

Early Aviculture in the U.S.A.

by Rae V. Anderson
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Aviculture has existed in the U.S.A., to at least some limited degree, as long as this country has been inhabited, even before European influence.

For purposes of this essay, I will restrict the discussion to Aviculture and Aviculturists whom I have personally known.

Pre-World War II, the 1930s and early 1940s, was a time of serious economic depression in the U.S. The unemployment rate was extremely high. It was a time of "bread lines", very high levels of homelessness and wide spread general deprivation. There were of course exceptions. Some lines of business thrived.

Due to this (or in spite of it) prices of everything, including birds, were exceptionally low and most animal imports were still by surface rather than by air. There was little consideration of endangerment at that time. CITES did not exist and none of the world's governments restricted exports of their avifauna, with the exception of South Africa which imposed an embargo on bird exports in the late 1920s. Consequently lots of very spectacular bird species were readily available at what, by present day standards, would appear as "give away" prices. Even at the very low

prices, however, they were beyond the financial abilities of most of the avian fanciers.

Many of us kept birds at that time though most, because of financial inability, were required to start with the more common and lowest priced species. This, in my opinion, was not all bad. We gained experience with the more common species and sold our surpluses to obtain the prices of a few of the more desirable species. In this way we learned as our flocks slowly grew in size and quality.

There were of course, some exceptions to the above. Some avian fanciers were owners or managers of businesses which were essential even during the depression and others were able to maintain jobs with steady incomes. Some of these fortunate individuals, together with the smugglers, amassed very large and spectacular collections.

The difficulties and time required for most of us in that time period to build a reasonably nice collection resulted in many of us developing an exceptionally deep seated and long lasting interest in aviculture.

Other problems and obstacles to avicultural advances also existed at

that time.

Very few avicultural books or journals were available. The few that were available included: Blakston & Swaysland, *The Illustrated Book of Canaries and Cage Birds*, published 1877-1880; W.T. Greene, *Parrots in Captivity*, published 1884-1887, price in 1930 £4.0.0 (\$20.00); Arthur C. Butler, *Foreign Finches in Captivity*, 2nd edition, published 1894, price in 1930 £3.0.0 (\$15.00); David Seth-Smith, *Parakeets—A Handbook to the Imported Species*, published 1903, price £3.15.0 (\$18.00); Marquess of Tavistock, *Parrots and Parrot Like Birds*, published 1929, price £0.15.0 (\$3.00); Neville W. Cayley, *Australian Finches in Bush and Aviary*, published 1932, and Neville W. Cayley, *Australian Parrots, Their Habits in the Field and Aviary*, published 1938.

During the 1950s several new and very welcome books were published. These included P.M. Soderberg, *Foreign Birds for Cage and Aviary*, published 1956; Jean Delacour, *Pheasants of the World*, 1951, *The Waterfowl of the World*, 1954; Edward J. Boosey, *Foreign Bird Keeping*, and *Parrots, Cockatoos and Macaws*, both published in 1956. Robert Stroud ("The birdman of Alcatraz") published his book, *Stroud's Digest of the Diseases of Birds*, in 1943. As most aviculturists probably already know, Stroud did his research on canaries and wrote the book in his prison cell while serving a life sentence for murder (he received the death sentence but that was not carried out). The book is really quite worthless but is of interest simply because of the circumstances of its creation.

Most of Stroud's 60 plus years in prison were spent in solitary confinement at the Federal penitentiaries at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas and Alcatraz Island, San Francisco Bay. At one

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point the Prison Bureau decided that Stroud should not be permitted to keep his birds but aviculturists on the outside made so much fuss and applied so much pressure on the politicians that they relented and Stroud was permitted to continue his work with his birds. I did not personally know Stroud.

The only good English language journals at that time were *Aviculture*, the journal of The Avicultural Society (British) and *The Avicultural Bulletin*, the journal of the Avicultural Society of America. This latter journal was an "off shoot" from the British Avicultural Society.

Aviculturists such as Frank Vanderlip in the Palos Verdes Estates (north-west coastal Los Angeles County) were successfully raising Crowned Pigeons in 1930 and Vance Wright, a smaller aviculturist in El Monte, California, was successfully regularly hand raising psittacines and grainiverous birds in the early 1930s.

