

Dave West Ringneck Master

by Dale R. Thompson, Lemon Cove, CA

This issue of the *Watchbird Journal* specializing on the Indian Ring-necked Parakeet and its mutations is a good place to pay tribute to the late Dave West of Montebello, California, who was so instrumental in establishing the early mutations of this delightful aviary bird.

Dave West was active in aviculture since 1945 and is known as one of the truly great American Avicultural Pioneers. Many techniques of aviculture (now so commonly known) were learned at the "office" of Dave West. His office was wherever the discussion was being held (the discussion could be on exotic birds, plants, books, politics, history, etc.).

His "office," in later years, was at a table with a few good and a few broken down chairs on an excellent patio in the back yard of his bird farm on Don Julian Street (about 20 minutes from his home). It was surrounded by specimen plants of great beauty.

The World of Aviculture revolved around this table, especially when it involved several of the great old timers. There genetics and mutations were discussed. It was at the table of Dave West that some aviculturists guessed what the Whitefaced- Pearly-Pied Cockatiel would look like before it came into the States from Europe. We were all wrong! This was where many of us learned of new mutations in Europe and dreamed of someday owning one of them. It did not matter if the bird was a Zebra Finch, lovebird, rosella or Ring-necked Parakeet, Dave West loved them all—especially the mutations.

Though I never heard Dave speak of it, he was the first to successfully rear the Splendid or Scarlet-chested Parakeet (1947) in the U.S. He was the first private aviculturist to rear the Princess-of-Wales Parakeet after the Brookfield Zoo. In 1955 Dave raised the second blue Indian Ring-necked Parakeet in the U.S. [the first was raised

in 1941 by Bill Sheffler in Arizona from normal appearing parents—see Rae Anderson's article in this issue. S.L.D.] This beautiful bird was reared from a pair of birds received from the Duke of Bedford in 1952.

Dave West may have had many firsts or even seconds but it was what he did with the new mutations that awed all of us. Firsts in aviculture belong to the bird; how the mutation or species is developed belongs to the breeder and Dave was truly a pioneer in the early days. This was when birds were really wild and were reluctant to reproduce in captivity. Dave had the intuitiveness to make his birds feel secure and he had the patience to wait on his birds and not be in a hurry.

Those who knew Dave West best knew his great love was in mutations but just behind this was the Indian Ring-necked parakeet species. Obviously these two subjects go together very well. Dave loved his Ringnecks and they responded and produced for him.

Now, in 1997, one of the hottest ringneck mutations is the Turquoise mutations of the Ringneck and the various colors that can be produced through this mutation. We must give credit to Dave West (and Gordon Hayes) for developing this beautiful mutation. It was Dave West who would drop everything and drive hundreds of miles or more to see a new mutation, no matter what kind of bird it was.

Those of us who knew him well have very fond memories of Dave West but it was his wit that made our visits to his office so memorable. We would schedule precious time in our lives just to hear Dave West tell stories and learn from him. But it was his jokes and humor that we have kept in our memories for a long time.

Indeed, even during times of stress, Dave usually remained calm and cheerful. In the early 1980s when over \$25,000 worth of Ringnecks (including many of the then top mutations) were stolen from Dave West, he was asked why he did not get angry over this great injustice. Dave replied, "When I was in the Korean War in the 1950s, I was stationed and fighting in the north and it very bitter cold. It was so cold

that I promised God that if I ever got out of this freezing country I would never ever get angry with anyone or anything."

Although Dave seldom became angry, his sense of humor led toward a penchant for "balancing the books" as he called it. A wholesale bird buyer once came to the farm and offered \$1.50 each for Zebra Finches. Dave told him the price was \$1.75 each. The buyer nodded and Dave caught up a couple of hundred young Zebras. With the birds in carrying cages, the dealer again said he could give only \$1.50. Dave looked calmly at him, said that if the birds aren't worth \$1.75, they aren't worth anything and turned all the young birds loose into the sky. Stunned, the amazed dealer walked away. It was only an hour or so, however, before Dave had caught all the young birds in traps set for the very purpose. The next time the dealer showed up he did not haggle prices.

Dave's joy was to *raise* birds. He did not want to just *keep* birds. He was once overheard saying, "It is more fun to breed a Zebra Finch than it is to *not* breed a Gouldian Finch."

During one of the last years of Dave West's life an incident showed the compassion he had for children. This was when he had the graft (from cancer on his face) that extended from his cheek like a fleshy protrusion. Dave was in a grocery store when a mother and small daughter walked by him. The daughter was of an early age before she could be "taught" about "being different" or "ugly." This little girl pointed up to the protrusion on Dave West's cheek and ask him "What is that?" Dave West knelt down and replied, "This growth is from smoking too much so never take up smoking yourself or ever take a cigarette from any of your friends. You may turn up looking like me."

The little girl replied that she would never smoke, while her mother smiled and looked on.

Dave West, of course, had never smoked.

Dave West lost a lengthy and painful battle with cancer and one of the best friends of aviculture (and especially the birds) passed away on February 4, 1993. ➔