



Olde Tymmer

Al Muhlethaler, Urban Aviculturist

by Sheldon Dingle, Alhambra, CA

In the huge urban sprawl of the Greater Los Angeles area (some 12 million people), tucked away here and there one can still find an ordinary-sized back yard which is in fact a perfect little bird farm.

You *can* be a bird breeder without barns, land, storehouses and hired help. You don't *need* five acres for your bird farm.

Alfred Muhlethaler of Valinda, California proves the point.

Muhlethaler has been at the same location a few miles east of downtown Los Angeles for many years. His property is 60 feet wide by 120 feet deep with a large front yard and a large home taking up space. The aviaries are

located in the back yard on a plot about 60 feet wide by 45 feet deep. The back yard is fenced and the aviaries form a large horseshoe that hugs the outer perimeter of the fence. There are neighboring homes on three sides—in one case almost within arms length of the property line.

In other words Muhlethaler lives, as many of us do, on an ordinary tract lot in a heavily populated area. Yet he has a large collection of birds that takes up virtually all the space behind his home. This cannot be done everywhere. In many locations there are specific zoning, health and noise regulations that limit what can be done. One should explore all the pertinent local, county

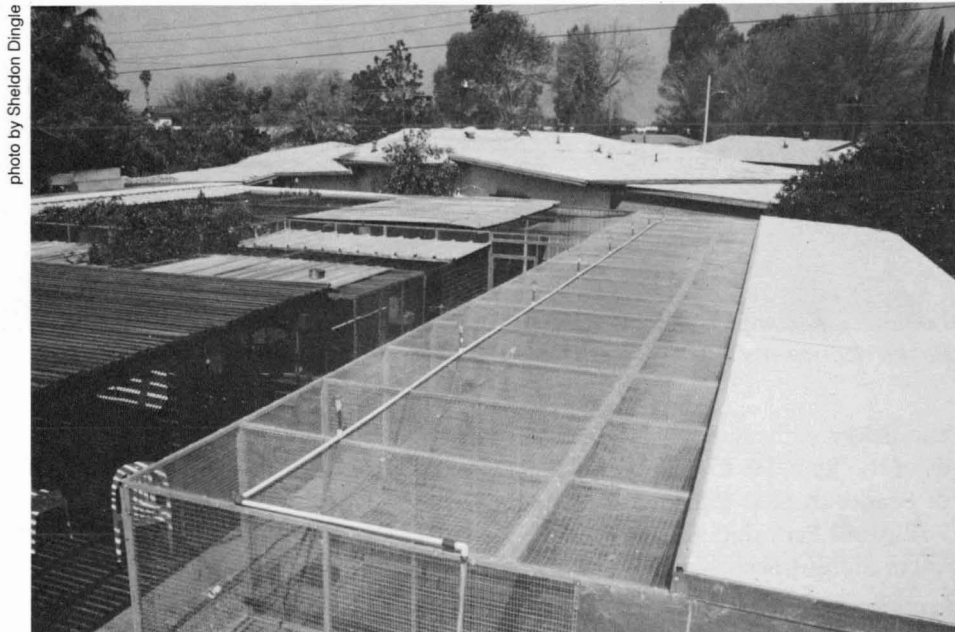
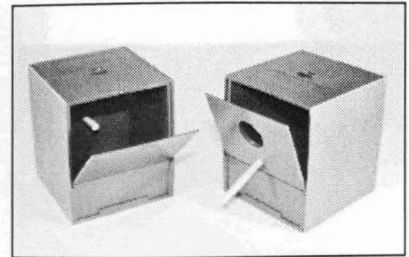


photo by Sheldon Dingle

The view from atop Muhlethaler's house shows the backyard full of aviaries.

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In addition to all the outdoor flights, Muhlethaler has smaller breeding cages in a building. These cages house Scarlet-chested Parakeets and other neophemas. The building also serves as a feed storage room and an incubator center.