The Marquess Mita Shiba Hachisuka lived in Los Angeles during the 1930s but returned to Japan prior to WW II.

He was a very interesting and successful aviculturist during his residency in the U.S. He authored several ornithological books.

Japanese Prince Nobusuka Takatsukasa, though not a regular resident of the U.S., was a frequent visitor and successfully raised the Rheinardt's Argus pheasant *Rheinardrius ocellatus* in 1929. This bird was unknown in the wild until Jean Delacour brought them from Tonkin, Indo-China.

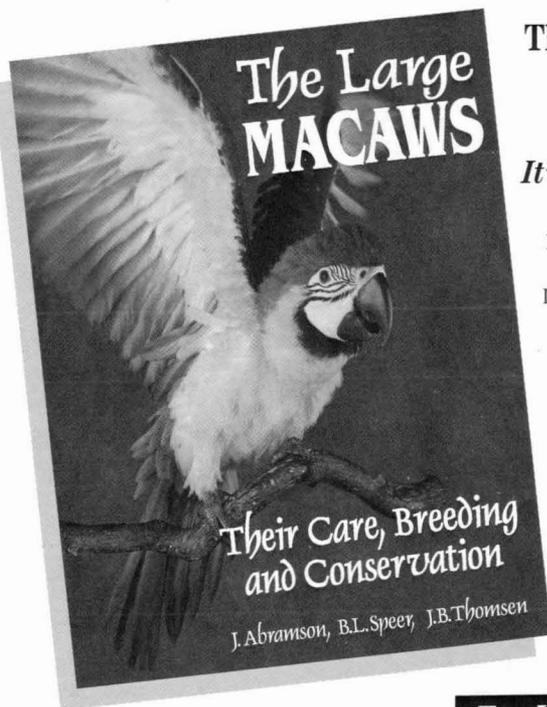
Jean Delacour departed this life sufficiently recently for many present day aviculturists to have known him personally. Delacour was born in 1890, at the family estate, Villers-Bretonneux, France. His first aviaries were established in 1906. He had a "world class" avian collection there at the time Villers was destroyed by the Germans during WW I in 1918. In 1919, Delacour purchased a significantly smaller (but still huge) home, the Château du Clères. In 1939 while he was collecting in Indo-China, a fire gutted the chateau destroying his magnificent library (including his

original Audubon folio) and all of his large fine art collection. Clères was then bombed and occupied by German military forces. The entire bird and animal collection was lost at that time. After WW II Delacour restored Clères, developed his private zoo again and accepted a position with the American Museum of Natural History, New York. He later told me that this was his first job ever for pay. He said that in his socioeconomic position, jobs for pay had always been reserved for those who needed them. In 1952, he and his mother moved to Beverly Hills and he became Director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History.

Delacour maintained a very nice avian collection including softbills, finches, trumpeters, flamingos, etc.; at his Beverly Hills home until he became too infirm to continue there by himself. He died in Los Angeles on November 5, 1985.

At Rancho Sespe, Ventura County, Calif., Keith Spalding, owner, and W.E. Homsinger, his curator or man-

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ager, maintained an extensive avian collection including all captive species of finches, psittacines, waterfowl, softbills, gamebirds, curassows, cranes, pigeons, birds of prey and large ratites.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, the renowned American screen actor John Barrymore and the cereal magnate W.K. Kellogg were both members of the Avicultural Society of America and maintained collections. These two personalities, however, rarely, if ever, attended the Society meetings and just as infrequently invited any of us to visit or view their collections.

Alex H. Isenberg, Menlo Park, Calif., maintained large, planted, walk through aviaries of 40 ft. x 100 ft. x 20 ft. high in which he kept such species as touracos, Resplendant Quetzals, riflebirds and various bowerbirds. In his several smaller aviaries, 20 ft. x 30 ft., he kept most of the species of softbills which were at that time available to aviculture, as well as many rare psittacines including Kuhl's Lories. Many of these species successfully bred in his aviaries. Isenberg used to delight in carrying a tame Tawny Frog-mouth to the proximity of his jays, thrushes and other smaller birds in his mixed species aviaries in order to stimulate them to issue alarm calls for the benefit of his guests and visitors.

