

## "Thanks - for the Memory"

by Graeme Hyde,  
Elliminyt, Victoria, Australia

When Barry Hutchins, Warwick Remington and I accepted the invitation to speak at the AFA's Convention in August 1994, in Knoxville, Tennessee, our immediate reaction was one of "controlled elation." Once the euphoria subsided we began planning our six 50 minute lectures (two each).

In "Promoting the USA 'Down Under,'" (*Watchbird*, March/April 1998, p.56), Barry and his wife Ruby went to Canada after the convention and Warwick and I traveled within the US.


In our report we mentioned the development of our special color slide presentation, "Impressions of the AFA Convention and American Aviculture," and how we had travelled 3,200 miles in Australia by car presenting our "talk-in-tandem" at nine avicultural meetings.

We now thought we'd fulfilled our own self-imposed promotion of the joy of traveling in America, participating in an AFA convention, sightseeing, and visiting public and private collections. After receiving an invitation to speak at the November 1998 monthly meeting of the Avicultural Society of South Australia, we travelled to Adelaide – the State's delightful capital city – and we're sure this is the last time we present our "talk-in-tandem."

The return trip to Adelaide, where we were guests of Barry and Ruby Hutchins, is 900 miles. We have now traveled a total of 4,100 miles by car "sharing our experiences."

Reactions to our presentation include:

- "Not enough slides about birds."
- "It made me appreciate the wide-range of softbilled birds American aviculturists can keep."
- "I really enjoyed your talk and felt I was on the trip with you."

We never realized the impact the AFA's letter of invitation would have on us. Sharing our US experiences has been a pleasure for us and to all who contributed to those experiences, especially our new-found friends, we simply say – "Thanks – for the memory!" 

# Bird Buying 101

Some common  
misconceptions exposed

by Paula Strasser, Fallbrook, CA

You've gone through the magazines, looked at all the pictures, read the books in the pet store and the library, and have finally decided what kind of bird is best for you. Now the task is to find the bird of your dreams. This article should provide you with some basic definitions used in the bird business, and explode some commonly held myths about the people who breed and raise pet birds.

### Three Choices

When you go to buy a pet bird, you have basically three choices of seller: the pet store (including specialty bird stores), the bird breeder, and the bird broker. For the most part, pet stores are well run, and some are exceptional.

#### **Pet Store**

The advantages of buying from a pet store include the ability to buy your bird, cage, toys, and food all in the same place. Many pet stores offer generous health guarantees, package deals for the whole set-up, and free nail and wing-clipping after you buy your pet. The best bird specialty stores are run by people who love and care for birds, and are knowledgeable about their care and biology.

Things to ask and look for in a good pet store:

- Is the store clean, and do the birds have fresh food and clean water available to them? (To be fair, some birds are "dippers," dunking their food into their water bowls, creating a mess, but you can tell if it is a "clean" mess by the odor...there should be none.)
- Are feathers and powder down swept up and dusted?

- Is the food storage area (if you can see it) secure from rodents and insects?
- Does the store quarantine new arrivals away from the rest of the population?
- Does the store handfeed babies, and are they kept away from the adult birds and new arrivals?
- Are the expiration dates on food packages current?
- Can the sales staff answer your questions, or can they direct you to someone who can? Nobody knows everything about birds, but good bird stores employ a knowledgeable staff and may even have a reference section for looking up the answers to sticky problems.

#### **Bird Breeders**

Bird breeders have the parent birds on the premises, often many breeding pairs of the same species. Breeders advertise in many of the bird magazines, on the Internet and in local newspapers and may offer a better price on an individual bird because they do not have the overhead required to stock a store. However, you can usually buy only birds from breeders; most do not carry cages, food or other accessories.

#### **Bird Brokers**

Bird brokers often purchase baby birds when they are a few days old and raise them to weaning before selling. They do not have the parent birds, but should have records of where the baby came from; some will ask the breeders for their closed bands, and will band the babies when they are big enough. If you are buying from a bird broker, you should try to find out how many

breeders the broker works with. The possibility of disease increases when babies from many different aviaries are mixed together. Once again, the price of the bird may be lower than at a pet shop, but most brokers don't carry accessories or food.

