

People Pets

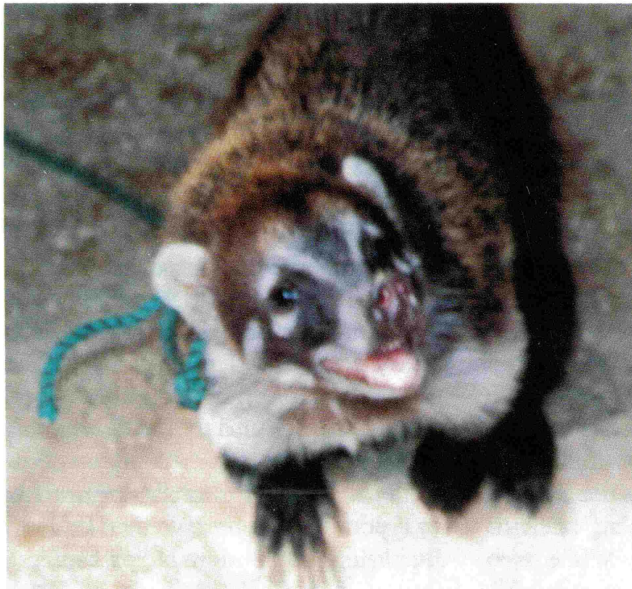
The Keeping and Taming of Birds and Other Creatures in Mesoamerica

by Edward J. Harvey, Ph.D.
Riverside, CA

The keeping of birds and other animals for pets extends far back into the ancient past. Both art and archeology have shown that man has long been fascinated with his fellow creatures. He has kept as pets: fish in tiny bowls, glass fronted ant farms, string-tied June bugs, painted turtles, horned lizards, cats, dogs and even elephants.



Adult Petz's Conure, *A. canicularis*, from Quimixto, Mexico.



White-nosed Coati, *Nasua narica*.



A Modern Stela — a jungle billboard.



Female *Crax rubra* — The Great Curassow.

As a boy growing up in southern Mississippi I had my share of pet squirrels, foxes, raccoons, crows, lizards, snakes, opossums, and alligators; and I was not the only animal keeper. In fact I was surrounded by neighbors who kept a variety of pets. The people living behind our home in Biloxi raised Canaries on their back porch and their neighbors had a parrot. Even the lady who owned the gas station at the foot of the Back Bay Bridge had a half-naked, feather-picking green parrot that could talk and beg for all the "nutritious" saltine crackers, with its high pitched "Polly wants a cracker!" Today my interest in animals that people keep as pets has continued.

While writing this article I am sitting by a large window at my home that allows me to intermittently glance up from my paper into our outside octagon-shaped aviary, 20 feet away; containing an elegant pair of Rose-ringed Parakeets, a pair of Bourke's grass keets and a courting pair of Red-rumped Parakeets. To my right, three feet away is a young Stumpy budgerigar (a mutant born without primary remiges and rectrices), perched on his stand begging for attention.

Between prenuptial songs and territorial arias my eyes spend more time on the outside avial antics than on this avian article. I'm afraid if I don't glance up I'll miss some new, never seen before behavioral activity. Since I've been on this paragraph for 30 minutes I'll have to move to a more secluded writing spot.

This fascination with our fellow creatures is in part why there are keepers of pets wherever man and beasts are found. They pique our intellectual curiosity, and bring us entertainment and joy.

While traveling in Belize and Mexico this year, I took the time to ask people about their pets. To my pleasure I was invited into backyards, enclosed patios, garths, homes, and rooftops to see and photograph their special pets. These visits often became friendly exchanges about how they collected the animals and what foods were fed. These pet owners were as equally curious about my pets. On these occasions, my wallet was pro-

duced where I showed off pictures of my grandchildren sandwiched in between photos of my psittacines and galliformes. Before leaving a pet keeper I asked if they knew of other pet owners in the neighborhood. This often resulted in a referral list of friends with animals, which included: pet coatis, spider monkeys, deer, peccaries, iguanas, snakes, turtles, and birds. I've included photos of some of these special pets.

On a biology research trip in Belize in August of 1997, four friends and I were told of a family of Maya artisans (Yucatecos) who owned a small gift shop at Sac Tunich (an ancient Maya site) near San Antonio, Belize, and owned a pet curassow. After an hour's drive from our base camp in the Maya Mountains of Western Belize, we arrived at the Sac-Tunich Gift Shop.

The owners and operators, Jose and Javier Magana, graciously allowed us to watch them as they produced carvings on local slate that rivaled the carvings and paintings found on the edifices throughout the ancient Maya cities. I asked the brothers where they

had learned their trade. Their answer was that, from their "father's fathers" (the original artisans of antiquity).

After purchasing some original carvings I asked to see their pet curassow. Climbing gingerly up the acclivity toward a palm thatched stick house I spotted my first free roaming, tame, *Crax rubra* (Great Curassow). Determined to get close-up pictures I was prepared with my 600 mm zoom lens. Not knowing how tame the bird was, I went to my knees and began to worm-crawl my way to my unsuspecting quarry, snapping pictures as I inched along, crawling and creeping through chicken droppings and from bush to rock, like a marine infantryman under fire.

After kneeling behind a rock and quietly reloading the Elan 35 mm camera, I cautiously peered around the rock to take another roll of long-distance shots, and came vis-a-vis with the large female curassow who had crossed the 30 feet to get a close-up view of the strange white man hiding behind the rock. I was more than a little embarrassed when I looked past



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the curassow and saw the whole Indian family smiling in wonder at my stalking of a bird that wanted to eat out of my hand. After changing lens and backing away, I got my photos.

