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procrastinate today— regret tomorrow!

By Robert J. Berry
Curator of Birds
Houston Zoological Gardens

Considering our shrinking planet and the habitat destruction rampant in every part of the world as a result of burgeoning human overpopulation, technological pollution and disruption of natural systems, and even such qualities of human frailty as waste and greed, there is no question that each year more and more species will be threatened with extinction. And we, as aviculturists, stand on the brink of the greatest challenge we shall ever have to face. If asked if we can play a significant contributing role in wildlife conservation, I would hope the answer most of you would give would be a resounding YES! However, before we can move forward, we must consider whether our current avicultural practices are compatible with this type of undertaking.

In developing our collections, many of us fail to set long range goals, and our collections grow in myriad directions without real purpose. We often sacrifice quality for quantity. Our desire to collect is sometimes so great that we frequently overcrowd our flights, and consequently produce only meager breeding results. This approach to aviculture is counterproductive to avian conservation. In order to function more effectively in conservation, many of our former habits must be laid to rest. To meet the challenges of the future, we must attempt to curb our desires for large, comprehensive collections and begin to consider the merits of specializing in breeding certain species, groups, or families of birds. The Noah's Ark syndrome so characteristic of our past must be avoided.

Specialization is perhaps the key to our future, for without it, there is little hope of establishing the rarer or the more difficult to breed species in captivity.

In the past, we have often had the luxury of periodic access to wild-caught specimens to infuse new blood into our breeding stocks or to replace non-breeding birds in our collections. However, ladies and gentlemen, the end of those days is far closer at hand than

many of you may realize, and we must accept the fact that the only assurance of having birds tomorrow, is breeding birds today. Even though we are breeding more birds in captivity now than at any other point in our history, we must become even more conscientious and dedicated in this effort.

It is also imperative that we are careful to retain sufficient genetic variability in our stocks to avoid the detrimental effects of inbreeding over multiple generations. Through the practice of specialization in our collections, this objective can be far more easily achieved. To have a single pair of birds of a particular species and to continuously surplus their offspring in brother-sister pairs as potential breeders, is a practice that must be brought to an immediate halt. We all know that this practice is very common today, and we must also know that to continue with such an irresponsible practice, we are, in effect, dooming to failure any efforts to establish long-term, captive populations.

We should also consider some of our other practices which are counterproductive to our avicultural pursuits. While hand-rearing is a very valuable tool when properly utilized, there is cause for genuine concern, when, for example, individuals hand rear all of their large psittacines, in order to sell these birds as pets. One of our most important responsibilities at this time is to breed multiple generations of birds. This cannot be accomplished unless sizable portions of the young birds reared in our collections each year go into breeding situations. Again, once a species is denied importation or has become scarce, or perhaps even extinct in the wild, there is only one place our future stock can be obtained—birds reared in captivity will be our only source!

Fortunately, we have one very important factor in our favor: the fact that every creature on this earth is embodied with one primary purpose—to reproduce its own kind. We have learned through experience, however, that simply having a male and female together is not always the magic formula for instant success. Many of us also know of instances where an aviculturist has spent years working with a particular species with little or no success, only to have an amateur with virtually no avicultural experience obtain a pair of birds, and "voila," instant progeny. In such cases we must begin to wonder whether aviculture is actually a matter of skill or simply a game of chance. Rather than permit the practice of aviculture to remain essentially a skilled art based on the unique talents

and, perhaps, the extraordinary luck of the individual, we must begin to take a more scientific approach to our work.

We need to develop a broad and comprehensive understanding of the breeding biology of the specimens in our care, supported by fact, not theory. It is amazing how many of us attempt to breed birds with little or no information on their habits and breeding requirements in the wild. We tend to develop our captive management techniques through a general approach, and as a result, our efforts often fail because we have not bothered to understand or to satisfy the specialized needs of our birds. We can no longer base our husbandry practices on assumptions that all parrots will thrive on a diet of sunflower seed, that all finches will use dried grasses as nesting material, or that all birds live in male/female pairs throughout the year. It is unfortunate that aviculturists have all but ignored the importance of field research in providing supportive data for their captive programs. In many instances, little, if any, field data are available on species we maintain in our collections, and rather than casually dismissing this fact, shouldn't we give serious thought to initiating, and perhaps, even funding field studies? This work is especially important if we sincerely desire to do more with our birds than simply house them in cages.

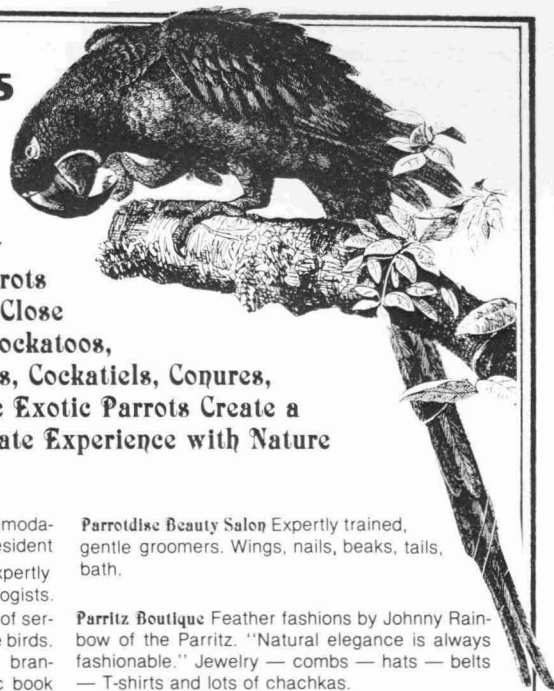
When the embargo on bird importation went into effect in 1972, no one knew how long it would endure. Some of us even feared it might never be lifted. Fortunately, it was, and aviculture has, in effect, been given a second chance. Hopefully, this time with a more responsible attitude than we have had in the past!

