

Francis Joseph Billie, Jr.

November 16, 1926 - February 10, 1997

Sheldon Dingle, Alhambra, CA



Long time aviculturist (60 years), bird show judge, author, lecturer and officer in numerous avicultural organizations, Francis Billie is gone. He died at 2:00 A.M. February 10, 1997 of cancer of the throat.

Although Francis had the cancer for a year or so, it did not seem to slow him down at all. He continued to work (handling the birds he loved at Magnolia Bird Farm), drive and attend bird club meetings right up to the time he entered the hospital for the last time. He died peacefully in his sleep after only a few days in bed. Much of his successful coping with cancer can be attributed to his wife Erma who spared no effort to care for him.

For many, many years Francis was an avicultural icon, not only in southern California, but throughout the United States and many other parts of the world. He was a great friend of many of the most important aviculturists and bird lovers of this century.

But Francis was never so happy as when talking to and dealing with the ordinary folks who were just learning about birds. He was a very popular speaker at local bird clubs where he served as mentor and teacher to hundreds of newcomers to aviculture.

Our sympathy goes out to Erma who shared the love of birds and everything else with Francis. Francis could not have done it without her. All of us will miss Francis. Aviculture has lost a true pioneer. ➔

Great-billed Parrots

Bill Duncan, Arbuckle, CA and
Susie McKinney, Vacaville, CA

I was first introduced to the Great-billed Parrot (*Tanygnathus megalorynchos*) through a newspaper classified ad in 1989. It was an unfamiliar species so out came Forshaw's *Parrots of the World*. Forshaw's account really impressed me.

I bought the bird which sexed out to be a hen but wasn't able to locate a male until 1990 when a shipment of birds came into a quarantine station in Los Angeles. The new bird was young with black eyes.

Serious Chewers

I soon discovered that these birds were quite destructive and required heavy duty wire in order to keep them caged. The pair seemed to settle right in to the daily routine. Unfortunately, just before the breeding season, I was forced to place my entire collection out on a two-year breeders loan due to an illness in my family.

With the collection gone, it seemed a good time to build the new aviaries that had been in the planning for years. I had gone on many aviary tours with my local bird club, Capitol City Bird Society in Sacramento, and gleaned a number of ideas from fellow club members.

New Aviaries

The new aviaries (patterned somewhat after those of co-author McKinney) now consist of three buildings with indoor cages connected to outdoor flights. The flights are made of $\frac{1}{2}$ X 3 in., 12 gauge wire mesh and are

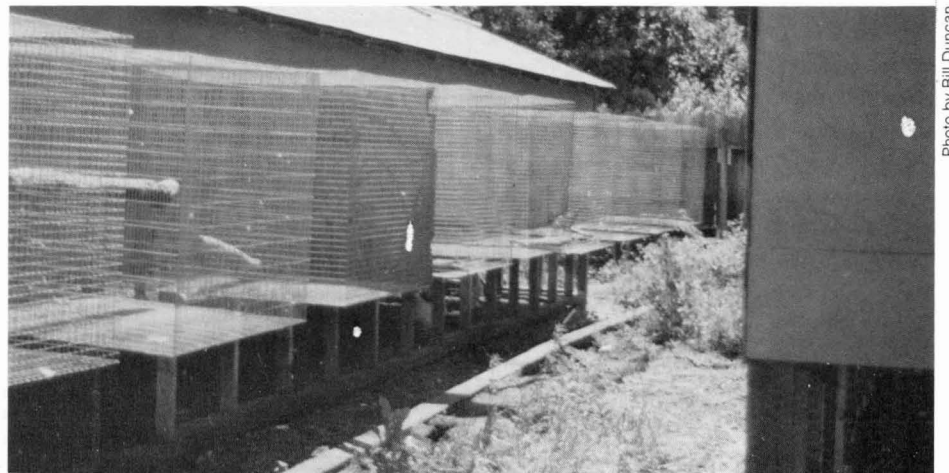
suspended. They measure 2 X 3 X 3 ft. inside and 3 X 3 X 4 ft. outside. The outside flights are 12 in. apart. The inside cages are 20 in. apart to allow for the hanging of metal nesting boxes that measure 24 X 24 X 11 in.

Nesting material is a 50/50 mixture of pine shavings and orchid bark. The birds chew this into a fine powder that can leave the birds with a rust color on their feathers. This also gives them something to chew on while brooding their eggs. I find that this mixture also holds moisture better than shavings alone. The nest box is left up year around but the pair does not use it unless they are getting ready to nest. In fact I don't see much interaction between the pair until they begin to breed.

