

# Aviculture: Yesterday and Tomorrow

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Prior to the seventies, the keeping of parrots and other exotic birds was an uncommon activity in the U.S. Aviculture was practiced by the wealthy and the dedicated hobbyists. The average person might have a Budgerigar or a Cockatiel, but most probably not a parrot or a softbilled exotic bird. A revolution in aviculture resulted when several technological changes coincided to make it possible for wild birds in far off lands to be collected in large numbers and quickly transported to the U.S. and Europe.

Large scale importation was made possible because trappers had greater access to wild birds as increased development in jungles and grasslands occurred. Roads were built into remote areas, opening up the wild lands for all sorts of plundering. Minerals, oil sources, and timber were sought. Along with these resources, the wildlife became more accessible. Air transportation made it possible to quickly move the perishable wildlife to its final destination in the northern countries. As aviculturist Rick Jordan states: "An entire infrastructure developed in producing countries where trappers set up holding facilities and sold groups of birds to U.S. importers. The bird business was booming and new species were being imported that had never been brought into the U.S. The ability of aviculturists to purchase wild-caught birds from importers increased the interest in keeping and breeding birds."

As the interest in keeping exotic birds became widespread, concerns

arose around keeping these exotic birds alive, healthy, and reproducing. Clubs and societies increased in number and the national organization, the American Federation of Aviculture was formed in 1974. Several magazines in the U.S. devoted to bird keeping were published. The *American Cage Bird* magazine, which had been published for many years, was joined in the seventies by the *afa Watchbird*, and in the eighties by *Bird World*, *Parrot World*, and *Bird Talk*.

The Association of Avian Veterinarians was formed which focused on the veterinary medical care of avian species, from histopathology to surgery. Probably the most important medical development was surgical sexing which allowed the bird breeder to know the sex of individual birds and thus to forego guess work in setting up pairs. Annual conferences provided the veterinarians with the latest advances in avian medicine. Research veterinarians studied diseases and provided important information regarding their prevention and control, including the development of tests.

Studies in nutrition were made at various universities and by feed companies to perfect a commercial diet for psittacines and a commercial hand rearing formula for baby birds. The commercial pelleted diets made it possible for large breeding facilities to maintain healthy productive flocks. The commercial formulas made it possible to successfully hand rear large numbers of healthy baby birds. As Roland Cristo, lory breeder, states: "The availability of commercial hand-feeding formulas was extremely important for bird breeders because you only had to add heated water and mix in the formula. There was less chance of making mistakes."

Aviculturists had a great interest in acquiring new exotic birds for breeding purposes and became very successful in breeding and rearing a great variety of species. Additionally, the desire to own a pet bird by was at an all time high within the general public. And then came the Wild Bird Conservation Act of 1992 (WBCA).

In the years prior to the passage of the WBCA, the animal rights organiza-

tions had campaigned mightily to close importation and to place a negative image on the keeping of birds. Videos seen on television often intimated that most pet birds were smuggled birds and this evil act was decimating wild bird populations. One of the consequences of this campaign was that pet birds lost some of their high regard by members of the public, who could not be expected to know a smuggled bird from a domestically reared one.

Another concept presented in this campaign was that even domestically reared parrots, and especially macaws, were wild creatures, unsuited for domestic life as companions in our homes. The residues of this anti-bird-ownership propaganda remain with us today when local and state legislation is proposed regarding exotic animals.

Aviculture in the U.S. is now faced with a future containing a great deal of advantages for bird keepers and breeders:

- A large number of individual birds of many species of psittacines.
- A tremendous bank of knowledge about breeding a wide variety of species.
- Modern equipment, formulas and tools for successful incubation and hand rearing.
- An active and informed community of avian veterinarians.
- A variety of bird societies focusing on families and species.
- Annual conferences and seminars to update breeders.
- A plethora of books and magazines related to birds and bird keeping.
- A much better educated pet owning public. We even have adoption and rescue groups to care for those birds which have lost their position as beloved pets in people's homes.

However, a few issues remain to be confronted and to be surmounted:

(1) State and local laws and regulations are continuously being proposed to restrict or prohibit bird ownership or breeding.

(2) Breeding birds that were originally wild caught and, thus, more successful as breeders, are slowly disappearing from breeding collections.

(3) The development of studbooks

and breeding programs for the species which are rare in captivity, although beginning, has not progressed very far.

(4) The leadership in the avicultural community, the zoo community, and the conservation community have not yet settled down to easy cooperation and mutual support on the issue of exotic birds and what can be done, working together, to secure their survival for the future in captivity and in the wild.

(5) The promotion of aviculture to our youth.

These five concerns have been recognized by the leadership in the avicultural community and most have been tentatively addressed, to one degree or another.

The AFA has produced *The Bird Keeper's Legislative Handbook* by Kelly Tucker, to assist in solving local and state regulatory problems. Specialty groups and the *AFA Fast Ads* provide information on the availability of single birds for breeding purposes. The AFA, specialty organization representatives and representatives of the zoo community are interacting to produce protocols and programs and studbooks for the species considered to be rare in captivity. There are some occasions where members of the conservation community and the avicultural community and the zoo community come together to work on saving a species, such as the AFA Red Siskin project and the Spix's Macaw project.

Very little is being done about introducing our young people to aviculture and its joys. A few bird clubs do have youth programs.

Much remains to be done in each of these five areas if aviculture is going to survive with the freedom to keep and breed birds across the U.S. and with the availability of a wide variety of species. Strong cooperative effort and the ongoing development of mutual trust and confidence will be needed by private aviculture, the zoo community, and the conservation community. Special programs to reach young people and interest them in aviculture are needed. Each one of us who cares about birds and their future on the planet has a responsibility to take a positive pro-active stance on these five issues. ➤

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