

NOTICE

All correspondence intended for the editor of the *Watchbird* should be mailed directly to his address.

Sheldon Dingle
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Norco, CA 91760

From The Editor's Desk

by Sheldon Dingle
Norco, California

Dear Sheldon:

I found the thesis in the article, *The Long Bill of the Toucan*, by Roger Williams and Elaine Radford, which appeared in the Feb/Mar '85 *Watchbird* interesting but not very plausible, when they suggested the large bills evolved as cooling devices.

Although several theories have been proposed to explain the evolution of disproportionally large bills of Ramphastids, cooling is one that has eluded my scrutiny of the literature until now. If, as Williams and Radford state, there is a corollary between large beak size and hot environment, why is it that the largest beaked birds of the genus Ramphastos may be found at the same low elevations and latitudes as the smallest beaked birds of the genus Selenidera.

Williams and Radford make the assumption that the shorter billed toucanets inhabit the mountains, which is true only of the green toucanets of the genus *Aulacorhynchus* and these rarely exceed 6,000' elevation — a not very cool environment in the tropics. The *Selenidera* toucanets, whose beaks are the very smallest (half the length of the green toucanets), live in lowland forests alongside Red Bills, Keel Bills, etc. Keel Bills, incidently, have been recorded as high as 5,000' elevation.

The authors cite Van Tyne's "The Life History of the Toucan" to argue against (who's arguing in favor?) the proposition that bills evolved as protective coloration, a theory that appeared in 1909 and 1910. Van Tyne did not rule it out completely, but stated it was only of slight importance, thus putting it to rest.

He also mentioned other theories, popular in his day (repeated by Williams and Radford), and went on to suggest there may not be *any* adaptive significance to the great size of these beaks.

Van Tyne's Life History, quoted by the authors, was based on personal field studies conducted over three seasons from 1925-27 and published as his doctoral dissertation by the University of Michigan in 1929. Needless to say, an in-

credible increase in our knowledge of toucans and evolutionary adaptation has occured in the ensuing fifty-plus years.

Finally, the authors state that the toucan's bill is "...a light porous structure rich in blood vessels, internally similar to other softbills," suggesting this structure serves as a heat exchanger. I would agree the bills are light and porous, but they are not rich in blood vessels once the bird is mature and the beak has stopped growing. A broken beak on a mature bird does not bleed.

Current consensus holds that beak length and color has something to do with display during courtship, although the size does serve other non-cooling functions mentioned by the authors. Cooling is an interesting idea, but not one supported in the literature.

Sincerely yours,

Jerry Jennings



Dear Sheldon,

I was quite interested to read the recent article (Dec. 84 - Jan. 85) in the *Vet's Corner* entitled "The Veterinarian and the Import and Sales of Pet Birds" by Drs. Roskopf and Woerpel. The article was factual in most respects, as far as I can determine since a paper that I recently presented at the Association of Avian Veterinarians convention in Toronto was the only mentioned reference. There was however, one statement that was referenced to my paper which it did not contain. On page 12 it is stated that "an average of 24% deaths are to be expected in the quarantine stations." This statement was not contained in my paper and is not true. If it were, importers definitely could not sustain such losses and remain in business.

I will demonstrate how this error could easily be made, and often is. The following statistics were reported in my paper. These were obtained directly from the USDA as official figures for fiscal year 1983.

Received into quarantine	803,873
Dead on Arrival	40,054 (4.9%)

Died in quarantine	92,768 (12.1% of live arrivals)
Refused entry (Newcastles)	9,303 (1.15%)
Released from quarantine	614,782 (76%)

As you well know written papers often are submitted for publication many months before oral presentation of the same material at the meeting. At the time that this data was compiled I had not closely examined these figures but merely reported them as above. I then set out to examine mortality records for 9 quarantine stations with which I worked closely during 1983. I was disturbed by what appears to be a 24% mortality. However, it is obvious upon scrutiny that these numbers are highly inaccurate as demonstrated below.

Dead on arrival	40,054
Died in quarantine	92,768
Refused entry	+ 9,303
Reported dead or refused	142,126 (17.6%)
Received	803,873
Released	- 614,782 (76%)
Dead or unaccounted for	189,091
Dead or unaccounted for	189,091
Reported dead or refused	- 142,125
Unaccounted for	46,966 (5.8% of received)

This discrepancy was brought out in great detail in my oral presentation. However, it was not explained in the written paper. I was, of course, very curious as to the fate of the almost 47,000 missing birds and made an inquiry to the USDA. I was told that those figures are inaccurate as they are collected on the last day of the fiscal year, and not limited to stations already released. All birds in quarantine on that day are counted as received but never counted as released. Therefore on October 31, 1983 we can assume that there were 47,000 birds in quarantine and that since they are not released in time for development of the annual report, they are missing and presumed dead. We were much luckier in 1982, we only had approximately 25,000 missing and presumed dead. I was assured that the USDA is aware of this problem and will make attempts to correct it for fiscal year 1984.

