gracious host.] ➔



From left to right, Roger Bringas, Antonio deDios, Sheldon Dingle. Birds International, Inc., one of the largest and most productive bird farms in the world, is owned and operated by de Dios. It was, coincidentally, the first time Bringas and Dingle made it to the farm at the same time.