



Finch Aviary

A.F.A. Visits A Member's Aviaries



Finch aviary – interior

A spontaneous, relaxed lifestyle — pursued by many in today's society — characterizes Sue Van Couvering, an award-winning sculptress and successful aviculturist.

Born in Fullerton, California, Sue grew up on a citrus ranch in La Habra Heights, Calif., the unincorporated, semi-rural area in which she lives today. A nature lover from childhood, Sue expresses these feelings through her art and her aviaries. Her first bird, a Great Horned Owl with bumblefood and a broken wing, was rescued some eight years ago from a high school youth and nursed back to health. That moving experience led her to today's ambitious breeding flock of finches and psittacines.

Sue's aviaries are situated on a two-acre hillside farm covered with citrus, eucalyptus, and a modest ranch-style home. A small, intermittent stream borders the lower end of the property.

Each year a pair of Red-tailed Hawks nest in the eucalyptus, which Sue guards against neighborhood youngsters bent on becoming falconers. The Red-tails never bother her aviaries, though an occasional Sparrow Hawk creates pandemonium.

Her largest flight — 21' on a side, 7' high on the uphill and 12' on the downhill side — is well planted and houses a variety of finches including Diamond Sparrows, Shafttails, Cordon Bleus, Spice Finches, Canaries, a pair of Scarlet-chested Parrakeets, and a colony of 32 Zebra Finches which expanded from one pair that unwelcomely entered from an adjoining aviary several months ago. Adjacent flights in this complex house Owl Finches, Gold-breasted Waxbills, Diamond Sparrows, Zebras, and Cockatiels.

In response to the terraced nature of the hillside and the many trees, the aviaries have been divided into groups. The second group is a complex of five west-

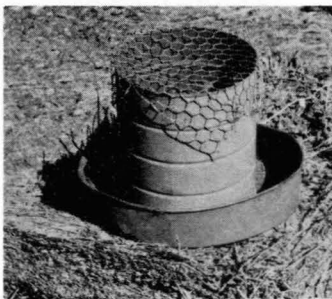
ward facing flights housing a colony of Black-masked Lovebirds, Golden Mantle Rosellas, Lineolated Parrakeets, and Cockatiels. Along the rear of these flights runs an 8' X 20' enclosure for finches. Species represented are: Peter Twinspots, Lady Goulds, Owl Finches, Lavender Finches, Cherry Finches, Gold-breasted Waxbills, Cordon Bleus, and Strawberry Finches. A small flight attached to the end of this aviary and a separate flight exclusively house Lady Goulds.

Sue has been particularly successful at raising finches. She has consistently bred each year all but the Lavenders and Peter Twinspots, which she only recently obtained. Last season four pair of Lady Goulds reared sixty young. She has raised numerous Spice Finches — a difficult accomplishment in most aviaries — and has always had a surplus of Gold-breasts, Cordon Bleus, and Strawberries, which she has made available to other members of the South Coast Finch Society, whose newsletter she edited as corresponding secretary in 1975.

Sue has endeavored to provide as natural an environment as possible to encourage breeding. She has been cautious not to overcrowd her flights and is constantly alert to aggressive behavior between males of the same species or other species, a behavior often only very subtly expressed, yet damaging to a successful breeding program.

All of the finch flights are outfitted with orchid misters to simulate rain. These serve as an important environmental stimulant for grass-finches to initiate breeding — a concept supported by field studies conducted by Dr. Klaus Immelmann and others.

Several simple experiments have been conducted by Sue to determine the significance of various food sources to the successful rearing of young finches. She has found that multiple sources of



Maggot factory

Variety of finches share large aviary.