Each building is equipped with outside overhead misters that are on a timer that goes off four times a day. The misters usually stay on for about an hour at a time. I find that the pairs like to bathe early in the morning.

Dietary Considerations

I have found that not much has been written about the diet and reproduction of this species. The first diet I gave consisted mostly of seeds. In a 1993 article on the *Tanygnathus* parrot species, Dale Thompson said he felt that their diet should be made up of about 50% seed and 50% fruit and vegetables. I began to increase the fresh diet and experimented with their likes and dislikes. I started adding nuts on a



Outside view of the aviary complex that houses the Great-billed Parrots.

Photo by Bill Duncan

daily basis year around. They get only a couple a day but I rotate the kinds. I use walnuts, pecans, almonds and coconuts, their favorite being coconuts.

The only time I see preening between the pair is at breeding time. The rest of the year they seem to ignore each other. I beef up the diet at this time making sure they have a variety to choose from. I use apples, pomegranates, pineapple, mangos, papaya, melon, grapes, oranges and bananas. I occasionally throw them a whole lemon or grapefruit that they peel, eating the skin and leaving the fruit. By the way, they prefer the sour type of apples over the sweet Delicious. For vegetables I offer broccoli, cauliflower, sweet-potatoes, frozen mixed vegetables, carrots and corn on the cob (they eat the cob as well as the corn). I have found that they seem to like the stem part of grapes and often ignore the fruit, and to my surprise, when I put date palms into their flight area for chewing, they stripped all the leaves off and devoured the woody stem. This is one of their favorites. When giving pineapple, I give them the entire fruit. The first thing they go for is the outside skin and the green leafy stem.

I Spy

I have an enclosed porch on the back of my house that I use to spy on many of my birds. I often take my morning coffee and cigarette out and sit and observe the pair for hours at a time. As you can imagine, I don't get a lot done on these days. I have noticed that courting usually goes on for about a month until they settle down to the serious business of nesting.

Eggs

In 1994 the pair laid for the first time. Both clutches were infertile but I left the eggs in the nest for the full 28 day sitting cycle. The hen sat tight, only coming out when I left fresh diet. At this time I was able to examine the eggs and get her use to the idea that I would be looking in the nest daily. I have never chased her off the nest.

In the Spring of 1995 she laid again. The first clutch of two eggs was clear. I'm getting very discouraged. To my surprise, she laid again in May, this time three eggs, I continued to check the nest at feeding time. I have trouble

in recognizing fertility in the early stages so I have to wait a full 10 to 15 days before I am absolutely sure one way or the other. At first I thought the eggs were rotten but left them any way. The eggs were due to hatch around the 10th of June.

My friend and business partner Susie McKinney was being given a surprise Over-the-Hill birthday party on June 11 so with no babies I decided to attend. Just before leaving I ran out to give the Great-billeds their vegetables and as usual I opened the nest.

Babies

To my surprise there sat an ugly, brand new baby. I nearly jumped out of my skin with excitement. I decided to stay home and keep a close watch on the activity around the nest. I called Susie several times over the next few hours. We decided to leave the baby alone as long as it appeared to be well taken care of. The second baby was hatched two days later.

Susie McKinney will now take over and finish this article.

Continued on next page.



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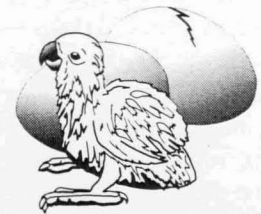
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I came into the picture on the fourth day. I had scheduled a trip to Fortuna, CA to trade blood lines in Blue and Gold Macaw babies. I had been talking to Duncan several times a day and since everything seemed to be going well with the Great-billed babies, Duncan decided to go along for the ride. When we arrived back in Arbuckle, he asked me to check the remaining egg for life. We slowly and quietly entered the inside area. The hen was sitting in the hole looking out which surprised Duncan.

Trouble in the Nest

When he opened the nest box, the nest had been scattered. The oldest chick had very little food in its crop and baby number two was cold to touch and had *no* food in its crop. I took the remaining egg and placed it between my portable incubators (mammary glands, boobs—if you must know). I took the chicks into the house and prepared a very dilute warm mixture of hand feeding formula. The second chick was very weak and we didn't think it would survive. I

always carry a microwave heating pad in my vehicle. We prepared a small enclosed basket and put both chicks on the heating pad. I then made a bee-line for my home in Vacaville, where my incubator was running with cockatoo eggs in it.

