

Midwest Avian Research Expo

by Gayle Soucek, Westchester, IL

Over the past few years, companion bird medicine has advanced at a dizzying rate. New testing methods exist for once elusive diseases like Polyomavirus, Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease (PBFD), Herpesvirus (Pacheco's), and Chlamydia (psittacosis). New treatment protocols, including vaccines and drug therapies, may help control if not eradicate many of these diseases in captive populations.

Unfortunately, as quickly as researchers nail down one threat another one erupts. In the foreword to Dr. Branson Ritchie's book *Avian Viruses: Function and Control*, Dr. Phil Lukert of the University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine says: "The future will most surely bring about the recognition of more and more diseases of birds....As we peel away each layer of disease there is another layer of disease lying underneath."

In the past, almost all avian research was limited to poultry. After all, the poultry business is a multi-million dollar industry, and domestic fowl are plentiful and easily studied. Companion bird medicine was nearly nonexistent, and the little knowledge we had was based almost entirely on research from the poultry industry. Throughout the 1970s and '80s however, large-scale importation of exotic birds into the pet trade created both an awareness and a need for improved veterinary care and specific research. Some of these birds brought with them diseases (especially

viruses) that had not yet been identified, and due to our lack of knowledge of transmission routes, incubation periods, quarantine procedures and disease detection and treatment methods, many of these illnesses were introduced into captive populations and breeding facilities, causing large-scale outbreaks.

Some diseases, such as Newcastle's (VVND) virus, pose a serious threat to the poultry industry. Others such as psittacosis are zoonotic, meaning they can be transmitted to humans. It quickly became obvious that the exotic bird industry needed and deserved species-specific research to protect these beautiful and valuable creatures that we had brought into our lives.

Research is expensive, however, and aviculture had few resources available. Groups like AFA were stretched thin with legislative issues in addition to captive breeding and conservation concerns. The Association of Avian Veterinarians (AAV) worked hard to legitimize and develop the field of companion bird medicine. But without

sufficient funds to sponsor necessary research projects, new developments sometimes did not keep pace with the spread of disease. In many cases, avian medicine could do little but offer supportive care while countless birds dropped dead of frequently seen but unknown causes. Often the first species diagnosed with a particular syndrome was believed to be the only species susceptible, as was the case with PBFD which was originally called cockatoo feather syndrome. To this day, proventricular dilatation disease (PDD) still is often referred to as "macaw wasting syndrome," even though the disease has been found in over 50 species of psittacines, as well as wild populations of waterfowl. A similar syndrome has even been identified in giraffes.

In response to the grave threats posed by these deadly diseases, a loose-knit group of aviculturalists, veterinarians, and pet bird owners banded together in 1989 to hold a fund-raising exposition to benefit avian research. The first event took place in



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Texas, and raised several thousand dollars for research programs at the University of Florida (Dr. Jack Gaskin) and the University of Georgia (Dr. Branson Ritchie).

The expo moved to Ohio in 1990 and took the name Midwest Avian Research Expo (MARE). With a stated goal of providing and promoting continuous education in order to fund avian research, each expo brings together some of the best minds in the avicultural and veterinary communities. MARE is completely staffed by volunteers, and all proceeds go directly to research.

In 1992, a not-for-profit federation was set up to establish continuity and to guide future fundraisers. Since then, MARE has raised nearly \$150,000 to fund programs such as the Psittacine Disease Research Group (PDRG) at the university of Georgia. The PDRG, headed by Dr. Branson Ritchie, has been responsible for most of the major research and development breakthroughs in avian viruses including PBF, Polyoma, and PDD. MARE has also helped fund similar virological work by Dr. Jack Gaskin at the University of Florida; antibiotic research by Dr. Keven Flammer at North Carolina State College of Veterinary Medicine; chlamydiosis research by Dr. Robert Dahlhausen at Research Associates Laboratory, and numerous other veterinary and conservation programs benefitting birds both in the wild and in captivity.

MARE is governed by a board that includes a president and vice-president elected for three-year terms, and a secretary and treasurer elected for one-year terms. In addition, each year's chairperson and co-chair of the exposition are included in the Board of Governors. The yearly elections are held at a board meeting convened during the expo. The current board consists of President Gayle Soucek, Vice-President and 1997 Co-Chair Jerry Clark, Treasurer Lori Stana, Secretary Katy McElroy, and 1997 Chairperson Sam Vaughn, DVM, Diplomate, ABVP.

Membership in MARE is open to any individual or bird club that wishes to participate. Individual memberships cost \$20.00 a year, and include a quarterly newsletter and a \$20.00 confer-

ence registration discount. Club memberships run \$40.00 a year, and include the newsletter and two \$20.00 conference discounts which can be used by club delegates or raffled to members.

The 8th annual event is being held July 11, 12, and 13, 1997, in Louisville, Kentucky. Three full days of seminars include talks by Keven Flammer, DVM, ABVP, Branson Ritchie, DVM, Ph.D., Robert Dahlhausen, DVM, Sally Blanchard, Brian Speer, DVM, ABVP, Terry Clyne, Greg Harrison, DVM, ABVP, Phoebe Linden. David McCluggage, DVM; Eric Peake, Greg Rich, DVM; James Murphy, Jean Pattison, Joseph Deck, DVM, David Sefton, and Bianca Zaffarano, DVM.

The recipients for 1997 are: Dr. Branson Ritchie, Dr. Keven Flammer, and Dr. Robert Dahlhausen.

In addition to the seminars, there will be plenty of fun and entertainment. The expo will kick off on Thursday night, July 10th, with a two-hour cruise on the historic Belle of Louisville paddlewheeler. Saturday night is a Monte Carlo night, complete with "gambling," the annual banquet and awards presentation, and a terrific auction featuring original paintings by Eric Peake and Bob Elgas.

There is also a limited-ticket Win-Place-Show raffle featuring a 1997 Ford Explorer, a personal computer system, and a 60" RCA projection TV. And last, but not least, is a raffle for a 6 day 5 night trip for two to the Tambopata Research Center in Puerto Maldonado, Peru, courtesy of Rainforest Expeditions. The winner will receive a \$1500 airfare allowance.

MARE offers a rare opportunity for people to be entertained and educated while supporting, important avian research. The annual expos are a great place for meeting others with a similar love of exotic birds, for brainstorming and sharing solutions as well as problems, and for coming together in support of those people who are dedicating their lives to insure a healthy and prolific future for both companion and free-ranging birds around the world.

For further information, please call 1-800-453-5833, or write MARE at P.O.Box 72547, Louisville, KY, 40272-0547. You can also visit MARE on-line at www.aye.net/mare. ➤