

AFA Visits Forrest Johnson

*Rosella and Duck Enthusiast
from Atascadero, California*

by Susie Christian, Morro Bay, CA

One of the most gracious people I have met in aviculture has to be Forrest Johnson. For many years he is consistently the one called on by our local bird club who never says no to any request for help. Living in the Central California Coastal area he is blessed to be fortunate enough to have great weather and be able to house all his flock outdoors.

This warm, friendly, sparkling, dynamic man keeps six varieties of rosellas including Eastern, Western, Crimson, Mealy, Northern, and Yellows. He also has the uncommon Red-capped or Pileated Parrot and quite a flock of Wood Ducks and Mandarin Ducks as well. Other species include Amherst's and Golden Pheasants, Bob Whites, Rock Peckers, Barabands, Budgies, Cockatiels, Crimson-winged Parrots, and Bronze-winged Doves.

Johnson's interest in birds goes back to the age of five when he kept



Johnson with a very unusual but beautiful avian pet – "Midas" the Golden Pheasant.

barn pigeons. He remembers climbing up on the rafters into the cupolas of barns, thirty-five feet in the air to obtain the squabs he kept as pets. During the 1960s in Laguna Beach, CA, he raised and showed Roller Pigeons and was secretary of the National Birmingham Roller Pigeon Club.

The first taste of hookbills came when his youngest daughter found a lost Parakeet on the windowsill. After receiving no answer from the lost and found column, the family kept the bird and it lived for 13 years. Johnson loved the little bird and it learned to say many phrases, rock and rolled with the kids

and even ate meals with them.

About 10 years ago a pair of Cockatiels were given to Johnson, then came the ducks that were ordered from Ohio. Soon to follow were Budgies, lovebirds, rosellas, pheasants, and the rest of the group.

Some of the pheasants and rosellas are housed together in the same cages. Johnson says they don't disturb one another at all, with the Western Rosellas being the most gentle. Westerns will mix with everything. He pairs his Eastern Rosellas with Pheasants and Doves, Mealy Rosellas with Golden Pheasants, and the Yellow Rosellas with Bob Whites.

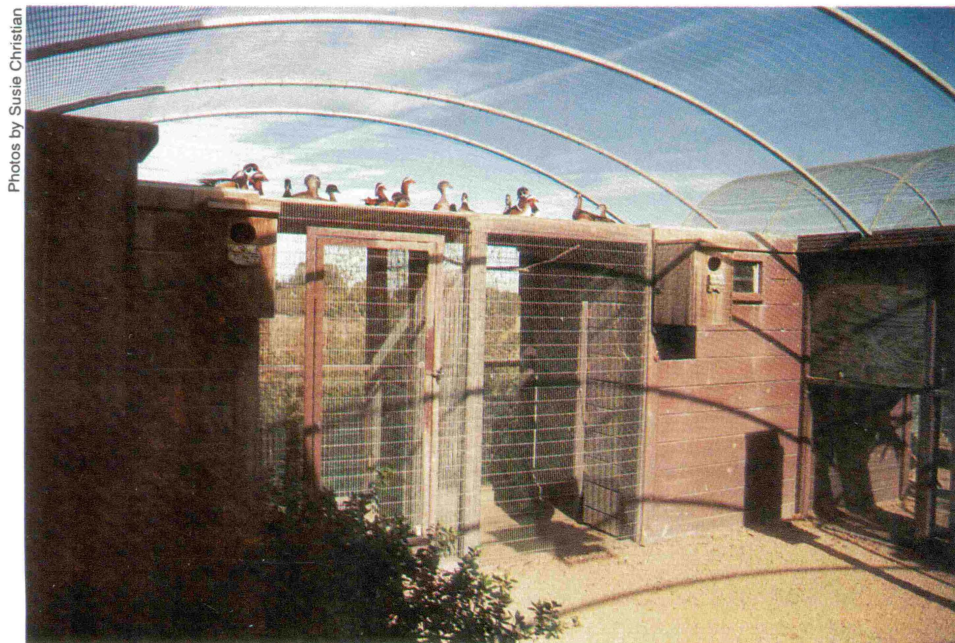
During our visit Johnson proudly showed off his pet male Golden Pheasant, Midas, who spars with him and really gets excited over the game. The bird is so tame he will perch on Johnson's shoulder and talk to him in Pheasant Love-Language. I was privileged to be included in the Pheasant's play routine too, and was told that Midas doesn't respond to many strangers. Always knew I was really for the birds – any kind of bird!

