

Tani Smida Bird Lady Extraordinaire

by Susie Christian, Morro Bay, CA



Tani Smida and "Woolie Booger" a Timneh Grey pet.

Nestled in the oak-covered rolling hills between Morro Bay and Atascadero, California, lives our vivacious red-haired birdlady, Tani Smida. Smida has been the Central Coast Avicultural Society president for the past six years and a charter member since its beginning in 1986. She was also a speaker at the AFA Convention in Denver this year and covered the topic, "Food for Thought."

Tani Smida was "hatched" and reared in California and has been surrounded by animals her whole life. Until 1981, however, most of the critters in her life were mammals. In '81 Tani inherited a pair of Double Yellow-headed Amazons from her mother. The Amazon pair were moved to the Central Coast and Tani decided to pursue her mother's dream of breeding parrots. Never in her wildest dreams did she anticipate the outcome.

It didn't take her long to realize that parrots were very special creatures and deserved her full attention. The first time she fed a baby Psittacine she was smitten and hooked thoroughly. Her fate was sealed. Tani collected and tried many different species in her early days with birds but over the years she has

wisely narrowed down the Genera that she works with. They include five: *Amazona*, *Cacatua*, *Ara*, *Psittacus* and *Poicephalus*. Recently she has also narrowed down the number of pairs that she keeps from more than 80 to a mere 55. Although Tani has skilled helpers, she always wants to be sure that the number of cages that need servicing never exceeds her ability to so by her-

self if need be.

As I entered the gate of Tani's hillside abode, perched on what she calls "Frog Pond Mountain," I was met by a small herd of 200 lb. English Mastiffs, one of which took me by the sleeve very roughly and "led" me to his mistress. I wasn't sure if he would chew my arm off or if he was playing and it took my heart at least 10 minutes to quit racing from the experience. What an amazing burglar alarm system—actually, a burglar *eating* system. There is also a very tall secure fence around the whole area. Chickens are allowed to run loose under the cages to feed off of what drops through the cage bottoms. The fowl also serve as an early warning system if there are any predators in the yard. Better to lose a chicken to a hungry wild animal than a parrot.

Smida has wisely divided her parrot cages into two groupings and they are a great distance apart. She calls one "South America" and the other "Africa." By keeping her continents separate, the African species aren't disturbed by the noise of the South Americans. Cockatoos are housed with the Africans however.

Separate cages dot the hillsides and are nestled here and there under the old oak trees. Amazon and African species are housed in 4 x 4 x 8 foot cages and the Senegals get cubes about half that size. Macaws are in 8 x 8 x 10 foot sized enclosures. All cages have plywood on the top and sides for pro-



An enclosure designed for Amazon parrots.

Photos by Susie Christian

tection from the elements and privacy. Tani has a misting system that gives the birds a daily bath and fills up water bowls as well. All cages are supported by pressure treated 4 X 4s that are fastened in a way that the birds can't get at them.

Wooden nest boxes are Tani's choice for her pairs as she says they don't get as hot and as cold as the metal kind. Wooden boxes are also more available than metal nowadays too. She says she has never lost a baby to heat but has lost them to cold made worse by a metal box.

The frosting on the cake (that adds to the "wildness" of the landscape her parrots are lucky to live in) are flowers planted everywhere. She has planted wildflowers, bulbs, perennials, and annuals with good planning so she has bloom all year long. An incredible cactus garden interspersed with assorted mementos, rings one side of the house and leads around to a trail of stepping stones made from old bird crocks. This is a great idea too. Tani takes all her fragments of colorful ceramic broken bird crocks and sets them into wet cement to form an abstract mosaic design stepping stone—very beautiful and a good way to recycle. Since I saw this at her house some years ago I started saving all my old broken crocks, but for lack of time all I have to show is a pile of broken crocks that wait patiently to be set in cement and transformed into works of art.

Smida credits people like Dale Thompson and Gail Worth for her early learning about birds. More recently she has relied on Howard Voren and Rick Jordan for sharing their information on raising birds with her. She is thankful that aviculturists like these folks always shared their knowledge so cheerfully with her and every chance she gets Tani is more than willing to return the favor when anyone asks her about birds. My favorite saying I have heard Tani repeat so many times is, "The only stupid questions you can ask about birds are the questions you *don't* ask."