Since 1972, our intensive efforts to breed more birds have begun to pay off. Each year more species are being reared, and there are even numerous instances of second and third generation breedings being reported.

Although we are definitely better prepared today than we were in 1972, if a total prohibition on imports were placed in effect tomorrow and continued for any appreciable length of time, we would still see a rapid decline in the numbers of species we would be able to sustain through captive breeding. We have definitely come a long way but must remember we still have a long way to go!

Captive propagation is now an integral part of most avian conservation programs. We are all aware of the important role aviculture has played in the thirty year effort to save the whooping crane by

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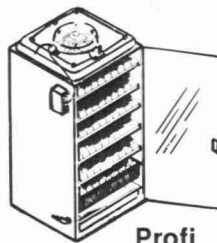
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U.S. and Canadian governmental agencies. We are also aware of the contributions private aviculturists have made with species such as the scarlet-chested parakeet, the Swinhoe's pheasant, and others.

Sadly, our past also looms forward to haunt us, and from it, such tragedies as the extinction of the Carolina parakeet. This species slipped through the very fingers of aviculturists, for it was bred in captivity on a number of occasions. Ap-



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parently they were so plentiful at one time, that no one felt they were in danger until quite abruptly it was too late. Could this type of tragedy occur again? The answer is obviously, of course.

One of the most often heard cries of conservationists when populations of certain types of birds appear to be in a state of decline is—the pet trade, the pet trade. While we must agree that there is indeed much negativity associated with the world-wide pet trade in decimating certain species, we also know that the pet trade is not always the primary culprit! Loss of habitat, uncontrolled use of pesticides such as DDT, and a host of other considerations often play a far more significant role in population declines.

And what do we find ourselves doing in response to such accusations? Virtually nothing. Through our silence and our lack of positive response, we appear totally content to allow the practice of aviculture to be considered right along with ivory poaching as a major form of senseless wildlife exploitation. The fact that we have hidden our heads in the sand and have done nothing to try and change these attitudes or to improve our image seems unbelievable. Surely, dedicated aviculturists are concerned over statistics regarding the numbers of wild-caught specimens which perish for each specimen that survives the ordeal of capture and importation; we are also concerned when entire consignments of birds are destroyed after being denied entry into the United States; surely we have concern for the status of dwindling wild populations; and surely we do not wish to be a factor in species extermination.

Undoubtedly, delicate balances in nature are easily upset, and some of the species which have been imported in large numbers over the last several years may be in a state of decline due to heavy cropping to meet the seemingly insatiable demands of the pet trade. However, this is a major unknown at this time. Again, how unfortunate, that aviculturists have all but totally ignored the need for field studies to determine the stability of certain species habitats and the effects of our constant demands on wild populations. This is a grave omission and an irresponsible attitude on our part. Without this kind of information, we have no insight into what we are really doing and where our avicultural emphasis needs to be placed. If this situation causes us no real concern, we are only giving lip-service to our interest in conservation, and our motives for keep-

ing birds in captivity represents nothing but a selfish greed with no concern for the consequences of our actions.

In our own best interest, I suggest we should begin to establish closer liaisons with conservation groups, and, perhaps, be prepared to provide some funding for projects we feel are important. Field studies for commonly imported species destined for the pet trade should be supported, and even initiated by aviculturists, to see if these pressures are, in fact, taking an undue toll on the wild populations.

The truly dedicated aviculturists today must have a concern for tomorrow. We find ourselves at a pivotal point in writing our own history. On one hand, we stand on the brink of the golden age of aviculture with the promise of a future of significant accomplishments in avian conservation. On the other, we stand also on the brink of disaster, where a careless lack of concern by aviculturists may help contribute to the extinction of more species of birds in a shorter period of time than at any other point in history. The choice is clearly ours.

If we procrastinate today we will regret tomorrow. ●

AFA Conservation Committee Report

By Committee Chairman
Robert J. Berry

The recently formed conservation committee of the American Federation of Aviculture is in need of funds to initiate a variety of projects which were proposed at the Annual Conference in Washington, D.C., last August. The multi-faceted approach to the organization's over-all conservation endeavors includes projects such as AFA-initiated field studies (the first, currently under way on the Red-headed Amazon, *Amazona viridigenalis*); public education programs; stipends to existing captive breeding programs for certain endangered species; contributions to field studies initiated by others; and support of proposed land acquisitions for habitat preservation. All of this sounds good! All of these measures are positive! All of these efforts can enhance the total conservation effort on a global scale! The major problem is—none of these proposals can be effectively implemented without adequate funding!

As chairman of the Conservation Committee I am appealing to avicultur-