In addition to this, in the 1920s and early '30s he used to liberate foreign species including various thrushes, Pekin Robins, zosterops, warblers, starlings, bulbuls, and mockingbirds on the Hawaiian island of Kauai.

Frank Buck of "Bring 'em Back Alive" fame in the 1930s, had a large, rare bird breeding facility in Vanalden Canyon, Tarzana (San Fernando Valley), Calif. In the late 1930s he relocated to New York and set up a large avian exhibit for the N.Y. World's Fair. This in addition to his large private zoo at Amityville, Long Island.

Mr. Pompeo "Peo" Maresi, Scarsdale, N.Y., in addition to having a very fine avian collection, procured and donated to the Avicultural Society of America the die for the Society's First Breeding Award medal.

The Avicultural Society of America

initiated this award as a way of overcoming the general lack of willingness by aviculturists to share the details of their breeding successes. There was a very deep seated tendency to keep secret the details of feeding, nesting accommodations, etc., which led to breeding success. Such information was jealously guarded and misinformation was even stated.

The First Breeding Award program required that the young birds reach fully fledged status and be eating on their own, that this was properly and adequately witnessed and that the breeder prepare a detailed account of the breeding for publication in the Society's Bulletin. The program was only partially successful though because I personally know several cases where the breeders omitted pertinent information and included false information in the article.

In 1939 and the early '40s Henry Sedley, Los Angeles, bred Violet-eared Waxbills, various twin-spot finches, Australian Painted Finches and numerous other African and Australian finches.

Eric Kinsey, San Francisco, rather specialized in chats, keeping and breeding many species. In addition, he kept California native species and various foreign softbills.

Mr. I.D. Putnam, La Mesa (San Diego area), Calif., had a large and beautiful ranch-style home on the top of a knoll overlooking his 10-acre bird ranch. In 1929, one of his batteries of aviaries was 400 feet long. This consisted of six flights 16 ft. x 26 ft. x 9 ft. high and 38 flights 8 ft. x 26 ft. x 9 ft. high with an inside top sprinkler system. In these aviaries he kept and successfully reared 600 to 700 birds per year (psittacines, softbills and finches), including Tabuan and Red-shining Parakeets and Hooded Parakeets by building artificial termite mounds for them from sawdust and cement powder with water.

In 1931, Mr. Putnam built another battery of flights that was 600 feet long. In these, during WW II, he successfully reared Palm Cockatoos and Masked Parakeets among many others.

Mr. E.H. Lewis was the superintendent of William Wrigley Jr.'s (chewing

gum king) aviaries at the Catalina Island Bird Park (20 miles off the coast of Los Angeles). Mr. Lewis used to annually host a meeting of the Avicultural Society of America at the Bird Park, providing free surface transportation from the Wilmington docks for the Society members and their families. The Wrigley family of course owned the Island and all of its infrastructure and facilities. A large number of various macaws and cockatoos flew at liberty over the island. This was always a beautiful sight and one which we all looked forward to seeing.

Eastham Guild, a Californian, relocated to Tahiti and considered the island as his own personal aviary. He introduced more than 50 exotic species to Tahiti.

He said he did this because most of the native species of the island had disappeared due to the introduction of cats, rats, weasels, hawks, etc. In addition, he attempted to establish on "his" island in the Mt. Orohena area the Taumotuan-Tahitian Blue *Vini peruvianus* and Marquesan Ultramarine Lories. In addition, he frequently brought pairs of these birds back to the U.S. on his visits. Among the species which he attempted to establish on Tahiti were various hummingbirds, Gouldian finches, parrots, finches, tanagers, pheasants, Valley Quail, etc.

Francis H. Rudkin Sr., Bardsdale (Ventura County), Calif., immigrated to the U.S. from England in about 1902 or 1903 where he personally knew the Duke of Bedford and his son the Marquess of Tavistock. Grandpa Rudkin, as we used to call him in order to differentiate from his aviculturist son F. Harold Rudkin Jr., lived in a very modest "batten and board" house in his orange orchard by the Santa Paula River. At that time he was generally accepted as the "father of American aviculture." It was in his aviaries (as well as simultaneously in several others) that the first Blue-masked lovebird mutations appeared prior to WW II. He used to caution me to NEVER in the presence of his wife, ever mention any price above \$50.00 for any kind of a bird. He said that his wife did not know that any bird ever cost more than

\$50.00.