Her bird diet consists of sprouted grains and legumes from spring thru the fall. In the winter when sprouts grow more slowly, Tani adds some soak and cook to her diet. She feeds a lot of root vegetables like carrots and beets that are cooked and mashed up. Cooking is needed for the root crops so the cellulose wall is broken down and made more digestible for the birds. Other fruits, vegetables, mixed nuts, almonds in the shell, and raw peanuts round out her diet.

Smida believes in parent rearing of babies whenever possible but there are always a few pairs who never get it right and the eggs are incubated. She feels it is better to incubate eggs from the problem pairs than to lose the babies.


Being a commercial breeder, Tani sells most of her babies to retailers spe-

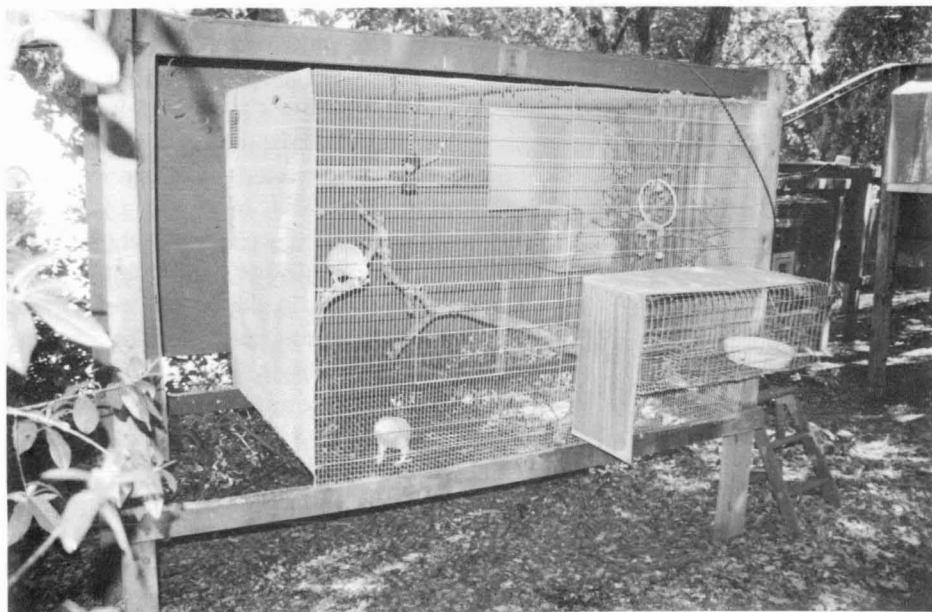
cializing in handfed parrots. She occasionally sells to private individuals and takes great care to educate the new owners in the care of their new bird. Her chicks come with hatch certificates, a 15-page booklet on the rudiments of parrot keeping, and five pages of nutritional information. Tani also remains available for consultation regardless of how long ago the bird was originally purchased.

Odd, the little lessons we get from others. I have learned so much watching Tani speak to our bird club and the most valuable lesson to me was her spiel on "Mr. Thermometer." Corny as it was, it stuck in my mind so well. She always stressed the use *every* time, of a thermometer, no matter how much of a hurry we were in or how sure we could test the baby food formula on our lip or wrist and have it be the right temperature. No matter *what*, always use "Mr. Thermometer" to stir the food and in her presentation Smida would make the thermometer dance like it was alive and had a personality of its own.

This mental image stayed with me and I have gone through countless thermometers in the last few years. (Candy thermometers break easily). I was so grateful that Tani made that impression on me, especially when last year I saw a sweet baby bird about five weeks old whose crop had been burned by another hand feeder. The food would pour out of the hole in its crop as fast as it was put in. Thank goodness we have the willing and caring bird-network we do. I feel my bird education is priceless and was given to me free of charge by caring folk such as Tani.

Tani feels that those of us who choose to spend our lives breeding parrots need to take our vocation very seriously. We owe it to our flock and to the world to do the best we possibly can for the marvelous feathered creatures who depend entirely upon us for their every need. The best food, housing, and environment we can provide for them should be our main goal and purpose.

Without our total dedication there will be a dearth of feathered beauty in the 21st century. If we all had Tani's kind of energy, the quality of bird-keeping would surely soar high on the wings of her kind of enthusiasm. 



An African Grey cage with a detachable feeding station that converts into a transportation cage in an emergency.