Natural Methods of Parrotkeeping

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Part I

A Definition

In more than 15 years of advocating natural methods of aviculture, I have yet to be asked what does natural birdkeeping mean? It is nearly self-explanatory. Still, a working definition might be in order.

An ideal arrangement would be keeping a single pair or flock of parrots in a cage the size of their territorial habitat in the wilds—a cage planted in vegetation native to their habitat, which would in turn provide food, shelter, and nesting needs for the birds. The aviculturist would then sit back and observe the psittacines, photograph and study them, harvest the offspring, and try to fit into the environment as unobtrusively as could be. Obviously, this is not a realistic scenario. Therefore, the working definition of natural birdkeeping is to make every effort to closely approach this ideal in whatever ways are feasible.

When duplication of the wilds in our home or aviary is not possible, the natural parrotkeeper still devotes full attention to trying to eliminate the artificial from aviculture—to replace the contrived, the fabricated with the natural.

Why? One Might Ask?

First of all, for the parrots themselves. For their health, their physical conditioning, their contentment and total well-being. Secondly, that we as psittaculturists may see and learn about the thousands of incredibly diverse facets of growth and behavior in the avian species we keep. Anyone who maintains that the only way to gather scientific knowledge about hookbills is by studying them in the wild state has not been reading the published material. Each one of us has the opportunity to be a scientist, a researcher. By carefully creating natural environments for our birds, we increase the chances that the observations we make, the behavior our flock manifests, is a natural behavior—one that relates directly to the wild state for reasons of evolution and survival.

Indeed, survival of avian species is the ultimate goal—the goal of the birds when they eat, drink and reproduce, and the goal of we aviculturists who have been entrusted with their care. Make no mistake, my friends, the groundwork today being laid by conservationists who join hands with aviculturists and aviculturists who join hands with conservationists is paving the way with concrete techniques for reintroduction and management of avian species in safe habitats in the wilds.

When we practice natural methods of birdkeeping, we create a realm of understanding in our aviaries through which answers to complex questions can be achieved. I believe to keep birds naturally is to keep them in the right way. If difficulties arise, as they do in any aviary, a keeper can simply assess causes. Is the bird getting exercise, companionship, foliage to hide amidst and chew upon? Is the breeding pair stressed, overcrowded, bored with each other or the sameness of aviary routine?

We have found that natural answers to avicultural dilemmas tend to be correct answers. They work! And they keep those survival instincts—that wildness—in the birds, even if we cannot always keep the birds in the wilderness.

Feeding

Okay. Let's talk food. The most natural food for birds is live food. It has within it all the building blocks for proper nutrition existing in the amounts and combinations put there by mother nature. An apple is not just a combination of sugars, carbohydrates, cellulose fiber, vitamins, minerals and amino acids—it's an apple! That's why it tastes so good to humans and to birds. For what reason would a conscientious aviculturist smash, cook, dry and powder a bushel of apples, then re-feed them to his flock? If apples are not available, much better to choose cucumber, or pumpkin, persimmon, grapes or papaya, and feed them fresh and raw. As a friend and avicultural mentor of mine once explained, "The real advantage of feeding raw food is that it carries the message of life itself."

In the wild, our avian species eat only live and raw foods. In captivity, to feed anything less than 40% to 50% unprocessed fresh food is to do our birds a disservice. In our aviaries we offer 35% fresh food, 30% grains and pulses soaked or cooked on alternating days, 20% nuts and seeds, and 10% pellets, vitamins, people food and treats. We all know how quickly a fresh vegetable wilts and loses vitamins after being picked. The same is true when foods are processed. The first nutrients to be lost are the complex and fragile enzymes and fluids. Once gone, these are irreplaceable in the amounts and combination contained within the mother plant.

Now Don't Get Me Wrong! I am not condemning as valueless the sundry cooked and processed bird diets we see today. Even dry seed, if of good quality, is dormant but alive. I am only saying that natural parrotkeeping demands a variety of raw nourishment. Of course the optimum would be duplication of birds' native foods. I have a friend who raises rare black cockatoos and endangered macaws; she actively grows and gathers from local farmers the hard-to-acquire tropical kernels and palm fruits so much a part of these psittacines' natural food regimen. Natural parrotkeepers try to learn as much as possible about native

feeding habits of the species in their flock. The beaks on African Cape Parrots and Slender-billed Conures, for example, were not evolved for eating safflower seed.