At that time, the late 1930s, \$50.00 seemed like a near fortune to the depression era teenager that I was. Fifty dollars was certainly far more than I could possibly consider.

His son, F. Harold Rudkin Jr., was a successful businessman in Fillmore, just across the river from his father's home. "Rud" owned a Plymouth, Dodge, De Soto agency, a local hotel, etc., in Fillmore. He had a backyard full of aviaries and later built a new

home and aviaries in the orange orchards adjacent to his father's. He kept and successfully raised many species of birds including Crowned Pigeons, many species of cockatoos, macaws, parrots, parakeets, waterfowl and softbills. He kept Yellow-tailed and White-tailed Black Cockatoos, Leadbeater's Cockatoos, hatched young but did not successfully raise Palm Cockatoos. Rud raised many Banksian Cockatoos and Hyacinth Macaws. He had Spix's

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Macaws and (I believe) Lear's Macaws (similar to but significantly smaller than his Hyacinths).

I recall one day when a pair of Resplendant Quetzals had arrived. They had been shipped in woven baskets. The gorgeous male with its long plumes, when being removed from the shipping basket in his feed room, escaped and the feed room door to the outside was open. The last we saw of the bird was the metallic green disappearing over the tops of the orange trees.

Among the next generation of aviculturists were W.E. (Bill) Scheffler who had lived in Arizona as well as Los Angeles. Scheffler was a Trustee of the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History and on at least two occasions successfully bred Palm Cockatoos in Arizona. He also had Luzon Green-faced Parrot Finches, Mona Island Parakeets (I believe these are now extinct) and Cuban Conures.

George Rayson Brown, in around 1960, purchased an acre parcel of property with a nice home, in Arcadia (Los Angeles County), and built his "dream aviaries". His very extensive collection of psittacines was in old aviaries at that time in Alhambra (L.A. County). At that time the City of Arcadia was largely zoned for one and two acre "gentleman ranches." This had been the case for many years previous. Brown's new aviaries were nicely arranged in batteries with safety walkways between facing batteries of flights. The flights varied in size according to the species to be housed. Within two or three years after Ray moved his flock into the new aviaries in Arcadia, the City

changed the zoning laws, prohibiting birds and animals and giving the property owners only five years to comply. This news devastated Ray Brown. He became quite bitter. He had gone deeply into debt in order to finance the construction of the new aviaries and home and the changed zoning forced him to sell his entire flock.

Brown was a very successful breeder and among his noteworthy accomplishments was highly successful colony breeding of White-eared Conures. He had one flight with 50 to 100 birds. They bred very prolifically. It appeared that many birds slept in the same nest box.

With the forced disbanding of his flock, the White-eared Conures were dispersed one or two pairs (not surgically sexed at that time—pairs selected by guessing at subtle differences in plumage) at a time. These pairs were spread all over the country and never seemed to breed well out of the colony environment.

Gilbert and Harriet Lee, Los Angeles, raised African Grey Parrots by the dozens from the 1930s to the 1960s. In addition, they kept and bred Leadbeater's Cockatoos, Forsten's Lorikeets and Kuhl's Lories.

Ray Thomas, Bel Air (West Los Angeles), maintained a large mixed collection in that very exclusive and prestigious neighborhood. He imported into the U.S. the first Turquoise Indian Ringnecked Parakeets. These birds came from a dealer in Calcutta and were advertised as "Blue Simon." Ray used to brag that he liked these birds very much and thought they were beautiful but that he never paid for them since they were not the pure

blue as advertised. Ray Thomas was quite wealthy.