### Myths and Misconceptions

Whether you choose to buy your birds from a pet shop, a breeder, or a broker, there are some myths and misconceptions that need to be addressed before you go shopping.

#### Misconception #1

*The breeder/broker is just in it to make money.*

As anybody who works with animals can tell you, the financial return on any animal-based business is actually quite low. For example, the fees charged by veterinarians are much lower than those charged by MDs, even though the vet must buy the same medical equipment, hire the same technical staff and rent the same office space as his/her MD counterpart. In most cases, vets must outfit

entire surgical suites, with anaesthesia, cautery, and x-ray equipment. Your own primary care physician doesn't need to do that.

The only way chicken farmers or cattle ranchers make a profit is by marketing their stock in volume; the individual animal is worth very little. By contrast, those who breed, raise, and sell birds usually do so because they have a basic love for the animals. That being said, the breeder/broker does expect to at least break even on his/her investment, and larger aviaries and pet stores expect to make a profit.

The prospective buyer should be aware that the price of a bird is dependent on many factors, including but not limited to, the area of the country in which the purchase is made, the species involved, and finally, what the seller thinks the birds are worth. It is worth noting that if you find an African Grey for sale in Florida for \$500, but you live in Chicago, the asking price from your local pet shop may not seem so exorbitant when you start adding in shipping charges. (including crate, health certificate and airline fare.) My advice is to buy locally. At the very least, your new pet won't have just come from a cross-country airline flight. Even if your Chicago pet shop purchased your Grey from a Florida breeder, they won't sell it to you until it has a chance to recover from its journey.

#### Misconception #2

*It is up to the seller to educate the buyer.*

Most private aviculturists (including breeders and brokers) are ready, willing, and able to answer questions from the public, provided they are not of the "tell me everything about cockatoos" variety. Pet store staff, too, really appreciate the prepared customer.

Especially during late winter, spring and summer, breeders and brokers are extremely busy with their own birds, and don't have time to spend with people who are not ready to buy. There are plenty of other sources of information, including this magazine, *Bird Breeder*, *Birds USA*, *Pet Bird Report*, and lots more information on the on-line services such as AOL, Compu-serve, and the Internet specialty groups.

When you are finally ready to call

the breeder for more information, have your questions in hand. Ask about recommended cage sizes, diet, medical problems, and behavior, but remember that busy people appreciate prepared questioners. After you buy your bird, the breeder, broker or pet store will provide technical support and will be happy to hear how you and your new pet are getting along.

Although you know where your local pet store is, many breeders and brokers do not indicate in their ads where they are located. A good rule of thumb is never to call anyone before 11:00 A.M. or after 7:00 P.M., unless you are sure they are in your own time zone. That way, Californians don't get awakened at 5:00 A.M., and New Yorkers can sleep before midnight.

A major responsibility of the buyer is to follow the seller's instructions. If, for example, you are instructed to feed fruit cut into 1/4 inch cubes, *do not* feed the bird seeds then complain that the bird isn't eating. If the pet store recommends a cage with bars spaced 1/2 inch apart, but you like the cage with the 3/4 inch spacing, your bird may get its head caught. The seller cannot and will not assume responsibility for your lack of knowledge, nor can s/he read minds and know intuitively what information you're lacking.

Establishing a dialog based on mutual respect and information with the seller is one of the most important things you can do to assure that you are getting the pet you want and can meet its needs properly.

#### Misconception #3

*I need to handfeed my parrot in order to bond with it.*

Wrong, *Wrong*, **WRONG!!!** If you have never handfed a parrot, don't start now!! While some breeders, brokers, and stores will sell unweaned babies, and will show their customers how to handfeed, I have never met anyone who is truly comfortable with this, unless the purchaser is an *experienced* handfeeder. There are too many things that can go wrong while hand-feeding, from feeding formula too hot, which causes crop burn, to feeding old formula contaminated with bacteria and yeast, to keeping the baby too hot or too cold, to feeding too much or too

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Once a chick leaves the seller's facility, no guarantee in the world can be expected to make up for lack of experience in feeding baby birds. The difference in price between an unweaned and a weaned baby is usually only about \$100 for a large parrot, macaw or cockatoo. It's a small price to pay for a baby's life.