Sue VanCovering

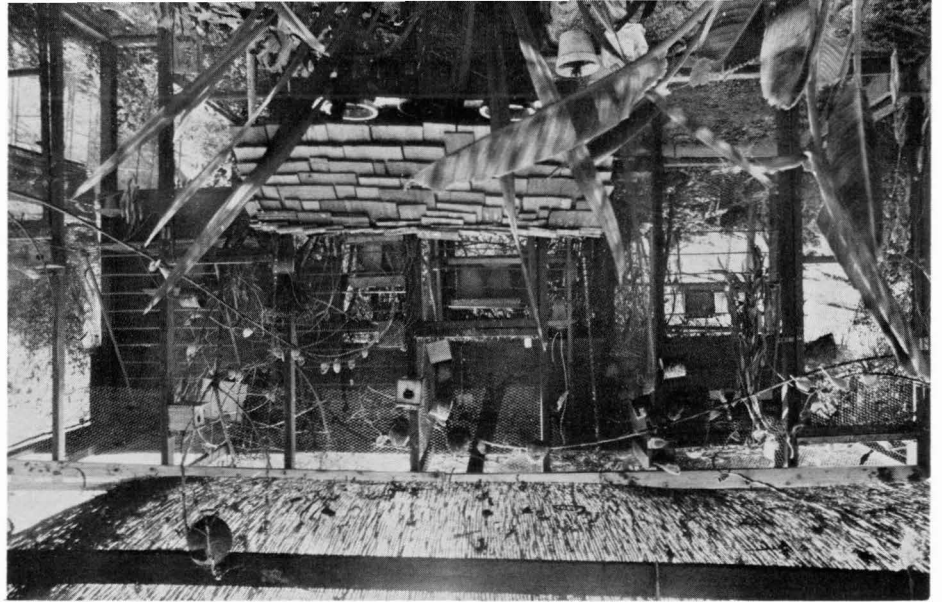


live food play an important role. When maggots (gentles), mosquito larvae, and mealworms are provided in large quantities the waxbills, Diamond Sparrows, and Shafttails do exceedingly well. When these sources are removed, the number of young produced declines to less than half of those produced when these sources are available, regardless of the time of year.

Sue raises maggots in her "maggot factory" — a 5 lb. coffee can with both ends removed and set in a pan filled with bran. Over the can is placed a piece of 1/2" x 1/2" mesh wire to support a piece of beef heart or other meat. To protect from cats or other predators, a cage may be placed over the factory.

After flies have laid their eggs, maggots soon hatch and quickly begin to devour the putrifying meat. As they grow, they fall into the bran, from which they may be collected. Sue advises the maggots be placed in a separate shallow container of bran for 24 hours to allow the maggots to excrete all of the spoiled meat they have eaten, before the maggots are fed to the birds. The meat may be seen as a dark line running the length of the otherwise white larva. When the maggot is ready to be utilized, this black line will be absent. If the maggots are left too long without meat, they will pupate. The pupae may also be fed, although they are not as easily recognized by finches as food.

Mosquito larvae are obtained by Sue from her horse trough. They may be found in any place where water collects and remains long periods. The larvae may be retrieved with a small fish net. Sue



Finch aviary — showing variety of nests offered to birds.

places them in a terra cotta dish, which absorbs the water causing the larvae to jump around, thus attracting the birds.

Mealworms are obtained commercially although a "home grown" culture may be used if the quantity required is not too large.

In addition to the live food, Sue provides a standard finch mix, budgie mix, ground (sterilized) eggshell, greens, and soaked seed — a mixture of finch mix with extra canary seed added.

The soaked seed concoction is prepared by soaking for 24 hours. It is then thoroughly rinsed and soaked for an additional 24 hours. After the second soaking it is again rinsed thoroughly. Sue adds 1/3 cup wheat germ oil to two pounds of soaked seed, which is then stored in the refrigerator until needed.

On top of all the above, Sue provides a protein supplement in the form of an egg mixture. Her recipe calls for two hard-boiled eggs, four small saltine crackers, one envelope of KNOX plain drinking gelatin from the 4 oz. size box, and one tablespoon wheat germ. All of the ingredients are thoroughly mixed together. The recipe should feed approximately 30 finches for a week. Only what can be consumed in one day should be offered to prevent spoilage. The rest may be stored in the refrigerator.

Nesting material in Sue's aviaries consists of fine devil grass, white feathers, and nesting hair (white feathers appear to be an important component that her finches use to line breeding nests as these birds do in the wild). A variety of nest sites, including boxes, baskets, gourds, coconut shells, tumble weeds, and growing shrubs are provided.

Sue has combined her excellent husbandry techniques with a vigilant health care program in co-operation with her veterinarian to maintain a healthy and productive flock.



Hookbill House.

Sue's other activities include her family of three teenage daughters, who share her love for animals, and her career. Sue currently teaches art at the East Los Angeles Community College, having obtained both her Bachelor's and Master's Degrees in Art from California State University in Fullerton.

Sue has always had an interest in all art media; pen and ink drawings, painting, and creative writing. However, it was during her undergraduate work at CSU Fullerton that she found her real love — sculpture. Her specialty is "hard edge" — a technique utilizing unbroken edges in materials of chrome-plated copper and brass, spheres of polyester resin and sheets of acrylic plexiglass lucite. She also does work in bronze and other metal castings. Some of her work is on display in galleries in Palm Springs, San Francisco, Laguna Beach, and Dallas.

A.F.A. wishes Sue a prosperous New Year and knows she will continue to make contributions to both art and aviculture. ■