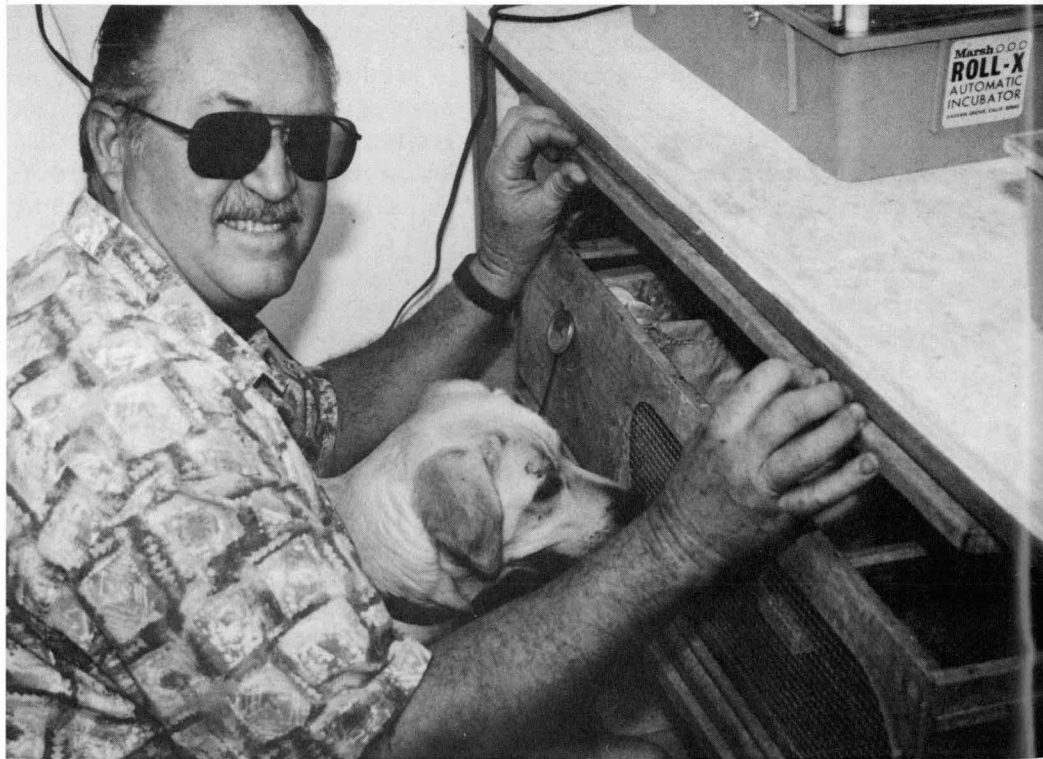
and state regulations to learn what is permissible and what is not.

Muhlethaler, however, has been keeping birds for about 45 years, having begun with pigeons, ornamental chickens and Budgies while still in the 4th grade. During that time he has, for one reason or another, changed the makeup of his bird collection several times.

Indeed, one of the reasons is that years ago he took his prospective wife on an outing to the San Diego Zoo. He was hoping to share with his bride-to-be the thrill of seeing the exotic zoo birds. Alas, when they got to the aviaries, she held back saying she just didn't like birds. What to do? Muhlethaler was in love so, naturally, he got rid of all the birds—almost all of them.

The couple married and it was then Mrs. Muhlethaler learned that Mr. Muhlethaler (tricksey birdlover that he is) had kept a small finch aviary way off in a forgotten corner of the backyard. You know the rest of the story. Mrs. Muhlethaler gradually became more accustomed to the birds and the devious Al Muhlethaler gradually increased the number of aviaries and birds.

Finally, he built a 16 by 30 foot wooden framed, well planted aviary



Muhlethaler inspects his incubator. His killer dog makes sure everything is OK.

and filed it with all the available finches of the time. He tossed in four pairs of Scarlet-chested Parakeets and had Roul Roul Partridge and Jungle Bush Quail running about on the floor.

The finch breeding proved very successful and Purple Grenadiers, Owl Finches, Peter's Twinspots and most of

the other species reproduced well.

Muhlethaler was so enthralled with his birds that when he arrived home from work he would take his dinner out into the aviary and sit in a chair to eat. Naturally, after dinner he would observe his birds until he fell asleep. Many a bird flew over to perch on the

sleeping hulk and more often than not left a deposit. Muhlethaler's wife, being the understanding sort, would wake him, hose him off and take him into the house after dark.