The first cage one comes to in Johnson's yard is the one that houses his group of over 20 ducks. It is 26 X 20 feet and rises from 6 feet to 9 1/2 feet tall in the center. The duck enclosure has a cement pond at one end with a shelter at the opposite end of the flight.

All of the cages are dome shaped. The rosella cages are 5 feet wide by 15



Part of the interior of one of Johnson's aviaries.



Photos by Susie Christian

The duck pen where several species make their home.



Johnson at the end of the duck pen that has the pond in it. Ducks swim all they want.

feet long and 9 feet high at the tallest arch. Johnson says if he had the room they really should have been five feet longer.

Coarse sand is used on the floors for easy cleaning. Wood framing of 4 X 4 and 2 X 4 posts supports the aviary. The wood is covered on the edges with metal flashing and a cap. The wire is 1/2 inch X 1 inch aviary welded wire and roof protection is provided by galvanized tin laid over the bows of the roof.

Plenty of palm fronds as well as eucalyptus and other safe yard trim-

mings are fastened in each cage for perching and chewing. An Escalonia and a Fig tree also grow in the duck enclosure, and are left alone by the ducks to thrive there.

Many wood stump burl natural logs hang in each cage. Each is hollowed out inside and has an entrance hole. Forrest says the lovebirds really used them and the Cockatiels and Budgies are gradually beginning to show an interest in them.

There are overhead misters for the warm weather and general bathing

purposes. The watering system consists of a hose bib in each cage, automatic waterers, plus a "foolproof" big bowl of water in each cage.

When the weather gets below 20 degrees F. there are heat lamps and electric heaters that are wired in conduit for some of the birds. Rosellas, Johnson says, are particularly hardy in the colder months.

His flock's diet consists of a soak and cook 15 bean mix, sprouted grains, brown rice, plus vegetables and fruits of all kinds. Cockatiel mix seed is given every evening, millet several times a week as a treat, and in the winter months he adds walnut meat to their diet as insurance against the cold. Johnson makes his cooked bean mixture up ahead and stores it in 5-gallon plastic containers in the freezer.

He says he never has a problem with bugs or mice as he keeps his feed in closed containers in a special room. It is dry and clean there and pretty much inaccessible to pests. There is also an electric heater in the feed room to keep the dampness and mildew away during the winter months.


Johnson feels that giant strides have been made in aviculture in the last 10 to 12 years. He likened the years before to the "dark ages" of bird keeping. Very little was known about aviculture and it was much trial and error. He feels that the biggest gains have been in nutrition, habitation, and sanitation.

One of the biggest mistakes he feels is still made today is the purchase of a new bird and the "Where are we going to house it afterwards?" problem. He cringes when birds are bought first and the environment is chosen second.

It is easy to see that Johnson hasn't done this with his spacious, immaculate aviaries. He says he is happy knowing that he has provided plenty of room for the birds to exercise and loves watching them in flight.

Because of the spaciousness of the cages his birds are the picture of health, in perfect feather, and obviously happy with their environment.

Johnson admits that he sells very few birds. He prefers to trade and he says he does an awful lot of keeping the ones he raises.

I did see a little more room for expansion while I was there. 

Photos by Susie Christian



This nest box setup works well for rosellas

Log nests.

These enclosures contain the unlikely combination of pheasants and rosellas.

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