#### **Misconception #4**

*A health guarantee is iron-clad, the same in all circumstances, and will always be honored.*

A health guarantee is worth only the paper it's written on. As part of your research into where you will buy your bird, you should request a copy of the seller's health guarantee, and ask questions prior to the sale if there's anything you don't understand. Many breeders or brokers have no guarantee at all, other than live delivery. A common guarantee is 72 hours after purchase, provided the bird is taken to a qualified avian veterinarian within that time. Some pet shops give much longer guarantees. Remember, always, that it is not in the best interests of any breeder, broker or store to sell you a sick or injured bird. They want you to return to them when you are ready for your second pet, and they know you will not return, nor will you recommend them to anyone else if you are not satisfied with your original purchase.

The burden of proof of a sick bird is always on the *purchaser*. If you suspect something wrong, take the bird to a qualified avian veterinarian immediately. (It's a good idea to take a new pet to the vet within the first few days anyway. That way, the doctor can see your bird when it is healthy and get an idea of what its normal behavior is like.)

Have the vet do whatever blood tests, fecals, bacterial cultures, examinations and viral screens you and your vet think appropriate; if you have done this within the first few days after receiving the bird and the lab tests show a problem, contact the seller. Talk to the seller, and send along copies of any and all lab test results.

A reputable breeder, broker or pet store will work with you to resolve the

problem to your (and their) satisfaction. However, don't expect the same treatment after you've had the bird for three months. Most avian diseases have a short incubation time, which is the reason many sellers offer only a live delivery or short-term guarantee. After the first 24 hours, it's pretty difficult to prove that your bird's problem didn't develop after you received it.

#### **Misconception #5**

*If my bird dies, the seller MUST replace it.*

Once again, it depends entirely on the situation. Your chances for another bird, or your money back, are greatly improved if you have a necropsy report from a qualified avian veterinarian that clearly states that the bird died of something that happened at the seller's facility. I know a breeder who sold a bird which died about a week after the customer received it. Upon necropsy, it was discovered that the bird died of a massive parasite infection. Clearly, the amount of parasitism required to kill the bird could not have developed in the short time the customer had it. Result: the bird was replaced.

In another case, four birds were sold to the same buyer. One died two days after receipt, the second two days later, and a third the day after that. A necropsy was never performed on the first bird, the necropsy on the second was inconclusive, and the results from the third bird showed that the fruit-eating bird had been fed only seeds. The birds were not replaced.

#### **Misconception #6**

*Lawsuits cure everything.*

I hear of breeders every month who have horror stories of facing lawsuits. I suspect that the majority of these cases involve customers who do not want to accept any responsibility for their loss of birds, and are using the courts, especially small-claims court, as a way of threatening a seller into submission.


Surely there's a better way. Any time you have live animals, sooner or later, those animals will die. Sorry, but there's no kind way to put it. But if you have followed the guidelines above, and have chosen your pet and your pet's supplier with care, established a dialog and provided the seller with

documentation of problems as soon as they are detected, chances are you'll never need to go to court.

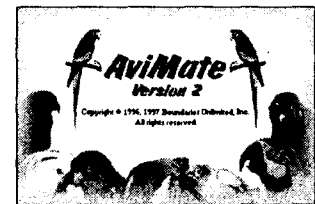
You can reach an agreement. It is perfectly legitimate for the agreement to be anything from full refund or replacement, to no refund or replacement, or anything in between. Once the agreement is reached, don't go home, think about it and try to change it. You expect the seller to live by that agreement, and the seller certainly expects you to do the same.

#### **Conclusion**

No matter from whom you buy a bird, whether breeder, broker or pet store, a seller's reputation is built on the soundness of his/her stock, the kindness of the treatment you and your pet receive, and the service you expect and need. Price isn't everything, and your decision to buy from a particular seller should never be based on the price of the bird alone.

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