

# A New Look at Cages in Aviculture

by Rainer Erhart, Ph.D., Kalamazoo, MI

I don't really recall exactly when and how I chose birds as my life-long, all-consuming hobby. My visits to my grandparents' farm surely contributed, so did my uncles many pigeons, and my first venture feeding young abandoned birds, my first visit to a large zoo, and my friendship with a unique individual who taught me much about nature and birds.

So many things and so many people come to mind, but all experiences

Photos by Rainer Erhart



*This bank of cages is specially designed for breeding Cockatiels. The nest boxes are attached to the outside to allow maximum room in the cage. Solid trays between tiers prevent debris dropping through to the lower cages.*

*This is the perfect cage for controlled breeding of mutation lovebirds. In this case, the nest box is inside the cage.*



*One of the author's bird rooms. As you can see, it is absolutely spotless and very orderly. It is very easy to maintain a large number of cages of this kind. If you look carefully, you'll notice a couple of Parrotlets*







*This display of EuroCages at the AFA convention in Baltimore presented some of the finest cages ever built for small birds. EuroCages are designed by Dr. Rainer Erhart and manufactured by Jim Pestoor. Pestoor (right), shows a visitor custom features of the EuroCage complex.*

started out pretty much the same way: what kind of bird was I going to get, how would I house this bird, how would I feed it, and, last but not least, how would I convince my mother of yet another feathered friend around the house.

Over more than 50 years I have asked these same questions at least that many times, and, though the answers have become more complex, the birds more exotic, the housing requirements more sophisticated, I still feel I have to convince my spouse that those new birds would make a fine addition to my collection.

Over the years I have learned that in order to be very convincing, I had to take into consideration some of the things that bothered her and, to my surprise, I became a much better aviculturist by listening at least to some of her advice.

She likes things orderly and clean, and so do the birds. She likes feeding the birds a greater variety of a menu, and the birds love it. She likes cages and aviaries which are functional but also attractive, and so do the birds. Since this article is about cages and caging birds, let me share some of my experiences with you.

During my many travels I am at least as interested in how my friends have solved caging and breeding their birds as I am in the birds themselves. Accordingly, I have gone through an evolution of cage designs and have finally arrived at something that I feel is practical, easy to clean and service, and is appealing to the eye as well as the bird. I was not alone in putting together such a project but was greatly helped by my friend Jim Pestoor who had much experience with the engineering side of production.

Photo 1 shows one of my two bird rooms. A series of cages are linked together and each cage is individually lighted. It's stunning for the visitor to see everything so clearly, the birds, the food, the nests and the ease with which to look at the young. Let me give you a bit more detail.

I hate cages that are made of wire mesh, clipped together and stacked one on top of the other. They remind me of my early chicken coops and unsightly enclosures for pigeons. I still have scars from the many scratches that the unfinished wires have given me and I also remember the unfortunate accidents with birds who have gotten entangled in a loose piece of

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wire.

Since I keep only small hookbills and finches, all my new cages are designed to accommodate one breeding pair per unit. My collection includes lovebirds, parrotlets, Australian grass parakeets, and small African finches. A friend of mine also keeps Cockatiels in these units, although we redesigned the cages to adjust for the birds, crests and long tail feathers.

One of the things I have learned over the years from European breeders as well as through my own experience is that successful breeding occurs only when birds hear each other but can't see each other. Hence all my units have solid sides made of a very durable and easily washable plastic. The wire front is of a professional design and powder coated. The front easily slips in and out of the cage for thorough cleaning once the breeder birds have finished raising their young. I prefer only one big door in the lower center because I use feeding and watering dishes at the bottom of the cage. Other arrangements, however, can be easily made. I also have one door in the upper right or left, which gives me access to the breeding box which sits on a metal platform. For finches I often remove the platform and simply hang the natural nest right on the side of the cage. A sturdy powder coated tray fits tightly into the bottom and when removed for cleaning the opening can be closed with a neatly fitting plastic device. This keeps birds from escaping which is especially important for the more flighty finches.

Finally, each cage is fitted with a small fluorescent light fixture which

fits neatly on top between the cages. Individual cage lighting has brought out the best in these units and I would not think of doing without them. I use Vita Lites and each bank of six cages and light fixtures is put on a timer. This allows me to slightly stagger the times when light turns on and off.

As I indicated earlier, I use these cages mostly as breeding units, though there is little wrong with using them in what ever other way you choose. Since each cage is only about 36 inches wide, 21 inches high and either 14 or 20 inches deep, I try to give all birds more space at least part of the year.

Once the young birds have hatched and are completely weaned I remove them to my second bird room which is made up of walk-in flights, including a few indoor-outdoor units. Here they can practice flight, put on more muscle and obtain a healthy looking feather coat. From these flights I eventually select my breeders for the next season and the entire cycle starts all over again.

One final note. Obviously, those cages are not for everyone. Most people complain about the initial investment and rather continue with what has worked for them. I, on the other hand, find it most satisfying to look at this as a once in a lifetime acquisition, enjoy the ease of cleaning and have others compliment me on how beautiful the birds look in these modern cage environments. And, perhaps most important, I now have an admiring and supporting spouse who rarely complains about my bird rooms or my often intense avicultural interests. ➤

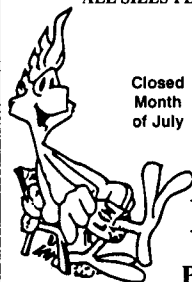
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