The Magana family, like most forest-dwelling Indians, routinely collected plants and animals from the surrounding selva to stock their larder. While collecting eggs for the table they had decided to hatch one of the curassow eggs and raise the chick for the table. I moaned inside to think that this beautiful and not too common bird was soon to be mixed with maize and herbs for the pot. I thought of the gamebird breeders back in the USA who would have given this Indian family a common Belizian salary for that genetically fresh female curassow.

The shortening of the photo period and the shedding of leaves stimulated the urge to migrate ahead of the brumal weather. Like all the other snow birds my wife Rose and I flew south on remiges made of aluminum and steel (Mexicana Air) to the warm climate of Puerto Vallarta, where we spent a week enjoying the playas, clear waters and Mexican cuisine.

For Rose, the trip was part vacation and part work. When not being a tourist she was studying for one of her graduate classes. On these occasions I boarded the public bus and headed for the outlying countryside, meeting the locals and their special pets.

On one outing about six miles south of Puerto Vallarta in the small coastal village of Quimixto, I visited four homes with pets.

The first family visited, was "owned" by an energetic, in-to-everything, rolypoly, coatimundi. Getting a good photo of this, long-tailed, four-legged dynamo was nearly impossible. This beast had a mind of its own. No one in the family was able to command or dictate its behavior. With camera clicking I pursued this out of control varmint through the kitchen, under the table, under my legs, off my knees again and again.

With tail erect and dragging a short blue nylon rope that had been someone's attempt at constraint, he led me through a roll of 24 frames, all blanks or out of focus. I must have been a ridiculous sight on my knees, under

the table trying to coax a still moment from the dancing dervish.

The coatimundi is a new-world mammal that ranges from South America north into Texas and into the American Southwest, and is close kin to the raccoon commonly found in North America. It is an omnivore and has been considered a pest by the maize farmers since antiquity. In the 1500s, the Bishop of Yucatan, Diego De Landa, gives the following account of the "chic" (coati). "The Indian women raise them and they leave nothing which they do not root over and turn upside down and it is an incredible thing how wonderfully fond they are of playing with the Indian women and how they clean them from lice and they always go to them and will have nothing to do with a man in their lives. There are many of them and they always go in herds in a row, one after the other, with their snouts thrust in each other's tails, and they destroy to a great extent the field of maize..." (Landa, ca: 1566). The coati as food was not considered by the Indians as tasty. Today, family groups of coati can be seen scavenging along the trails and forests paths of the ancient Maya city of Tikal in the Department of El Peten in the northern section of Guatemala and in the forests near Coba in the Yucatan.

Down the dirt road from the coati owner was a Mexican family that had collected three young Orange-fronted Parakeets, *Aratinga canicularis* from a termitary near the village. These three young birds were quite tame and fearlessly clamored to the door begging for a treat. Five of the homes visited in this community had this species of conure as pets.

Though these conures seem to prefer the termite mounds of *Nasutitermes nigriceps* for nests, they will also use hollow logs, den trees, and aviary boxes (Molar and Spitzer, 1990). These small parrots (9-10 inches) have a raucous, screechy scream.

Some Tips for Visiting Owners of Special Pets in Remote Areas of Latin America

- Bring colored pictures of animals you wish to see.
- Bring a good camera system and

plenty of film.

- Bring a gift for the pet owner.
Suggested gifts:
 - (1) box of cuttlebones,
 - (2) vitamins,
 - (3) feeders,
 - (4) cage water bottles,
 - (5) lock down bowls,
 - (6) catalogs of products,
 - (7) old copies of bird magazines,
 - (8) louse and mite powders,
 - (9) field guides (I look for used ones at every garage sale).

After evaluating the pet owners' situation I select the appropriate gift from my backpack and with a smile and thank you I ask them to please give the gift to their pet for me. I usually carry many packs of sugarless gum for the children.

- If the language is not English I usually bring with me a small notebook with key idioms and questions phonetically marked and memorized. e.g., "Hello, my name is Edward and I'm from the U.S.A. I am a pet owner. Do you know of a neighbor who has pets?" I then show them pictures of animals I would like to see.

Other good questions are:
"Would you show me how to find your friend's home? What is his name? Would you draw a map to his house?" Practice saying these sentences under tutelage of a person who speaks the foreign language.

- Sources for finding pet owners in foreign countries (especially throughout Latin America): pet shops, veterinarians, grocery stores, cab drivers, zoos, police, and feed stores.
- Some of my most interesting finds came as I walked through a village and listened for the squawks and whistles of caged birds.
- Photos of you and your pets.

Have a great flight on your next migration.

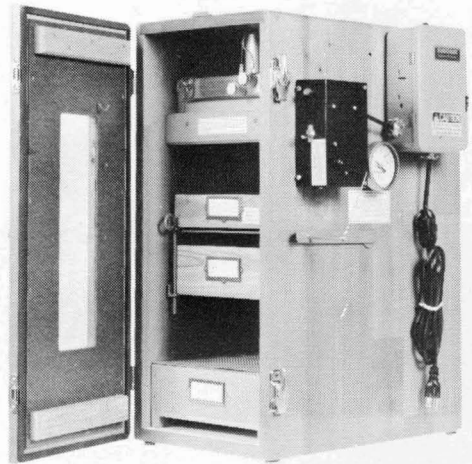
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- Landa's-Relacion de Las Cosas de Yucatan*, a translation, Edited with Notes by A. M. Tozzer, Cambridge, Mass., 1991
- Encyclopedia of Parakeets*, by K. Kolar & K. H. Spitzer, copyright 1990 by T.F.H. Publications



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