

Toucans

in Aviculture at the Millennium

by Jerry Jennings, Fallbrook, CA



Red-billed Toucan owned by the author.

Toucans are as familiar as breakfast cereal at the supermarket, as magnificent as a clown, and as exotic as the mystical places of our fantasies. Everyone seems to know who “Fruit Loops” is, and understands that this silly looking creature has, at the very least, a good sense of humor. Not nearly as many folks have had the good fortune to meet one of these characters in person, and only a small, rare breed of person has had the thrill of actually owning one, the Court Jesters of God’s kingdom.

For many years, up until the mid 1960s, it was thought by most aviculturists that toucans were impossible to breed and, indeed, but for the exception of the once-only breeding of the Spot-billed Toucanet at the London Zoo in 1914, there was a notable absence of success. Then out of the fog of ancient aviculture stepped one Frank Todd, then Curator of Birds at the Los Angeles Zoo, who would do the impossible and breed not only

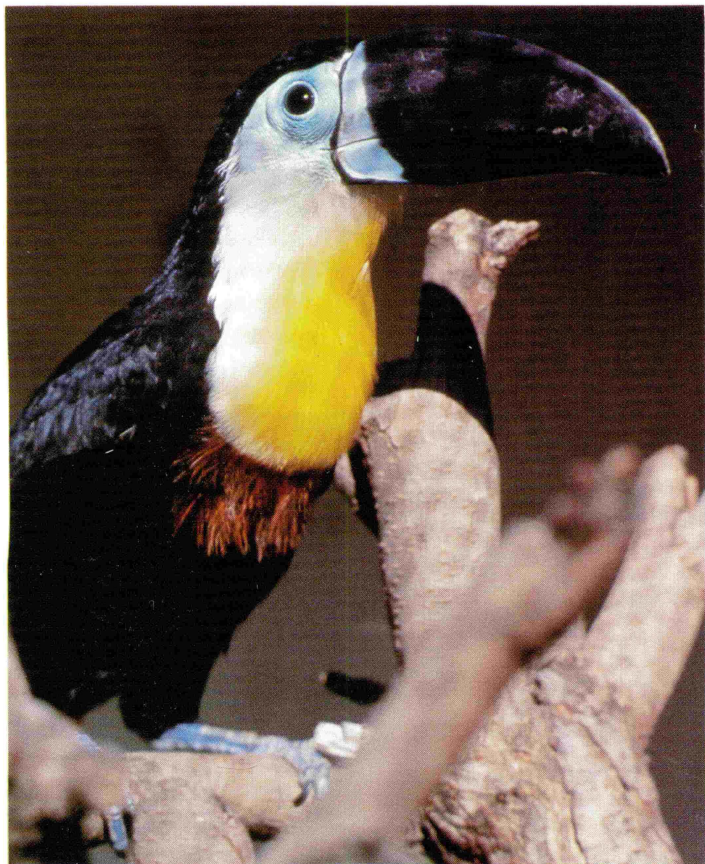
one, but several species of toucans, and not only a First Breeding of each, but several generations — a testament to his avicultural gift.

Mr. Todd did more than break new ground (which he subsequently and notably repeated with penguins at Sea World), he created a “cook book” recipe for the repetition of his feat for all who would simply follow directions. Interpretive renditions of his opus generally would not suffice — simply follow the steps. A little compatibility here, a little nest log there, etc., and a great result would be forthcoming.

Few have followed in those illustrious footsteps, but I had to give it a try. I never was a good cook, so this was a difficult task, or so I thought. Needless to say, it was surprisingly easier to do than expected, and today Emerald Forest Bird Gardens has become a center for the reproduction of many species of toucans, toucanets, and aracaris.

Toucans are not well established in aviculture today in spite of the great introduction pioneered by Todd in the mid sixties. Only a couple of species, the Green Aracari and the Emerald Toucanet could be considered “safe”

Channel-billed Toucan in the collection of the author.



Photos by Dale R. Thompson and George Dodge



An Emerald Toucanet belonging to Jerry Jennings.

in the sense that most other species may slip through our fingers like water and disappear from aviculture. It is important that we not let such a tragedy occur.

