

The Fire

Tani Smida, Atascadero, California

On Sunday, August 14, at 3:57 P.M., Pam Burgett phoned in a fire on Hwy 41. She and her husband own Richies Market & Grill which is less than a mile from my house on Frog Pond Mountain. John and I smelled the fire shortly thereafter. Spotting it was a simple matter of walking to the cactus garden and looking out over the valley. We could see that it was close and we knew we were in peril, how much, only time would tell.

I dialed 911 and the operator said the blaze had been reported. As I replaced the hand set into the cradle the phone rang. It was Forrest, with some information about the up and coming CCAS Bird Mart, October 9th, in Templeton. I told him there was a fire near me and we talked for a moment or two before saying good-bye. The next thing I knew, he was pulling up to my gate with buckets, burlap bags, water and moral support. Forrest was a fireman for many years, and he checked out our property for problem areas. We were discussing the possibility of evacuation when Debi arrived. David came back, as he had worked that day and we all stood around watching and surmising. As we spoke the fire was growing enormously.

Finally the airtankers showed up, (later we were told that they had to come all the way from Lancaster so we understood the time lapse). The afternoon winds that whip through these canyons were a terrible hindrance to the planes dropping fire retardant. They were a hellish aid to the inferno. About sundown, everybody left with a "Call if you need me."

John went to work Monday morning but headed for home when I told him, "I'm watching the flames from our living room windows." The only one I called was Forrest. That was about 10 A.M. as I saw the flames top a nearby ridge. By noon my driveway was filled with the cars of people who decided to find out why I wasn't answering my phone. I was still in denial, hoping against hope that the inevitable would be unnecessary and I would be spared the horror of evacuating my birds. I put that decision off as long as I safely could. I was already overwhelmed by everyone's response to my emergency.

We evacuated the African birds whose compound was closest to the path of the fire and then we waited to see what would happen. By mid afternoon it became apparent that the South American birds would also have to be caught up. I was resigned to putting them into pillow cases when I ran out of carriers but just

then Dorine drove up with a car full of crates. She went back for a load of cages but CDF refused her re-entry past the Zoo. (Later I was told there was a veritable log jam of people trying to get to me who had been turned back and met up with each other at the Zoo.)

Norma Johnson was the last person to get to my house that Monday. They probably let her through because she was driving her "Student Driver" car. She came straight from work, dressed in a skirt and a white blouse. She said, "I can catch birds," and so she did, along with Debi, David and myself. I don't know about the rest of the "catchers," but I got so many bites and wire scratches that my hands and arms hurt for days. David's whole family came and they were kept busy just carrying birds up to the garage. Pat, David's Dad, made a food run in the late afternoon. We were all starving and running on "fumes."

Once the birds were caught I asked most folks to go home. My heart was beating so hard, I wondered what would happen if I had a



This sight is one nobody ever wants to see from their own rooftop – especially if one has animals.

Photo by Tani Smida

heart attack? No time for that now !!

I had four pair of birds who were sitting eggs and I waited until the last moment to pull them. My neighbors, Stu and Maria showed up with an empty flatbed trailer for whatever I needed it for. They helped to load cages and then they followed me around as I dealt with the last four pair of breeder birds. At nine-thirty at night I shined a light in their eyes, stole their eggs and then proceeded to catch them, which often meant pulling them through the inspection door by their heads. I felt so terrible to betray their privacy like that. I kept apologizing. My neighbors, who were holding eggs, one newly hatched baby and carriers, must have thought I was nuts.

Our power went out Monday afternoon, leaving us with no water. We had planned to stay in the house because of its stucco and tile roof construction. Of course, that's when I was planning on having the fire get to us in the day light with plenty of Bomber support. "Funny how the best laid plans..." I thought to myself as I loaded 82 Parrots and 14 eggs into my little Subaru. As I drove down our road I saw the hillside in front of me burning and two thirds of Frog Pond Mountain either in flames or charred. The fire was very close to my home and the homes of my neighbors. I wondered how we would come out of this and I prayed with all my heart. "Not my will but THY will be done, in a perfect way. We've done all we can do, now I must let go leave it to GOD. Truly, this is out of my hands."

