

Aviculture: An Instrument of Preservation

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Had aviculture existed in the past, as it does today, the Cuban Macaw, the Passenger Pigeon, and the Labrador Duck might not now be extinct. Sadly, with the passage of time, the increasing pressure of an expanding human population will inevitably result in the extermination of additional species. However, since preservation through captive breeding is possible, many can be saved.

As compared with a few years earlier, aviculture, particularly within the private sector, is much advanced. Breeding, incubating and rearing techniques have improved dramatically. Many rare species are being successfully bred. As noted above, the future of wildlife, particularly birds, is increasingly precarious. Our capability to preserve them through captive breeding becomes enormously important.

There are three major areas in which propagation can be undertaken. The first is through governmental initiative, secondly by breeding programs of zoological institutions, and third through breeding efforts within the private sector.

Avicultural programs at governmental level have been infrequent, with marginal results. Breeding programs at zoos have been more successful, and some noteworthy results have been achieved. Zoos however, function primarily as display institutions and are not intended as breeding facilities. Although they have successfully bred rare species, their efforts have been directed primarily toward the propagation of high profile mammals. Most zoos do not concentrate on breeding birds—not because they lack the capability, but because they frequently do

not have sufficient facilities.

Circumstances within the private sector are quite different. There are numerous individuals with the capability, the desire, the dedication, and the facilities to successfully breed birds. Unfortunately, a major component that is largely restricted, is the opportunity. Unlike governmental or zoological institutions, for whom stock is available, for private aviculturists, the opposite is true. We in the private sector are forbidden the possession of most native birds, and therefore, are denied the opportunity to breed them. It seems unrealistic that zoos may possess native birds, for public display, while aviculturists are not allowed to breed them.

As it refers to exotic, or non-native species, aviculturists have a wider opportunity for possession than they do with native birds. However, regulations are being continually proposed and frequently enacted to also curtail our access to these species. Rather than continuing to enact restrictive regulations, our governing agencies need to recognize the value and importance of captive propagation.

As indicated, it is unlikely that significant programs can be anticipated at the governmental level, and only limited efforts by zoological institutions. Private aviculture does have the capability to successfully propagate birds, and should be given the opportunity to do so. To demonstrate the capability of Aviculture to preserve rare birds, it would be worthwhile to examine its role in saving the Hawaiian or Nene Goose (*Branta sandvicensis*) and the Laysan Duck (*Anas laysanensis*).

The Hawaiian Goose, which appropriately is the State Bird of Hawaii, had

become so decimated that by the mid-1940s the total population was fewer than 40 individuals. In 1950, three of these geese were sent to the Wildfowl Trust in England, where they were bred successfully. Ultimately, hundreds were reared, and breeding stock was transferred into other facilities. Captive breeding was so successful that eventually more than fifteen hundred birds were returned to Hawaii and released into their natural environment. In addition, many hundreds were established in private programs, where they continued to breed freely.

Then, as the future of the Nene seemed secure, misfortune prevailed. Without effort to affix blame, for various reasons, the wild population in Hawaii declined. It was proposed that the Hawaiian Goose be declared endangered. In-as-much as the Hawaiian Goose existed in the wild, only in that state, and since there were large captive breeding populations within the continental United States, it was suggested the endangered listing should be confined only to Hawaii.

Despite an overwhelming recommendation to that effect, the Fish and Wildlife Service declared them endangered, not only in Hawaii, but in the continental United States as well. As a result, it was no longer lawful to transfer Nene Geese across state lines. Consequently, aviculturists curtailed their breeding programs and domestic populations decreased dramatically. In reflecting upon that earlier time when the Nene population had reached an all time low, aviculture came to the rescue. After an incredible recovery, an ill advised decision by a governmental agency virtually paralyzed that recovery. Because of that decision, the future of the Hawaiian Goose is far less secure than it should have been.

As the name implies the Laysan Duck is native to the island of Laysan, a tiny bit of land in the northwest quadrant of the Hawaiian Islands. Laysan is only about three miles in length, with a small central lagoon. Early in the century, rabbits were introduced and ultimately denuded the island of vegetation. As a result, the Laysan Duck was almost exterminated. At one time, the entire population was fewer than 10 individuals.

Ultimately, the rabbits were exterminated, allowing the habitat to recover. Despite the environmental improvement, the duck population remained low. Eventually, a decision was made to capture some of the Laysan Ducks, return them to the continental United States, and put them in the care of proven aviculturists. As was true with Nenes, the Laysan Ducks responded well, and soon were being bred in quantity.