The wooden finch pens, of course, were not suitable for hookbills. Muhlethaler gradually renovated the whole backyard and installed all steel and wire aviaries. The finches were gradually replaced with an outstanding collection of parrots and assorted upland game birds and exotic doves.

At the moment, Muhlethaler's collection is comprised of about half psittacines and half doves, pheasants and partridges—with an odd species thrown in here and there.

It is hard to believe, but there are 90 aviaries in Muhlethaler's back yard. The aviaries are quite unusual in that many of them are two storeys, that is, one aviary is built over another one. It sounds weird, but when examined closely, it makes a lot of sense. Certain pheasants, partridges, francolins and the like, are committed ground birds. They do not want to fly up to branch-

es or perches. They feel happy and safe on the ground.

Other birds, the parrots and most of the doves, really like heights. They fly upward to sleep or when alarmed.

The double-decker cages allow both the ground birds and the tree perchers to share the same plot of land but without having to interact. If, for instance, a young parrot bails out of the nest and lands on the ground in front of certain species of pheasants, the aggressive pheasant may well kill it before it learns to fly well. The floor of the top storey cage saves the baby parrot.

And, conversely, curious parrots are not above going to ground and trashing a partridge or quail nest. The double-decker solves many of these problems.

In addition to the unique two storey aviaries, there are a couple of large walk-in aviaries that contain a vast assortment of birds—mostly exotic doves. And, of course, there are a number of smaller traditional flights each containing a pair or two of par-

rots. All the ground space in the back yard has been utilized.

I lost count of the number of species in the collection. There are 20-30 species of psittacines including most of the rosellas (even the very uncommon Green and the Brown's), most of the *Neophemas*, Princess of Wales (including some mutation colors), Cloncurrays, Blue-bonnets, Barraband's, Australian Pileated, 28s, some Pionus, an odd Amazon or two, some Amboina King Parrots, African Greys, and Severe Macaws. Quite impressive are the Indian Ring-necked Parakeets including about 20 color mutations.

And that is just the parrots.

There are about 30 species of exotic doves and pigeons including the Mountain Witch, Wonga Wonga, Bleeding Heart, Celebes, Key West Quail Dove, Ruddy Ground, Peruvian Ground, Cape, Diamond, Bronze-winged and many others.

Among the pheasant species are Tragopans, Edward's, Grey Peacock Pheasant, Brown Eared and Siamese Fireback.

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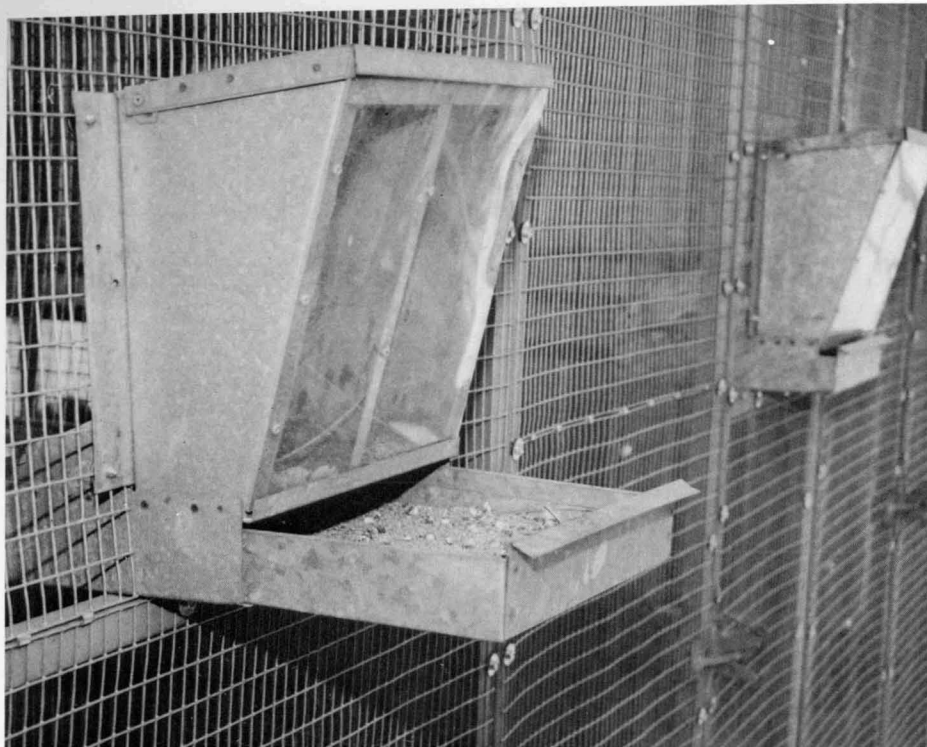
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Muhlethaler devised seed hoppers with trays to catch chaff. The trays are easily emptied.