Toucans are important to aviculture, because as Sir Edmund Hillary once said about a mountain, "...it is there." Toucans, too "are there." They are important because they bring laughter to our hearts and delight to our souls — especially children's. They are the colorful clowns of the bird world, and after all, Mr. Fruit Loops is an important icon in our culture.

Toucans are wonderful birds for the aviary. They are easily seen, friendly, and most species are compatible with other birds of a similar size. Toucans can be kept with hornbills and touracos; toucanets and aracarís can be kept with thrushes and jays, and more. They can be kept indoors and out and, of all the softbills kept in aviculture today, toucans make the best of pets.

The demonstrable trainability of a toucan is evident, and these delightful acrobats can be viewed firsthand at

Disney World in Orlando, Florida where they are free flown in the bird show at Disney's Animal Kingdom several times a day.

Toucans are easily maintained on a diet of pellets and supplemented fruit. The only limitation is the necessity of providing a low iron pellet and the avoidance of fruits high in citric acid, such as oranges, grapefruit, tangerines, pineapple, and tomatoes. Virtually anything else in the fruit family is appropriate and variety is the spice of life, though we prefer to use papaya and grapes. The notion that toucans require live pinkie mice must be dispelled, as it is not only unnecessary, but may prove harmful due to the presence of harmful bacteria in some mice such as *Salmonella* and *E. Coli*.

Whether toucans are kept alone as pairs, or housed with other birds, breeding requires a nest and the proper location of this nest. While palm log trunks are ideal, toucans have and will nest in wooden boxes. The inside dimensions should match the size of the bird, keeping in mind that they prefer "a tight fit." Therefore, a toucanet or aracarí prefers five- to six-inch diameters, and the large toucans prefer eight- to nine-inches for Keel-bills, Channel-bills and Red-breasteds and 11-12 inches for Tocos, Swainson's and Red-bills. The depth of the nest chamber is not terribly important, but should be at least 15 inches below the bottom of the nest entrance.

If a wooden box is used for a nest, the inside front and back should have a ladder for the birds to climb up and down. Also, the box should contain a concave bottom similar to those in Budgie nest boxes. No nesting material is required, and if it is added, the birds will simply and quickly remove it.

When young hatch, we have found that the large toucans readily accept crickets to feed their young, and will take better care of them when crickets are present. However, while the toucanets and aracarís will consume insects they encounter in their aviary, they are reluctant to take mealworms or crickets.

When toucans are gearing up to breed, they will begin to spar with their beaks, and begin to offer each other bits of food as part of the courtship rit-

ual, much as do parrots. There will be a lot of activity at the nest as they come and go, and there will be some considerable time spent *in* the nest preparing for egg laying. In a natural log, or palm log nest, they will spend hours excavating the log and if in a box, they will try to dig out the bottom. They are trying to dig deeper and to make the bottom concave. Once they are satisfied, egg laying will commence.

Incubation takes approximately 16 days regardless of species, and the young hatch naked and blind. They will huddle together, and the parents will spend remarkably little time brooding them after they are a few days old, even in cool weather. At approximately 21 days of age they begin to open their eyes and at 40 days of age they are completely feathered. Toucanets will fledge at 42-45 days of age and the large toucans fledge at 45-50 days of age. By the time they are 60 days old, they are generally weaned. The nesting process takes about half the time of that of a large parrot, and the parents frequently return for a second clutch.

Occasionally it is necessary or desirable to pull toucan chicks for handrearing. Certainly it is necessary to do so if the goal is a tame, imprinted bird to be kept as a pet. Also, it may become necessary if the parents will not care for the young. An added plus of pulling young for handrearing is the high probability the parents will produce multiple clutches in a given season.

The varied colors, shapes and sizes of the various members of the toucan family (Ramphastidae) and their entertaining behaviors make them a bird for all seasons and all avicultural tastes. Toucans are long lived as softbills go, and hardy in many varied climatic conditions. They have been successfully bred indoors and out, and they have reproduced in a variety of cage sizes from 3 x 4 x 4 feet (toucanets and aracarís) to 6 x 8 x 6 feet (large toucans) on up to the giant walk-through flights maintained by some zoos.

More information and color pictures of most species of toucans can be found at our web site: www.emeraldforestbirds.com. No longer very common, toucans need your attention and avicultural skill — let's keep them going. 