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Life, Love, and Lots of Seed Hulls

by Dylan Orion Burge, Davis, California

I began my career with birds, as a lot of aviculturists do, with Zebra Finches. My first pair proved to be rather bad parents, however, throwing all of their young from the nest before they could fledge, but I convinced myself that breeding birds could not possibly be this hard, and so made my bird breeding career a kind of challenge to myself.



Photos courtesy of author.

A young Dylan with very tame Rainbow Lory.

Of the 200 or so birds that I had at the height of my craze, perhaps 50 were one species or another of *Lonchura* (various mannikins, munias, silverbills, and related finches) the first genus group of birds that I challenged myself with. I used the money that I was able to make off of my Cockatiels, Diamond Doves, Zebra Finches, and Society Finches (all of which existed in large colonies in my aviaries) to fund the rather unprofitable business of breeding challenging and cheap birds (which *Lonchuras* continue to be, unfortunately).

I succeeded in breeding the African Silverbill in great numbers (my first true success in bird breeding) and a few subspecies of Spice Finch, but the Tri-colored and Five-colored Nuns were stubborn to the last, giving me only infertile eggs during the five years that they spent living it up in my plant-

ed, outdoor flights.

Another challenge that I had was that of cold weather; my home is an alternative energy home that runs on hydro-power and solar-power, which works for my family's meager electrical needs, but is not enough to provide heat for three large aviaries. To solve this problem I worked only with hardy birds, such as *Lonchuras*, or hardy strains of birds, which I procured from local breeders. I covered my aviaries with corrugated plastic during the winter to keep out all rain and drafts, which are the major killers of outdoor finches in temperate zones. The temperature rarely dips below freezing at my home, so the birds generally fared very well.

Under these conditions I was able to branch out into a group of *Estrildids* that are generally thought to be strictly for a heated aviary, the Australian finches. I kept Star Finches, Diamond Sparrows, Owl Finches, and Blue-headed Parrot Finches outdoors, but only had breeding success with the former two species. I do not recommend outdoor over-wintering of Owl Finches and Star Finches, as they are not nest-roosters, and tend to get chilled too easily.

In addition to these Australian finches, I also worked extensively with Red-headed Parrot Finches and Olive Finches. Of all the birds that I raised these two species turned out to be the most profitable as well as the most hardy. Among all the wonderful and rewarding things that I experienced while breeding finches, the sight of these dutiful parents dotting over a clutch of plump and healthy young remains the most memorable.

Success with these birds, as well as the *Lonchuras*, inspired me to write three articles about the specifics of their breeding. I published two articles on *Lonchuras* in the *WPFS Bulletin*, and one about Olive Finches on the *NFSS* web site.

Of course, the bird-breeding experi-



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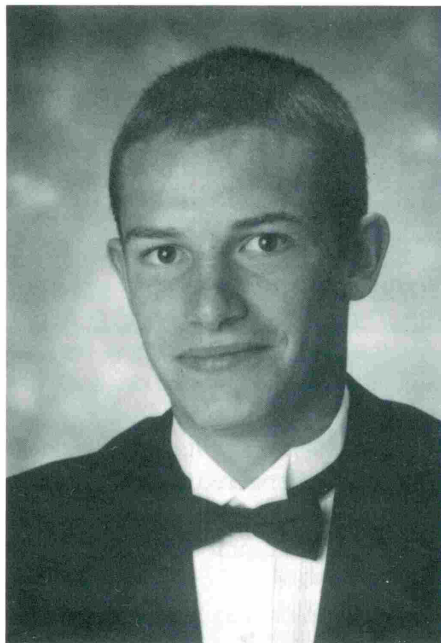
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ence has not been all “milk and honey.” I will never forget all of the bird dung that I have scraped in my life, all of the bad bird deals that I made, and all of the other unpleasant things that I have experienced while raising birds. However, I would still wish the complete experience on any other prospective aviculturist, because it is all a learning and growing process.

Most of what I know and understand about life and death, including my love for living things and my current perception of mortality, came to me through raising birds. The breeding of birds also gave me an understanding of living creatures in general that bested two years of high school biology. The hands-on experience is without peer, often emulated but never replaced.

Through the self-education that I imposed upon myself, either through the birds themselves or the through the literature that I gobbled up voraciously, I also became very familiar with a subject that I now think of as intrinsic to aviculture — conservation.




Dylan is now studying at the University of California, Davis.

Some of my birds were wild caught, as a lot of the more challenging species simply do not exist in a domestic form. When I learned more about how these birds are losing ground, both metaphorically and physically, in their native

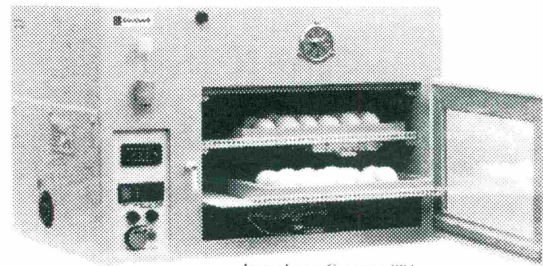
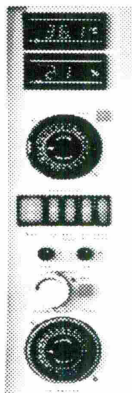
lands, I tried to rationalize my participation in the degradation of these species. Conservation has served as this rationalization/reason since the time that I became aware of the success of *ex-situ* species recovery programs, including that of the Peregrine Falcon and California Condor.

But I also came to realize that a species recovery program means nothing without a concerted effort to preserve the home habitat and the creatures that are not yet in trouble. In other words, I learned the value of foresight in conservation instead of hindsight.

Having sold or given away all of my precious finches, my children, as it were, and torn down all but one of the aviaries that I constructed nearly from scratch using home-made blueprints stained by my own tears, blood, and sweat, I have now moved on to college with the hope of becoming part of the foresight conservation world. I have my experience in aviculture to thank for this direction in life, for this goal/journey that I know will bring me much happiness and fulfillment. 

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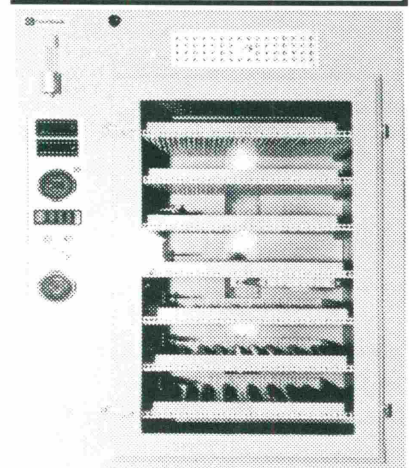
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