Jerome Buteyn's San Luis Rey (San Diego County) ranch was a large parcel of land which included a couple of multi-acre lakes with reed covered islands and banks. Under the care of his curator, Jack Throp, a large and diverse waterfowl collection thrived in very natural surroundings. Buteyn also kept Monkey-eating Eagles, various curassow species, cranes, flamingos, many psittacines including a very large aviary with many species of macaws including Hyacinths, Lear's (I believe due to their significantly smaller size – Buteyn called them "lesser Hyacinth" Macaws), and what I believe was one Glaucous Macaw. I believe this because of the very unusual blue-green with brownish wash color which made this bird immediately stand out from all the rest of the "blue" macaws. It was also noticeably smaller than the Hyacinths.

Leland Smith, Fair Oaks (central Calif.), had what was in the 1930s probably the largest and most complete collection of pheasants and other gallinaceous birds in the U.S.

At this same time, Henrietta Scheu had a large and fine psittacine collection including yellow mutant Masked Lovebirds. The first of this mutation of which I am aware.

There were also several fine aviculturists as curators of birds at major U.S. zoos. These included Karl Plath at Chicago's Brookfield Zoo. During Plath's tenure in the late 1920s and early '30s, their collection included Spix's Macaws. Another was Lee S. Crandall at the New York Zoological Gardens where among other rare species resided Imperial Amazon and St. Vincent Amazon Parrots. Later, Kenton C. Lint and Robert J. Berry at the San Diego and Houston Zoos respectively, oversaw large diverse collections.

Even Charles Nordhoff, Santa Barbara, Calif., author of the novel *Mutiny On The Bounty*, was an aviculturist.

My generation of aviculturists included Dave West, Montebello, Calif., who was well known to most contemporary aviculturists, Professor Carl Naether, Van Nuys, Calif., Perry Linder in the San Francisco Bay area,

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These are or were all highly successful and skilled aviculturists. Many of whom hold first breeding awards.

Ruby Hood in Yucaipa, Calif., Hector Hecock, originally of Compton, Calif., and later relocating his large pigeon and dove collection to Fallbrook, Calif., Bernard Roer, Phoenix, Arizona, Paul Schneider, Riverside, Calif., Gene Hall, presently at Woodlake, Calif., Francis Billie, Temple City, Calif., Lynn Hall, Camarillo, Calif., and Frank Todd, San Diego, who is well known for his extensive work with penguins while he served as Corporate Curator of Ornithology for Sea World.

These are or were all highly successful and skilled aviculturists, many of whom hold first breeding awards.

Of interest is the fact that in the late 1920s and '30s Dr. Leon Patrick, Orange, Calif., was stressing to all aviculturists the need for conservation of birds as well as other forms of wildlife and their habitats. George H. Corsan, Manager of the W.K. Kellogg Bird Sanctuary, Battle Creek, Michigan (and later in Whittier, Calif.) was expressing much concern about endangered species and extinction. This was in 1929! Mr. C.T. Metzger, Chicago, was in 1928 trying to stimulate aviculturists to concentrate on establishing breeding colonies of species which were threatened with extinction in the wild.

The current blossoming generation of aviculturists includes a very large number (far too many to begin listing here) of excellent and highly dedicated individuals.

Though they were not in the U.S., the Duke of Bedford and his son the Marquess of Tavistock, both keen aviculturists, were no doubt the biggest names in English speaking aviculture. It is also interesting that they were using small "off the ground" cages for breeding parrots in the early 1920s. Their psittacine collection was the largest and finest in the U.K. and possibly in the entire world.

In the late 1920s most aviculturists speculated that the Turquoise

Parakeet was at the time probably extinct in the wild and that the Orange-bellied and Splendid (Scarlet-chested) Parakeets were no doubt already extinct in the wild with very few remaining in captivity. Even Bourke's Parakeets were very rare both in the wild and in aviculture. I recall one of our members saying that he had great difficulty obtaining any Bourke's in Adelaide, Australia at £200.0.0 per pair. This was in the late 1920s when £200.0.0 was a small for-

tune. Fortunately the above concerns proved incorrect and we continue to have all of those nice birds.

While the Splendid (Scarlet-chested) parakeet was thought, prior to 1930, to be extinct in the wild, about six pairs were discovered in 1931. Dave West obtained those and shared some of them with F. Harold Rudkin Jr. and sent one pair to Karl Plath at the Brookfield Zoo. At that time those were probably the total of the Splendids in the U.S. ➔

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