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the Vet's Corner

by Kendal P. Svedeen, D.V.M.
Mission Viejo, California

"STRESS:" Caged Birds' Worst Enemy

A bird's stressful experiences begin at birth. Their dependence upon the parents to provide them with a proper diet, environment, and protection against predators and the elements is absolute. If anything should happen to the parents during this formative stage, the chicks would surely perish. The next stage is when the chick becomes a fledgling, when its feathers start becoming "hard-pinned," or mature. It is taught by its parents to fly, forage for its own food, including killing of prey in some species, and in general be self-sufficient.

This is the stage where the bird is clumsy in flight, usually hungry, and at least somewhat fearful of its environment. It is also the time when their human captors arrive on the scene. Depending upon the country of origin, the capture of native birds may or may not be authorized legally. If it is authorized, there are nearly always accompanying regulations specifying methods of humane capture, however, these regulations are seldom strictly enforced. If it is not authorized, many inhumane methods of capture are often employed, plus the additional trauma of the smuggling process.

Transportation from the area of capture to holding areas is invariably over rough terrain, under crowded conditions, and with poor food and water supply. Usually, the holding area conditions are not much better, adding unsanitary if not filthy environment.

The next stage is the transportation to, and usually quarantine in the country of importation. Few countries have as strictly regulated and enforced import and quarantine regulations as the United States. Every effort is made by the United States Dept. of Agriculture (U.S.D.A.) to enforce Federal and State regulations regarding the importation and quarantine of birds. Facilities, quarters, feed, medication, and veterinary testing are monitored on a daily basis.

When the birds are released from quarantine, after a minimum of thirty days, they are sold either to large pet shop owners and bird wholesalers, or to "jobbers," who in turn sell them to

smaller pet shops or to private parties. Conditions under which the birds are kept after this are far from closely regulated, unless a concerned citizen registers a complaint with their local Sanitation Dept., or Humane Society.

If a pet bird is sold to an individual, here is yet another change of environment, hopefully, and usually, a desirable one. It is the bird's first exposure to affection, good nutrition, some degree of solitude and rest, and a clean and sanitary environment.

The training process is next. Here is a bird that despises humans and everything associated with them, and is now being wooed or forced to be his or her friend! Birds are very vain individuals, and at this point in time, after what they have been through, their feathers are broken and dull, they are probably thin and malnourished, nails and beak overgrown, fearful, defensive, and confused. They are very unhappy, and fortunate to be alive.

If you have acquired a new bird for the first time, the number one thing to do is to determine which veterinarian in your area has a special interest in avian medicine. Call your County or State Veterinary Medical Association or State Poultry Pathology Lab for guidance in this regard. The veterinarian will give your bird a complete physical examination, trim the nails, wings, and beak properly, and remove any leg bands. He or she will also provide you with informative literature and information regarding proper diet, caging, perching, vitamin and mineral supplements, and parasite control. Bird training is a precise art, so do not hesitate to seek help or the advice of your veterinarian or experienced friends in the training of your bird. There are a few selected people who are very talented in the training of birds in the Southern California area, but beyond that you will have to seek local assistance.

"Stress" can be a continuing problem with pet and caged birds, even after acclimation to their new environment, and being trained. This subject will be covered in the future issues of the "Watchbird."

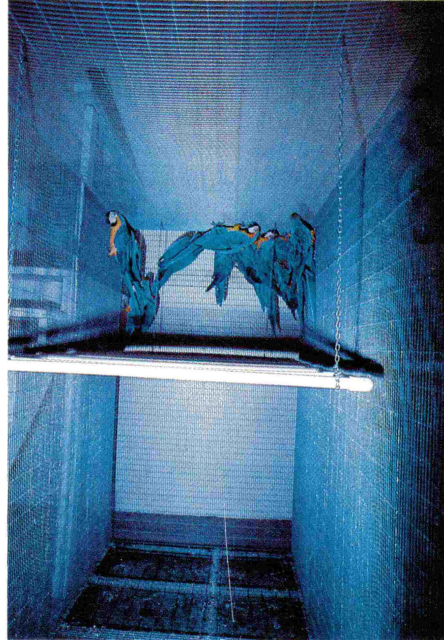


Mobile U.S.D.A. quarantine facility at San Ysidro, CA near the U.S. Customs building at the Mexican-U.S. border.

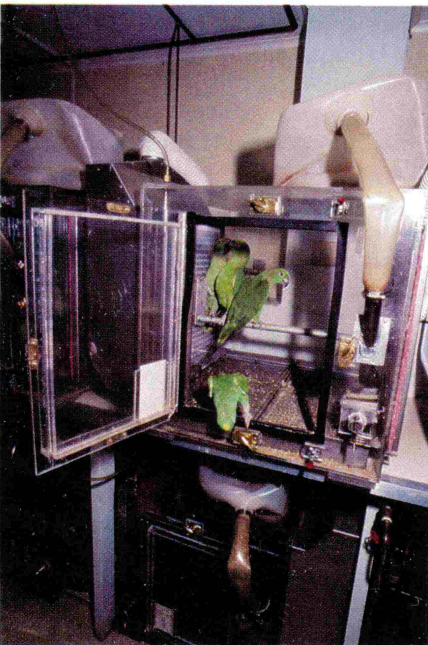
Photos by Loren Price



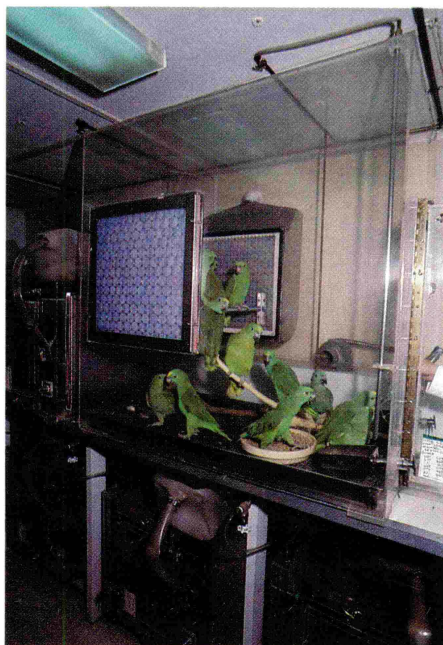
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