I didn't want to leave John's side but since I had all the baby birds with me, my first priority was to get them to a safe place where there was electricity. It was 11:30 P.M. and I stopped long enough to make a call to Lorna; "I'm on my way." I knew I had some hungry babies and all of the adults in carri-



The fire tankers dropped a pretty red fire retardant. It helps.

ers needed to have water and food too. Lorna was waiting for me and we went to work immediately. Several times the phone rang and each time my heart would stop, waiting for word from John. Finally it was him and he was jubilant. The power had come back on and he was back in the house. He said, "I'm going to fight this fire and I'm going to beat it."

I believed him and wanted to help but CDF had other ideas. By the time I came over the Chicago Grade, it looked like the whole world was on fire. The police were not going to let me go home and I could see why but I was beside

Photo by Susie Christian



If you have birds – no matter where you live – it is mandatory to have a sufficient number of small carrying cages on hand for when the fire, hurricane, etc., hits.

myself with angst. I returned to Lorna's and called my house. Each time I heard the answering machine pickup I would know that "Smida Castle" was still standing but that didn't tell me anything about how my husband was faring. More prayers!

At 7:30 Tuesday morning, John answered the phone. The fire had come at 3:00 A.M. sweeping down the mountain and brushing the back of our property, taking out three fence posts. John had fought it as he promised, clearing brush, dragging hoses and spraying water when the fire came close enough. He had engine company #3 out of Morro Bay to help him. His voice had the tired, calm of a brave man, who had just done the impossible. I hoped we were safe and I headed for home.

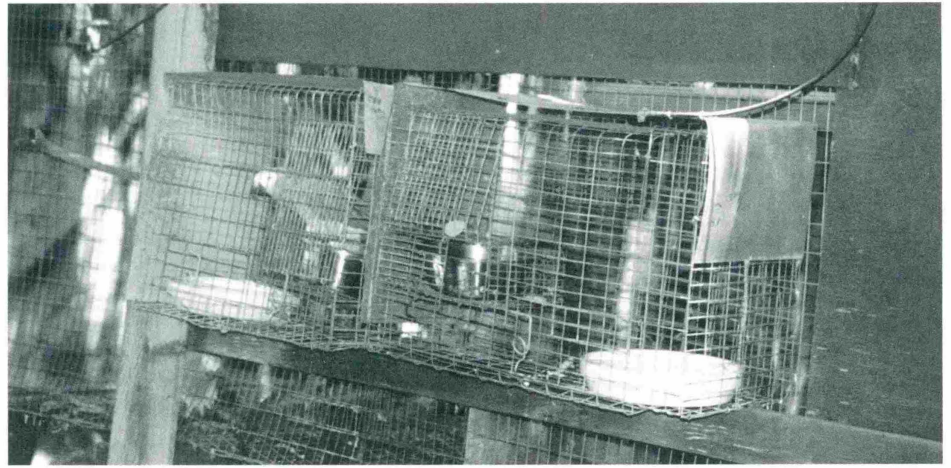
The police let me come through and the view that I got from San Marcos Road was amazing. Everywhere I looked the ridge was charred and sometimes smoking. Here and there, like untouched jewels, sat the houses, many with black all the way up to their door step. The fire had begun just west of Morro-Toro fire station, swept around behind us to blacken the hillsides all the way to the bridges, just outside of town. Now, as I viewed the destruction and the miracles from my vantage point I could see that the most active smoke appeared to be coming from the face of Frog Pond Mountain. Too close for comfort.

At the bottom of my road, a weary CDF gentleman tried to persuade me to turn around. He said the fire was not yet under control and he was certainly right. I called Karin, full of optimism, (denial raises its ugly head again). She said she was coming up to help me. All those birds in small cages needed to be unloaded from the trailer, fed and watered. She said, "You have your hands full," and she was right.

