

# Paulie

(A Movie by the Birds)

by Robbie Harris, La Habra, CA

I am excited. And why am I excited? Because of a movie—yes a movie. I am so happy because finally someone in Hollywood figured out that birds are very popular pets and has done something about it.

For years movies have been coming out with starring roles for dogs and cats, and even a pig. Now, if a movie about a pig can make such a big impression on people—and a second movie starring that pig is already in production—just think what a bird could do?

If you ask people to think of some popular bird that has appeared in a show from either T.V. or the movies, what usually comes up is that old T.V. show "Baretta." You remember, the cop (Robert Blake) with his pet cockatoo. I use to watch that show, and I can remember all the people who ran out to buy cockatoos as pets.

And, if you ask the younger generation the same question, those people think of Big Bird from "Sesame Street."

I feel those are pretty poor choices for we *real* bird lovers! Well, get ready—a movie all about a bird just hit the "big screen."

On April 17, 1998, Dreamworks, Steven Spielberg's new production company, released "Paulie." Paulie is not only the name of this movie, but also the name of the leading star—a Blue-crowned Conure.

This is a full length family movie containing *real* birds as characters. The main character is Paulie, a Blue-crowned Conure, and there are other birds (a Nanday Conure, a Cherry-headed Conure and a Jenday Conure) with supporting roles.

"Paulie," a modern day fable, tells the story of a parrot that learns human language, but never quite understands humans' strange ways. The story is told through the eyes of Paulie as he journeys through a series of funny and touching adventures over a 20-year span in his quest to return to the little

girl who raised and loved him. During those 20 years, he has nine different owners and many adventures.

The filming of "Paulie" began in Los Angeles in July of 1997 in an historic office building (built in 1914) in downtown Los Angeles. The different floors house several of the film's interior sets. The balance of the filming was done on locations in and around Los Angeles, as well as in a converted warehouse in Vernon, California.

I have been to both the indoor sets as well as out on locations. One of the indoor sets had what appeared to be a real house built inside, even though most was just a facade. But, there were some rooms inside that were even furnished, and included stairways to nowhere. That was something to experience, for as I walked through this interior stage setup, I really felt I was in a home.

The location filming was done outdoors in different areas in Los Angeles. I went to two of those outdoor filming locations, both of which were in downtown Los Angeles. One was on a dirt straw-covered parking lot. Filming

took place during the night, and lasted all through the night. There were a few set rules though, no live bird filming after midnight. The reason for this was that there were scenes filmed on location where filming started at about 7:00 P.M. and ran until 5:00 A.M. The birds needed their sleep so midnight was the time the birds retired for the night.

And believe me, these birds were truly treated like stars. They had their own air conditioned trailer where they stayed between shooting—just like the human stars.

At the other filming location I visited, the filming took place during the day, in the rain outside a large building, right in Olvera Street. This was done outdoors, with some of the birds cast in full flight. The birds stayed right with their trainers, having no desire to fly off.

The DreamWorks production of "Paulie" was directed by John Roberts ("War of the Buttons") from an original screenplay by Laurie Craig ("Modern Girls"). The film was produced by Mark Gordon ("Speed," "Broken Arrow," "Hard Rain [formerly "The Flood]"),



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Gary Levinsohn ("12 Monkeys", "Hard Rain") and Allison Segan ("Speed," "Broken Arrow"). Ginny Nugent ("The Craft," "Bloodline") is the executive producer, with Michele Weisler ("The Trigger Effect," "Saints and Sinners") co-producing.

The birds were supplied by Boone Narr, of "Animals for Hollywood." He and his crew spent more than three months teaching the birds the tricks that were needed for this movie. Back in early 1997, Boone started on his quest to buy numerous Blue-crowns. Most of the birds purchased were wild untamed birds. A total of 14 Blue-crowns were used for the making of this movie. As for the other birds, six of each species were purchased and trained for their parts, since the parts were much smaller.