Close observation of my flock's feeding dishes twice daily reveals a host of tendencies in a captive bird's eating habits. Certain pets prefer fruits; others love spices; some cocks and hens spend the whole year picking around green stems and sprouts in the bowl until the first hatch day of a new clutch, when they rush to the dish to gorge on greens. Our pairs eat less wet food on rainy days. And nearly all parrots will climb down to the food dish and crunch afternoon sunflower, millet, peanuts or treats, even if not in a hungry mode. Sort of like humans trying to ignore a dish of buttered popcorn on the coffee table in front of them—even after a nice lunch!

I thoroughly disagree with aviculturists and pet owners who insist that their parrots will not eat fresh greens, veggies, etc. Certainly cockatoos and some Australian species sometimes prefer not to sample fruits. But veggies, sprouts, buds, raw seeds and the like are close kin to the edibles parrots find in nature. I have seen feral parrots and free-flying pets feeding on nothing but new leaf-tip growth in the treetops.

Persistence and training are the keys to teaching our captive psittacines to eat what is best for them. We monitor well the food dish and adjust amounts daily in a constant effort to match fresh food offered with birds' appetites. Avoid falling into feeding ruts.

Such a simple variation as skipping an afternoon seed feed will make your flock oh, so hungry for a wet mix breakfast the next morning.

A common mistake a keeper can make is to cut up a raw carrot, zucchini or potato into large chunks and expect their birds to eat it. Not only does this make it easy for the parrot to throw pieces on the floor, but it does little to release nutrients locked in the vegetable. The grater is our friend in natural parrotkeeping. Grated beet turns the whole tub of food bright red —that is nourishment we are looking at, impossible for the bird to avoid ingesting. We grate fresh carrot, yam, turnip, cabbage and more. We chunk broccoli stems, celery, and the like to maintain the crunchy appeal. In certain cases we have even added fresh vegetable juices to clean drinking water, or to our lory nectars.

Parrots love texture, and all our wet mixes are sprinkled with small canary and finch seeds which cling to pieces of fruit and vegetable. Our parrots have learned not to throw away slices and chunks because they are busy nibbling these tiny seeds. We sprinkle crunchy pellets on top of wet mix to entice parrots who normally will not touch pellets in a dry mix.

Sprouts are a mainstay in our feeding program. I realize many aviculturists worry about bacteria and fungus growing on sprouts and endangering the birds. Please, if you wish to use a germ inhibitor on your sprouts, do not use bleach or a cheap chemical. There are several natural products available that accomplish the same thing without the risk of toxic side effects or environmental damage.

Our experience is that unwanted growths and slime do not proliferate in sprouts which are frequently rinsed and well drained. We also note that sprouting human-food-grade pulses, etc. gives better results, as does sprouting one type of grain to a jar instead of mixes. Hulled seeds such as millet, barley, wheat and sunflower are cleaner to sprout than seeds with hulls. The object of sprouting is not necessarily to produce a long shoot from the seeds. We only wish our legumes to "pop" or germinate. Usually this takes 24 to 36 hours. At this point, if washed and drained dry, the sprouts are clean and still growing. Do not over-handle or you can bruise and kill them. Even in Hawaii's warm climate we find sprouts safe and alive hours after they are fed. Be advised that glass and stainless steel sprouting containers stay sterile longer than does plastic.

By far our favorite sproutings are the micro-seeds: hulled millet, quinoi, amaranth, poppy, sesame, thistle, canary, etc. These grains will germinate in 24 hours or less. They are soaked in pure water, changed once or twice, and fed after rinsing and draining well in the morning. We carefully put a scoop on top of each food bowl

and do not stir them; they are too fragile. Even macaws love them! The risk of germ growth is further eliminated in such a short soak period, and some of these are complete proteins. Yes, for natural birdkeeping, a working sprouts pan is one of the best ways to go.

It is also of note that natural birdkeepers are gardeners. The only thing better than grocery produce for our flock is home-grown fresh-picked food raised without chemical fertilizers. My birds—especially the parakeets—prefer wildflower, grass, weed and seed buds before the flowers open. They masticate them patiently, sucking out the nutritious juices. Areas of the garden where we sow leftover birdseed become nurseries where new buds are snipped off as they continuously form, then added to our wet mix.