At 9:30 A.M. the monster came at us again and this time I was standing there with John, wetting everything down. Forrest appeared out of nowhere, in his hard hat and yellow slicker. The next thing I felt was a hand on my shoulder and I turned around, into the face of Karin. (When I realized that the fire was making a second pass at our property, I had called to warn her away, alas, my warning was wasted on the answering machine because my friends had already left.) She and Debi had come to help, bringing donuts...but we were ready for marshmallows. When all the excitement was over the ladies unloaded and fed my poor, dispossessed breeder birds while I tended babes and stumbled around in a daze. John finally slept.

Even though we suffered negligible property damage, (three fence posts), I saw getting things back in order as a nightmare of horrendous magnitude. Getting the right birds into the right cages was sometimes easy, but there were some I wasn't sure of – and then there were the crates and cages to scrub and disinfect. I could see the mountain in my mind's eye and I shuddered. How would I ever do all the regular stuff and take care of this too? I was still dazed, I was certainly tired, and I knew I had two or three weeks ahead of me before I would know the true "cost" of the fire in terms of parrot illness or fatalities. In the midst of my good fortune I had moments of feeling overwhelmed, but the phone never stopped ringing. Words of encouragement and congratulations came from all over. There were more volunteers than jobs. Everybody wanted to help!!

Lorna had a third of my breeders and my older babies. She and Michele took care of them all, with the help of Kris Barba and Pampered Pets, who both loaned cages. Karin, Debi and Janet Warren had more cages, so the three to seven days of being evacuated wasn't as hard on my birds as it might



Smida's cages for African Greys utilize small "feeding" cages hooked to the outer wall of the breeding cage. These feeding cages can be detached quickly and used as carrying cages in an emergency.

have been.

Arlene Parker sent a "care package," via Forrest, filled with all sorts of goodies and good wishes. I called Kelly Nelson, a club member from Los Osos and she scrubbed carriers and cages for hours on Thursday. Janis Wilailuck came on Friday for more of the same. That's the day that Linda and I caught up thirty pair, recording band numbers, cage numbers, names, and clipping nails. We also did some culturing. Late that afternoon, Brian and Sally Campbell popped in for a fast and furious hour of effort. "We were in the neighborhood and we thought we'd stop by to offer our help," they said.

On Monday, one week from the day they were caught, Lorna backed her 10 horse trailer into my driveway and we, (Lorna, Norma, Michele's whole family and myself), unloaded the rest of my birds and put them out. Debi came almost daily and did anything that she thought might lighten my load, Karin helped a lot too, David showed up often to work, Mary Souther and Trina did a lot of the final dirty work and Kris came to help me wrestle some of the heavy stuff on Tuesday. Doctors Choy and Robinson both prepared emergency medical kits and were involved in treating my breeders. One Congo hen died from stress and a White-fronted Amazon sustained a broken leg.

What a Fire Drill! What an education! Twenty-five people have helped us through this and that doesn't count the members of the CDF. Seventy-five cages were emptied and most of those birds were moved off this property – at least for the night. The tremendous outpouring of love that has surrounded me through this ordeal has been one of the most nurturing and enriching experiences of my life.

At one point, late Monday afternoon, I looked up and said to myself, "Oh my GOD, the flames are past the final ridge. They're on the other side of the valley." For one fleeting moment I thought, "I can't take this. What if we're burned out?? I will never be able to take more than this." At that moment, I wished desperately for someone to scoop me up and take care of me. I couldn't see the truth because I was so close to it.

From start to finish, throughout this entire trial by fire, I have been blessed and protected by so many caring people and certainly God above. We gave it our best and we worked very hard but we could not have done this without the help and good wishes of so many fine folks. My life has been forever touched by the love of my friends and neighbors. Thank You is simply not big enough to express my heart-felt appreciation. If I ever feel alone again – Somebody, please kick me!! ❖