

How to Survive Your First AFA Convention

by Jenni Jackson, Loxahatchee, Florida

This is not a casting call for "Survivor." You are not going to win a million dollars, and you don't have to eat worms and soggy rice. For anyone who will be attending their first AFA Convention this year, and for anyone who has been to an AFA Convention, the word "survivor" takes on a whole new meaning.

AFA 2000 in Los Angeles was my first AFA Convention, so I was a "first timer" as well as a speaker. Many of you realize that when you raise birds, your social life is very limited, so you can understand that a first convention is a really big deal. Here I am in Loxahatchee, Florida, being dressed up if I have a bra and mascara on, and having my social life limited to going to the grocery store and my avian vet's office. And off I went to the big L.A.!!

So - there I was in L.A. I had my own room in a big hotel, complete with iron & ironing board, blow dryer, and a coffee pot - such hotel amenities I had never seen in my sheltered life! I had my speaker presentation down pat, as I just live and breathe cockatoos. The biggest of my worries was "Oh my God, I'm on the 11th floor, what do I do if there's an earthquake?" Then, there I was at the Delegates' meeting the first day.

"Wow!!!" I thought, "Just look at this big room with all these tables and all these people! And what in the world are they doing putting a pen and notepad at every seat? I guess that means everyone is supposed to take notes," so I did, from a seat in the back of the room. I had gone to L.A. knowing three people with AFA, and wasn't sure how to

mix and join in with such a large group. I felt a little safer in the back, for the time being. Later that day was the trip to the L.A. Zoo, and I was sure I felt an earthquake when I got on the bus. Then I realized it was just Dwight Greenberg's booming voice. My seatmate on the bus was a really sweet Texan, who talked continuously. I felt pretty good that I had someone to talk to, even though I didn't get a word in edgewise. Back at the hotel, there were groups of people sitting together. I thought I could join some of them, but didn't have the courage to approach so many strangers, and retreated to my room.

Thursday afternoon was my presentation. I was so nervous getting ready that I could barely dress myself. My hands and feet were sweating so badly, I couldn't get my shoes on. I did manage to get through the whole thing, though, and was relieved that the audience seemed to actually be interested in what I had to say. Now, I thought, I can really enjoy the convention! Off I went to the party, where I again felt isolated because I didn't know anyone. I stayed there about 10 minutes, and then made a beeline for my room. I felt so miserable that I called my husband, Marshall, and told him I wanted to come home. He lovingly told me not to be so timid, to go back to the party, and to introduce myself to people as a "first timer." I got dressed again, went back to the party, and found the courage to do just that. *Success!* My feeling of isolation had been my own fault - it was my doing and no one else's.

For the next few days, I started paying more attention to people who had "First Timer" ribbons on. They were sitting alone, just as I had been. I approached some of them and found that they had been eating alone in their rooms, and not approaching others, just as I had been. I certainly knew the feeling, and I encouraged them to join the activities as my Marshall had insisted I do. Unfortunately, some of those wonderful people who were there

for the first time did go home early, just as I had wanted to. Right then and there, I decided that I would not let any "First Timer" feel like I had. So here are a few suggestions:

1. Wear your "First Timer" ribbon with pride - you will never again be a "first timer." If you get a chance to point out your ribbon, do it! Use it to get you where you want to go and to get what you need. (Even if it means playing dumb, it's better than being left out).

2. Do everything! Go on the Zoo trip! Attend the Delegates Meeting - if you are not a delegate, just keep your mouth shut. Attend every speaker presentation that you possibly can. Visit all the vendors, and get to know them. Buy raffle tickets. Get everyone's business card and email address - you may never use them, but at least you are socializing!

3. Spend the money for the banquet ticket! It may sound like a lot of money, but you spent a lot of money to get there - don't scrimp on something that is the highlight of the convention.

4. Buy the *Proceedings*! You won't have to take notes, and you can keep the pen and notepad. It's amazing how much you do not hear when a very experienced person is giving their talk. The *Proceedings* are a great reference for later.

5. Don't isolate yourself!! Introduce yourself to small groups. Approach people who are sitting alone, and talk with them. Most of all - *Do Not* stay in your room!

6. Remind yourself why you are there - you went to the AFA Convention to learn from others and to share your experiences. Everyone there has something to offer and something to learn.

7. Remember that whether you are a "first timer" or an "old timer," or any point in between, you are important to AFA and to the future of aviculture. If this convention is not your first, please try to help assure that someone else's first convention is not their last.



See you in Houston!