Just a word about vitamins. In a varied, natural diet, most adult parrots receive ample nourishment. We use quality powdered vitamins daily on our wet food, but in trace amounts only—like one would pepper one's Caesar salad. Dangers of over-vitamization are now being voiced in aviculture. Go easy on that high-potency powder.

Incidentally, some of my birds were weaned and brought up by other people on mushy, artificially colored, frozen and canned processed vegetables. Today, if I sneak a can of whole corn or a box of thawed peas and carrots into their wet mix, they will not touch it. The key is training. Carrots are cheap; cabbage is cheap; yams, celery and fresh corn are cheap. Methods of natural birdkeeping call for elimination of artificial vegetables in our parrots' diet.

Environment

Aviary Birds

Several years ago I was having lunch with one of Southern California's premiere psittacine breeders, an aviculturist who owns a facility with rare cockatoos, macaws, Amazons, lories and more. As our conversation drifted here and there, I was startled to hear the words, "You know, I'm getting tired of being a parrot jailkeeper." That phrase has stuck with me to this day.

When is a cage not a cage, I ask myself? When it becomes a habitat—a home that provides for the total needs of a captive psittacine. The philosophy of natural birdkeeping can help determine these needs on many levels. Obviously clean food and water are a must. Then, sunlight, fresh air, rain, wind, natural sounds are desirable; as is an aviary large enough to allow movement and moderate flight (we consider six to eight wing beats a starting point for psittacines). Ideally there is companionship if the bird does not have daily social interaction with humans, while a view of the outdoors and nearby aviaries keeps cage birds alert and interested in the life around them.

Change is one of the most important environmental factors in natural parrotkeeping. Parrots are intelligent. To remain healthy and active they need provocative mental stimulation. I always marvel when I visit a breeding facility and see conical stalagmites of fecal matter building up on cage bottoms. Now, why would a four-year-old Scarlet Macaw in a 12-foot enclosure, sit hour after hour, day after day in the same spot on the same perch? Because there is nothing else to do, right? He's bored to stillness.

Natural birdkeeping means change. It means change in foods offered, alternating of toys and engaging playthings, rotation of perch angles and positions, and a constant supply of green and chewable foliage.

Without a doubt, the heaviest labor factor in my avicultural program is the seeking out, cutting, cleansing and placing in each and every aviary fresh branches and greenery. It takes more time than feeding, than cleaning up, than bookwork and recordkeeping—more time than anything. It is also one of the top priorities for maintaining the health and active contentment of my flock. It is precisely because it is so time-consuming keeping species such as Derbyans, Hawk-headed Parrots, Capes and Conures supplied with chewing material, that I am making the move to 25 foot planted flights as play cages for my breeding pairs.

Change! In an interesting cage enclosure, parrots are all over the place in a day—no piles of petrified poop for busy birds. Two years ago we began, for pairs which do not sleep in boxes, a program of unmounting nest boxes from cages after the end of breeding season because in the wilds, parrots do not hang around their hollow tree for six months until they feel like laying eggs. Why should my psittacine pairs have to live with the constant vision of last year's box opening staring them in the face all year? And when our boxes are placed back in cages roughly three weeks before the normal recorded laying date of each pair, you would not believe how fast the cock and hen get into motion and lay fertile eggs! It's exciting! It's natural. It's *change* in a cage trying not to be a cage.

Pet Birds

In a home pet environment, it is easy to avoid boredom and stress in psittacines by arranging four to five spots around the home on which to provide a bird perch. A most common reason for bad behavior in a pet parrot is the bird's frustrated desire to not be left in a room with his cage when all the action is out in front of the TV! A bathroom perch is another wonderful change for a pet psittacine. Not only is the steamy humidity good for birds with nasal irritations or sneezing habits, but hookbills seem to love watching their humans getting wet all over. All my pets have been taught to join in.

For years, we have advocated the use of outdoor "day" cages in the yard or on the patio—cages which allow a pet to hide amidst cut branches and play "wild bird." The alertness and training gleaned in such habitats remains with a pet parrot, helping him or her make the transition from an imprinted, housebound creature to a true child of nature.

Well, we could go on and on with this. But remember, it takes imagination and extra effort to keep the sharp minds of our captive psittacines stimulated and aware. For the natural parrotkeeper, sterile enclosures with nothing but a perch, a nestbox, a food and water dish are no longer acceptable.

When is a cage not a cage? When it becomes an environment so enjoyable to the bird, he wants to get inside, rather than get out.

Part II Continues in the next issue.