I spotted a rare Bamboo Partridge and several species of francolin. And I'm sure there are birds that I missed. The collection is very impressive.

For an urban backyard operation, Muhlethaler has a lot of birds to feed. Indeed, he has a custom mix of seed made up in 1000 pound lots. And in addition, he feeds a lot of dove food, gamebird crumbles, and various greens several times a week. Spanish peanuts are tossed through the wire as special treats, carrots, race horse sweet feed, wheat bread, and a lot of other items are provided according to season and availability. He even gathers eucalyptus branches so Australian parrot parents can feed seed pods to their babies.

And do not make the mistake of thinking this is just an ornamental collection kept to look at. This backyard bird collection is a breeding farm of the most productive sort. Muhlethaler has long been a very successful bird breeder—not just a collector.

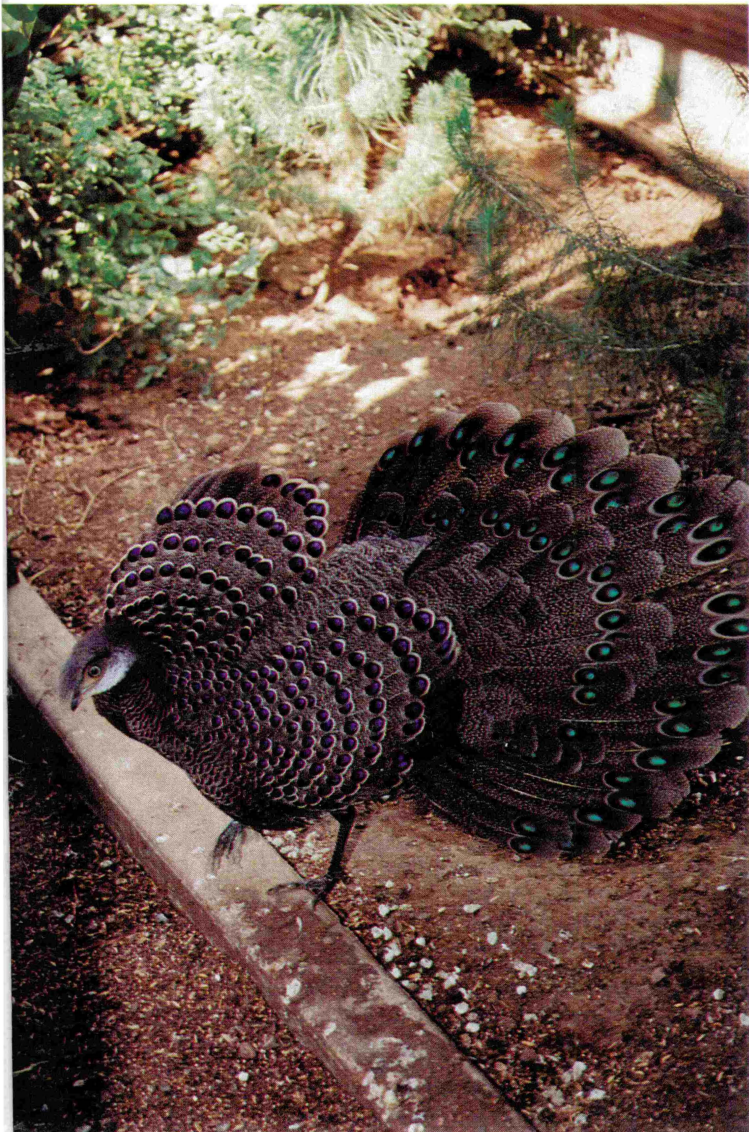
Muhlethaler has also been very active attending the meetings of the local bird clubs (California Gamebird Breeders Association, Orange County Bird Breeders, Norco Bird Breeders, and others) as well as some national organizations including the AFA and the Avicultural Society of America (where he serves on the Board of Directors). He was officially invited to the AFA Olde Tymers celebration at the 1996 convention in Concord but couldn't get away from home—too many baby birds.