Emergency Handfeeding

Arriving home with both chicks still alive, I set up a Foster Parrot at 90° F. and deposited both chicks into it. At this point I panicked, how does one care for baby Great-billed Parrots? What kinds of diet? Who would better know than my good friend and fellow bird enthusiast Dale Thompson? To my surprise, Thompson had never hand-fed baby Great-billeds. He did offer me some suggestions, though, that I incorporated into my daily routine. He suggested that I not let the crop become empty as one would do with other species of exotic parrots. He felt that the crop should be kept with some food in it at all times for the first few weeks. He felt that the crop of Great-billeds was different from crops of most other exotic parrots.

The Egg Hatches

Two days later chick number three hatched. This chick seems stronger than baby number two that had been chilled and underfed.

The first week I got up every three hours trying to keep my little wards alive. Over night problems seemed to begin. The chicks appeared to be badly dehydrated looking very red with flaking of the skin. I called my vet Dr. Lorraine Sellers in Placerville, CA. We ran culture sensitivity tests and found that baby two had a bacterial infection. We put the entire clutch on Baytril and Nystatin for 14 days. Dr. Sellers suggested that I use Lactated Ringers in the place of purified water in the handfeeding formula. The lactate seemed to solve the dehydration problem. The babies grew slowly for the next few weeks gaining only a few grams a day.

Out of the Woods

At about three weeks of age things changed drastically. They started putting on 10 to 15 grams of weight every other day. Eyes were opening, dark stubble started to appear, then quills. At 30 days old they were fully feathered on the body and head, and had short tail and wing feathers. At this time they responded to the sight of me. I tried not to handle them very much since our intent is to have them become breeders instead of pets. There were no further set backs.

1996 a Good Year

This past year 1996 was another good year for us. The pair laid twice giving us another three babies. This time two males and a female. The hand-rearing went smoothly with no set backs. I used Lactated Ringers in the handfeeding formula for the first 45 days. The babies were given Pretty Bird Handfeeding Formula (19-8) for the first 30 days then switched to Toppers Handfeeding Formula like the rest of my collection uses.

I weaned the babies on Pretty Bird Weaning Pellets, Toppers Large Hookbill Total Diet, Dehydrated Fruits and lots of fresh vegetables served warm, along with any fruit that was in season.



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Learning at the AFA Convention

After attending the AFA convention in Concord this past year and talking to other breeders that have pairs, I have come up with some of my own conclusions. Right or wrong here they are.

Successful Techniques

I believe that the success that Duncan and I have is due to making sure that a lot of high-fiber fruit and vegetables are available to the pairs each week. During breeding season we beef up the diet and make available a large choice of several different fruits and vegetables on a daily basis. When we see something that they want we give extra. Some days it's a particular vegetable, another days it's a particular fruit. Our misters are used every day from early spring through the long hot summer and into late fall when our rainy season usually starts. If we have a dry winter, we will continue to use them daily.

I believe that some of the tricks in hand-rearing are to use a brooder that maintains a constant temperature and that holds humidity.

As far as the feeding technique, I believe that the chicks must be fed often not allowing the crops to go completely empty for the first 15 days and using Lactated Ringers is providing extra sodium that helps the chicks to use food faster and easier.



Photo by Roger Sweeney

These Blue-naped Parrots are illustrated here to show how closely related they are to the Great-billed Parrot. The Blue-naped were raised at Loro Parque. The Great-billeds, of course, were raised in California. It is very important to develop a foundation stock for these species.



Photos by Bill Duncan

Another view of Duncan's outdoor breeding aviaries. The bird pictured is NOT a Great-billed.



This is a 1995 hatch male Great-billed Parrot. His name is Sue. Ha!

Sharing Information

I would appreciate anyone sharing information with me about their pairs. I still have lots of questions that need answers. Hopefully we can all work together to help this species become easier to raise in our aviaries.

This past year Duncan and I have put together two more pairs, and have taken on a breeder's loan for another. We have a couple of extra hens for sale or trade. We are still interested in new blood lines and would be interested in taking on additional breeder loans.

Susie McKinney can be reached at
Voice 707-448-0680 or
Fax 707-448-9799