Ultimately they were re-introduced to Laysan, where they prospered. In addition, an adjacent island was populated, and both populations appear stable. Laysan Ducks are abundant in captivity where they breed freely, and again aviculture has demonstrated its capability to preserve rare birds.

There are powerful forces in this country, the goal of which is to prevent the captive propagation of birds. These organizations are frequently referred to as "animal rights" groups. It is their position, that birds, as well as other animals, should not be kept in captivity for any reason. They espouse such slogans as "Better dead than bred" and "let them die with dignity," referring to the fact they prefer extinction to captive propagation. It is difficult to understand the reasoning of anyone who would prefer extinction. Those who support such flawed reasoning might reflect for a moment on exactly what extinction is. Consider, for example, the Dodo.

The Dodo was a large flightless bird, native to islands of the Indian Ocean. They were slaughtered by humans until the last one was exterminated some four hundred years ago. At that time, the Dodo became extinct. A hundred years later it was still extinct. It is extinct today, and will continue to be extinct ten thousand years from now. Nothing science can do will restore the Dodo. Extinction is irreversible--- it is FOREVER--- there is no return --- extinction is utterly and totally final.

Those who would "let them die with dignity" would do well to reflect upon this.

Also remember the Cuban Macaw. This brightly colored little bird was exterminated more than a hundred years ago. There is a single skin pre-

served in the Smithsonian. As one examines this mass of lifeless feathers, all that remains of what was once a beautiful living bird, it is difficult to understand those who would destroy aviculture. Given a choice, who would not prefer seeing a pair of these delightful birds preserved in a captive breeding facility, as opposed to a lifeless skin in a musty museum drawer? "Better dead than bred?" It makes no sense whatsoever!

It is suggested by animal rights groups, that captive birds are unhappy and long for their lost freedom. As a lifelong aviculturist, I have learned much about birds, especially how they respond to captivity. Birds like routine. They are also receptive to the security offered by a controlled environment. On frequent occasions, I have seen birds make their way outside the confines of their normal enclosure (macaws are notorious escape artists). The natural reaction of birds, when they find themselves in unfamiliar surroundings, is one of nervous discomfort. Escapees are far more inclined to try and regain entry into a familiar area rather than depart to the insecurity of strange surroundings.

On numerous occasions I have had macaws, outside their flights, usually perched in the crown of a tall tree. They obviously enjoyed my discomfort at their outdoor antics. At their own discretion, usually with the approach of evening, they returned to their own quarters, to retire in the security of familiar surroundings.

Anti-avicultural groups like to extol the virtue of birds being wild and free. Nature can be harsh---thus wild and free also has its downside. As an example, the first law of nature is that no species can exist in greater numbers than its environment will sustain. For every individual born into a population an existing member must surrender its life to make room for its arrival. This is known as natural population control.

Among other control mechanisms are death by starvation, death at the hands of hungry predators, disease, severe weather conditions and others. Birds in captivity are not subject to such reality.

Aviculturists provide their charges

the best and most nutritionally balanced diets possible. They are protected from predation, disease, harsh weather, and other adverse conditions. In brief, they are afforded the best environment and care possible. The first indication that captive birds are insecure, or improperly cared for, is a failure to breed. The fact that aviculturists are breeding birds in unprecedented numbers attests to the fact that they are being maintained under optimum conditions. It is also worthy of note that captive birds, as a result of appropriate care, have a life expectancy many times that of their wild counterparts.

We who keep birds need to be increasingly aware of the efforts of anti-avicultural groups who constantly seek the enactment of restrictive regulations. These groups are unrelenting, they are powerful and financially strong. They contribute to political campaigns, and thus gain the attention of elected officials. They function at all levels of government, their message is heard, and they are successful. Their ultimate goal is the enactment of legislation that will deny the right of private citizens to own birds.

The American Federation of Aviculture is working to preserve our rights. However, the AFA membership is largely involved with psittacines. There are many other groups interested in birds, including those who maintain waterfowl, gallinaceous birds, ratites and others. The threat of restrictive legislation is directed equally toward all aviculturists.

In an effort to protect ourselves it would be advantageous for all groups to consolidate and present a unified front. Animal rights forces continually lobby governmental officials. We as aviculturists are much less active in making our position known. It would be in our interest if all groups would contribute financially to a central fund, the purpose of which would be to finance professional education about aviculture directed towards elected officials. In short, we must educate the world regarding the rights and virtues of Aviculture.

If we fail in this mission we can expect the "better dead than bred" philosophy to prevail. ➔