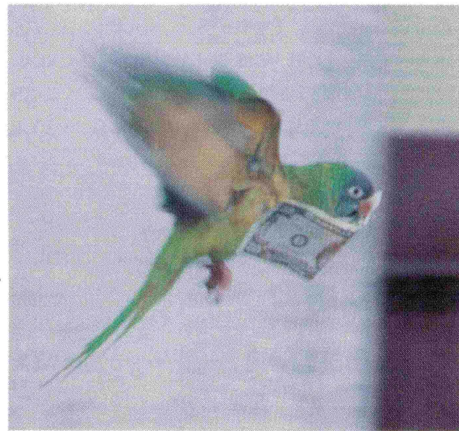
The first thing to be done with these birds was to hand train them. Narr told me that he found the conures a real joy to work with—this was his first time training and working with conures. He said once tamed, these birds were so eager to learn tricks that it made their work fun.

Narr compared the conures to a dog, the Jack Russell Terrier, because of their eagerness to learn and work at tasks. The conures all seemed to truly enjoy the human attention and loved to perform the tasks they all learned. Narr said he has worked with Amazon parrots and could not get them to perform any type of trick willingly, and

conures were truly the way to go when tricks are needed in a movie.

I totally agree with this, for I too have worked with conures for over 20 years. Tame pet conures are so "puppy like" and just love attention and human contact. Not only do many learn to talk, but they love to do tricks. I watched the birds on the set perform some of the tricks they were taught, and the birds did them with such ease. The Blue-crown that learned to work a ATM bank machine seemed to really have fun putting the card in the machine and pushing those 4 buttons. He seemed so proud of himself after he performed this task. And what was

Photos by Peter Iovino, 1998 Dream Works LLC



*A parrot named Paulie, who learns to not only speak but comprehend human language, proves to have some invaluable talents in Dream Works Pictures' PAULIE.*

really funny was if he had a problem getting that plastic card in the slot on the ATM he did not want any one to help him. If someone would reach over to help put the card in or straighten it out for him, he would get visibly mad and try to take the card out of the person's hand. He wanted to do this trick all on his own. He would work that card by himself until he got it in the slot, then he would push the card in with his beak until it was all the way in the machine. There are many other tasks the various birds were taught for this movie. Narr has other animals which perform in this film as well.

When a scene is too demanding or dangerous for the lives of the birds, the filmmakers rely on state-of-the art animatronics from Stan Winston Studios, headed by four-time Oscar-winning special effects wizard Stan Winston ("The Lost World:Jurassic Park"). I was asked if I could provided them feath-



*A little girl named Marie (Hallie Eisenberg) makes a special friend in a remarkable parrot named Paulie. The two form a lifelong bond when Paulie helps Marie overcome a painful stutter, and in so doing, the bird gets the "gift of gab." When Paulie is eventually separated from Marie he begins a tireless quest to return to her.*

ers from a Blue-crowned Conure, which I did and I mapped out each feather on a drawing of a conure's body. Then Stan Winston Studios could have feathers dyed to match exactly and build their robotic bird. They told me that my feathers and bird map helped greatly. A sculpture of a conure was created and, once the mechanics were done, the body was carefully layered with the dyed feathers. This radio controlled conure can be operated by the crew who are running it from up to 200 feet away. Up to five people can control the robot bird at the same time to have it do different movements of the body like eyes, wings, beak and so forth, if need be.

This robotic bird appears real, and no one will know the difference in the film during those few scenes where it is used instead of the real live bird. Keep in mind that only 5% of this film used the robot bird in parts, while over 90% were real birds. Feathered prop birds were used to set up the cameras and scenes, just as stand-ins were used during that set up time for the human movie stars.

I met Mr. Winston on the set one day, and he asked me what I thought of his "Paulie" robot creation since I knew my conures. Of course, his bird was fabulous, as all his work is!




*Paulie, a parrot who can speak, finds himself at a loss for words when he meets a beautiful feathered friend in Dream Works Pictures family adventure PAULIE.*

This film has many human supporting actors in it. Two time Academy Award nominee Gena Rowlands ("A Woman Under the Influence," "Gloria"), Jay Mohr ("Jerry Maguire"), Tony Shalhoub ("Men in Black," "Big Night"), Academy Award nominee Bruce Davison ("Longtime Companion"), Matt Craven ("Crimson Tide"), Tia Texada, veteran comedian Buddy Hackett and Cheech Marin. I was there for the filming of both, Jay Mohr's part and that of Cheech Marin.

In between filming, Mohr would hold the birds and scratch their heads and really interact with them. He really appeared to be having fun, that is both him and the birds. It was really something to see. He told me that he really enjoyed working on this film with the birds. He really liked all the birds used for the movie. Indeed, as he worked with the different birds he could recognize the various Blue-crowns by their personalities. Fourteen Blue-crowned Conures (which varied in ages, as well as in the performing specialties) were used in the filming.