And all this, not on the rolling plains of Texas, the deserts of New Mexico or the swampy wilds of Florida, but in the great urban sprawl of Los Angeles. Congratulations to an Olde Tyme aviculturist whose love for breeding birds has not been limited by location.

[Editorial Note: Al Muhlethaler's aviaries are unique and he has not had any difficulties with neighbors or zoning officials. Before you fill your entire yard with aviaries, however, be sure to check the local and county zoning regulations so that you remain in compliance. It is a tremendous disruption to have to remodel and rebuild in order to satisfy local codes.]



This bank of flights is built on the double-decker plan wherein the upper cages have a floor which serves as a ceiling for the lower cages. The lower cages contain ground birds such as pheasants, partridges, and some ground doves. They can still fly up a few feet to low branches. The upper deck is home to assorted parrots who like to be as high as possible. The dividing bird keeps the birds from bothering each other.

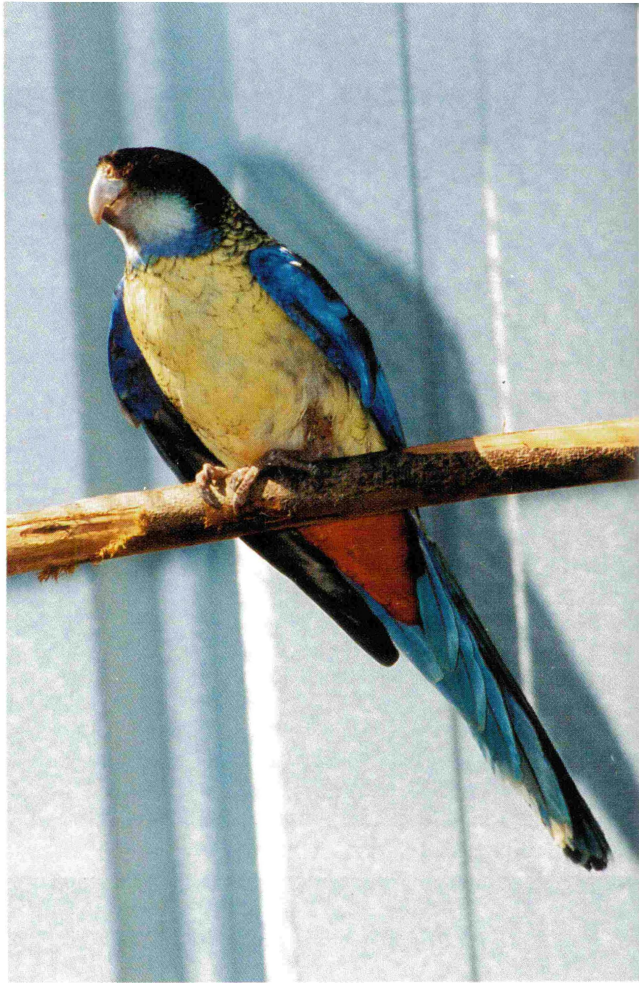


Brown Eared Pheasants occupy the ground while some Ring-necked Doves hold to the higher perches.

This proud Palawan Peacock Pheasant displays for visitors.



The birds on this page show some of the variety of species that Al Mubletbaler keeps. The elusive Bamboo Partridge is quite rare in captivity. Its pretty colors help it blend into the jungle shadows.



The Brown's Rosella is one of the most colorful of all the rosellas.



Mountain Witch Doves are delightful ground birds.



When a Golden-mantled Rosella has this much red coloration it is called a Firey Rosella.



The Luzon Bleeding Heart Dove is rare and beautiful.

