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# Arctic Aviculture (2)

by Jane Pender  
Fairbanks, Alaska



To convey to you the joy I have in my in-house birds, I'd like to sketch a little scene for you. It's 5 a.m., mid-winter, and dead dark outside. You feel your way out of your warm bed and encase yourself in something padded and warm to make the run from the cold bedroom through the cold hall to the living room-kitchen-aviary, with one stop with a flashlight to look at the temperature. It's hovering at just below -40 and you know there's ice fog out there.

In the living room, you put on the water for coffee and then stir up the fire to see if there's a coal or two left. And as you do that, a Strawberry Finch sings his waterfall of notes and Phoebe and crazy Gray says "hello."

Their lights do not go on for another hour and a half but the sleepy morning sounds continue periodically. Phoebe bangs her beak against her water dish and then imitates the sound, outdoing nature with a clear ringing bell sound. The Green

finches sing and even in the dark, the Rosellas have a fight. That's the sort of scene I wake up to each morning.

There's always some light in the flight. Originally I kept a 15 watt bulb over one of the feeding stations in case I had a sick bird at night. Then, once after I'd nursed an egg-bound bird in a warm cage, I left the lamp with its 60 watt bulb in the flight by accident, hanging over a flat dish which held spray millet. Subsequently, one by one, most of the birds in the flight came down to toast themselves under the light. At first I thought I had sick birds but this was not the case. They all turned their heads to receive the heat on their chests and I decided the little spot of extra warmth just felt good to them so now I keep that bulb burning night and day.

I keep the millet there since it's a favorite food, dusted with a powered vitamin mix. I also keep a block of volcanic tuff in the same place to make sure it comes to the attention of those birds which need it.

The aviary lights go on at 6:30 a.m. winter and summer, though in summer they are somewhat redundant since the sun rises anytime from 1 a.m. on. The lights go out at 7 p.m. and I draw the blinds which are nothing more than matchstick bamboo. I have read somewhere that birds require black dark for X hours a day, but my experience is that, once trained, the birds simply go to sleep when it's time. Except in emergencies, we seldom enter the room at night, but when it's necessary we are pleased that there is some light there so the birds don't panic and fly into things.

The Goulds, which like to sleep, usually have a last gathering and feed about an hour before the lights go out, and then go to roost in the top of the corn plant. If, as occasionally happens, I have to make a last visit into the flight to check something, they simply watch me and seldom fly.

This reminds me that one year I had two Green Finch nestlings just about ready to fly from their quite inadequate nest in a fork of the corn plant. I figured they must be just a day or so away from trying their wings when that night, we had a sharp earthquake jolt. We are directly over the Denali Fault and small quakes are daily occurrences to which we pay no attention. This one however was up around four on the Richter scale — not enough to cause any damage to speak of but enough to send all the birds into the air. The two nestlings also flew that night and the next morning I found them hanging onto anything handy, widely separated in the flight.

I am gradually curing myself of my human arrogance which insists that I must know better than the birds do but at the time I had the disease in full bloom. Accordingly, I picked up one of the babies, intending to put it back into the nest. About three seconds after I picked him up he went off like a siren and the parents divebombed me. I hastily put him back in the nest and got out of there just in time to see him flutter out and down to one of the pots on the floor followed by both parents.

The aftermath of this, no less interesting to me, is that within 24 hours both babies were back sitting together on a twig near the nest and once in a while would go back in as if trying it for size. The Goulds also sometimes bring their babies back together when they are very young and someday I hope to identify what they do to bring this about.

When my big Gould males display and sing, it's a wondrous sight, especially when they are hopping vigorously at the same time. But I also like to watch the young males who haven't quite got the idea and who sit next to the adults and watch and



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sometimes practice. Sometimes they get pecked for their trouble, but more often the adults will just stalk away huffily or fly away.

When there are young birds in the nest, the juveniles are always very interested and congregate on top of the box, sit on the edge and peer into the nest hole or even occasionally, sit on the perch and peek inside. Pretty often, if the male is in the box, he will emerge and chase the snooper away, though he doesn't stay away. Soon the youngster is back, just as curious as before.

I have an impression, though it's no more than that, that when there are immatures in the flight, just emerged chicks are at least partially weaned by them. At any rate, I see much less feeding by parents and hear fewer begging calls, and seem to think that the young birds are weaned much faster. There is a tendency for immatures who have flown with each other from a few days to a few weeks to hang around together, though the Goulds are so social and have so many formal gatherings that it can't be called anything but a "tendency."

In its early days, the young bird just out of the nest has to learn who will feed him and who will not. Often when the colony gathers for its periodic meetings, these young birds will wander around from one to another, crouched and begging. The hens usually pay no attention, but the males take it personally and will sometimes peck at the youngster and then stalk away. This pecking is not the same as jousting and never connects. It's just a quick peck in the direction of the baby.

I love to hear the young birds in the nest. I am not one who likes to disturb a nest. Not to get into the argument over fostering or not, or increasing production by keeping a watchful eye, my own goal is to keep things as undisturbed and normal as possible so I can watch from my acceptable distance. I can never be sure how many babies there are until the day they emerge to the enormous excitement of the whole flight.

It is curious to me that very often the young birds in the flight will coax a nestling out. I have seen them sit on the tree branches under a nest and call and call to the young bird, sometimes for hours, while he peers anxiously out of the nest hole. Eventually, he gets up his courage and tumbles out into the world and most usually promptly gets lost. Then comes the lost call and the whole colony becomes involved in finding him.

This is perhaps the place to explain about the Pekin Robins and the Canary which I inadvisedly put into the flight with the finches.

I was somewhat concerned about the Canary who is much larger than the finches and thought perhaps he might do some harm. But the contrary occurred. The finches chased and harassed him until I had to move him out. He now flies free with the hookbills as do the Pekin Robins.

They (the Pekin Robins) were put into the finch flight on the advice of a fancier who said they were peaceful and would get along. But they are so bouncy that I noticed they would land with a thump on top of a nest box and promptly a harassed Gould would emerge and fly away. Later, I discovered that these nest boxes were often deserted.

But what really persuaded me to move the Robins out was that a Green Singing Finch attempted a second nest in the fork of the Corn Plant, only to suddenly become inundated with nesting material as the Robins began to build an untidy nest of their own just above her. The Green Finches are very staunch parents, and even when I enter the flight, they remain sitting on the nest, watching me carefully, but not moving. This hen, however, who had two eggs, eventually could not put up with the constant rain of nesting grasses and all the activity on the floor above, and deserted.

So I moved the Robins, too, into the hookbill room, where they seemed to be fast enough to avoid problems. In fact, once the parrots got used to them, they seemed to enjoy them and I have seen the robins steal feathers from the parrots. At night, it's not at all unusual for the robins to sleep by pairs on top of the parrot cages. The only problem I ever had was with a newly introduced robin.

This little bird had been confined in a small cage at a pet shop for many months and then in a larger, but still too small cage here for my mandatory six-week quarantine. Her first act when released was to dive into the community bath, where she got so soaked she couldn't fly and had to scamper around on the floor awhile to dry out.

The next morning she got into more trouble by creeping into a small space at the top of the Macaw's night cage. I heard the sounds while I was having coffee and when I looked, the Macaw was attacking the Robin, which was spreadeagled on top of the cage and protesting loudly. Fortunately I was able to release her quickly and unharmed and I'm happy to report that's one thing she doesn't do anymore.

I tend to think, however, that this occasional tendency of birds to creep into spaces from which they could escape by backing — but never do — is a bit of faulty programming. Although, that's a very provisional conclusion, if I keep watching long enough, I may find the real reason why this happens.