Of course, all portrayed the one character, Paulie. Each bird actor has a very different personality, just as people do. Cheech Marin also told me that he too liked the birds and enjoyed working with his feathered fellow actors.

Boone Narr still owns all the birds that were used in this movie. Presently they are all semi-retired, but expected to do publicity work as the movie is released in the theaters. I think lots of work for them will come once "Paulie" is released on the big screen. The Blue-crowned actors that did most of the work on this movie were Guido, Lenny, Squiggy, Fran and Amy. On the set, all individual birds were referred to by their name, even the human actors called each bird by its real name.

Okay, I will say here that this movie may be somewhat politically incorrect, when it comes to some of those "stuffy" bird breeders and for the too-serious bird owners. But, as you watch this movie with your family, keep in mind that this is just a movie, a fairy tale, like Jurassic Park, Tarzan, and Wizard of OZ just to name a few. Go with an open mind, and just have fun with it. 

# OPINIONS

## Another Viewpoint From Australia

by Graeme Hyde, Victoria, Australia

Although I spoke at the AFA's Twentieth Anniversary Convention (Knoxville—1994) on Australian Grassfinches, I am not qualified to comment on Estrildid breeding in the United States, as discussed by Stash and Carol Anne Buckley in their Watchbird article "Conan the Aviculturist?" (November/December 1997)

However, I believe their statement, "In the 10 years we have been involved with Estrildid finches, most of the periodical articles seem to focus on the same few species, with the same caliber of writing, containing the same misinformation rehashed over and over again" needs clarification. Although they didn't specify U.S. periodicals, I assume they are referring only to American publications.

As editor of *Australian Aviculture*, journal of the Avicultural Society of Australia, for 265 consecutive monthly issues (at March 1998) I can assure *Watchbird* readers that articles about Estrildid finches published in "AA" over the last 10 years have been original, informative, and on a wide variety of species. For example, in the first year of the decade referred to (1988) the following species were featured: Crimson, Owl, Diamond Firetail, Red-browed Firetail, Gouldian, Shaft-tailed, Heck's, and Blue-faced Parrotfinch.

The Buckleys' comment "...since Derek Goodwin's classic work *Estrildid Finches of the World* (1988) there have been no truly noteworthy books published on the subject of finches" needs challenging. In Australia, the following avicultural books have been published in the period 1985 to 1997:

- 1) *The Avicultural Writings of Eric Baxter* (1985); co-authors: Mark Shephard & Chris Welford.
- 2) *Finch Breeders Handbook* Volume One *The Australians* (1987) contributing writers.

- 3) *Finch Breeders Handbook* Volume Two *The Foreigns* (1989) contributing writers.
- 4) *Aviculture in Australia: Keeping and breeding aviary birds* (1989) by Mark Shephard.
- 5) *A Guide to...Gouldian Finches: Their Management, Care & Breeding* (1991) by John Sammut.
- 6) *A Complete Manual for the keeping and breeding of Finches* (1994) by Russell Kingston.
- 7) *A Guide to Australian Grassfinches: Their Management, Care & Breeding* (1997) by Russell Kingston

### Comments on the above Literature

**No 1.** The Baxter Writings are a collection of 87 original articles written by Eric Baxter of Adelaide, South Australia. Originally published in *Bird Keeping in Australia*, magazine of the Avicultural Society of South Australia, it contains 35 articles on Estrildid finches.

**Nos 2 & 3.** The two "Finch Breeders Handbooks" were written by a team of experienced aviculturists and published by the Queensland Finch Society.

**No. 4.** Mark Shephard's *Aviculture in Australia* is the definitive work on the subject, e.g., 52 of the 380 pages are devoted to Australian finches, not to mention chapters on nutrition, management, diseases, and aviaries.

**No. 5.** John Sammut's informative work on the Gouldian covers all aspects of the subject.

**No. 6.** Russell Kingston's 480-page tome is the definitive work on "finches" in Australia.

**No. 7.** Although lacking the detailed text of his *Finches*, Kingston's *Australian Finches* is most informative.

I hope these notes will be of some use to Estrildid enthusiasts. 