If you examine the percentage of reported dead it comes to a much lower percentage of 17.6% mortality. This figure however still lacks some credibility in my mind. I am staff Veterinarian for a large importation

Continued on page 46



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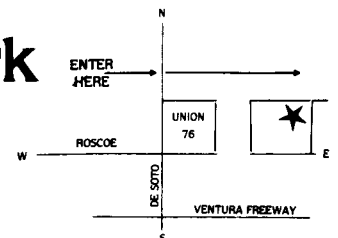
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company and deal full-time with imported birds. A close review of our quarantine stations for 1981-1983 revealed a mortality rate of approximately 5% for psittacines. In some areas such as cockatoos from Indonesia, we routinely have mortality rates below 1%. Some birds such as Amazons are more difficult to manage and have higher mortality rates. Mortality rates of 10% are considered high, and unacceptable, by our company. We will obviously have stations from time to time in which we have serious problems and the mortality rates will be high but that is the exception, not the rule. The highest mortality rates are suffered in stations containing finches. Most of these are from Africa and due to their low resale value they are imported in very large lots. The trip from Africa is long, resulting in high mortality. It is easy to see how a quarantine station containing 10,000 finches with a mortality rate of 20% to 30% would quickly offset the 1% mortality in a load of 500 cockatoos.

I feel that statements such as "expect 24% mortality" should be used with caution by anyone involved in the bird fancy. This is fuel for the fire of humane groups who would like to use such statements to our detriment (as was amply illustrated in New York). I do not wish to hide problems in the system. I do however feel that accurate representation of those problems is vital to learning how these problems can be dealt with. Please remember that we are trying to provide the customer with a healthy bird at the lowest possible price. While the purpose of my presentation in Toronto was to dispell inaccuracies spread due to misinformation, I have learned that you can never be too careful in what you say, or write.

Sincerely, Susan L. Clubb, DVM



Dear Sheldon,

I'm delighted that your editorial column has returned, because I have a worrisome question, and hope our AFA members know the answer.

Thirty years ago, the nutritionists began telling us about the dangers of products made from white flour. In addition to the vitamin and protein deficiencies, they also objected because the flour was "brominated". I knew nothing about the element bromine, except that it was in white wheat flour and somehow wasn't good.

Recently a bromine compound has made the national news. EDB (ethylene dibromide) as been "discovered" in

fruits, cake mixes, etc., and the old mystery was solved. Bromine compounds have been used (for decades) to "keep down the bugs" in grains and other foods. The problem with EDB is that it is one of the most powerful cancer-causing mixes ever made. (Bromine *alone* is defined as "a corrosive, toxic, nasty-smelling liquid which gives off irritating fumes.")

Although the federal government has finally banned the use of EDB to fumigate grain for HUMANS, it cannot yet legally enforce levels of this chemical as found in foods. Now, besides humans, who do we know that consumes huge amounts of grains? Our BIRDS, of course, depend largely upon grains for their food, and I'll bet that NOBODY is testing bird seeds for EDB (or for any other "bromidic" chemicals).

Does anyone know if bird seed is fumigated, and if so, with what? (I am now looking very suspiciously at my lovely, clean, bug-free bird seed!)

Sincerely,

Linda Sun, Riverside, CA

Readers who have answers to Sun's questions may respond via a letter in this desultory column or you may address your comments directly to her, care of the editor.

My own true answer is easy. Over the years I've had many birds posted and nary a one had cancer. Several of them, on the other hand, had bugs. And bromine as "a corrosive, toxic, nasty-smelling liquid which gives off irritating fumes" sounds precisely like the Irish whiskey many people I know use as preventative medicine.



Dear Sheldon:

I am very disturbed by the New York legislation banning the sale of wild-caught birds and am quite concerned that such legislation might spread to other states or be adopted by the federal government. The A.F.A. has historically been opposed to the licensing and regulating of bird breeders by the government, laws requiring the mandatory banding of birds, and, in general, restrictions on the purchase and sale of birds. Now, in a one sentence bill, New York bird breeders must suffer all of these things.

It has been greatly publicized that Whitney North Seymour, Jr. was largely responsible for the passage of the New York legislation. In a letter soliciting support for B.I.R.D.S., Mr.

Seymour's wife clearly states that their objective in forming B.I.R.D.S. is to prevent other people from having to experience grief at "the loss of a beautiful creature." If this is the Seymours' objective, I fail to see how the New York legislation will accomplish it. What is to prevent the domestically-raised parrot they are now so happy with from contracting a disease and dying? Would the heart-break felt by them be less than it was for the wild-caught bird? What makes the Seymours think that a domestically-raised bird cannot die?

The New York legislation will not accomplish the Seymours' stated purpose for the law. Instead, it will take away a little more freedom from the people and impose on bird breeders a new bureaucracy which will diminish some of the enjoyment New York bird breeders now experience with their birds. The unhappiness bird breeders will experience under New York's regulation will be just as real as the unhappiness experienced by the Seymours at the death of their parrot. There are many more breeders in New York than families with dead pet birds. The greater social good is repeal of the New York legislation. The law is burdensome and will not accomplish the Seymours' objective.

The things I have stated are fairly obvious. Even the Seymours must already know these things. I wonder if their real objective is to see bird breeders regulated in the United States. Certainly the New York legislation is having that direct result. Or perhaps they incorrectly believe that a ban on the sale of wild-caught birds will somehow restore endangered species or keep other species from becoming endangered. For them to believe this they must ignore the facts that endangered or threatened species are not a part of the pet trade and that habitat loss is the chief threat to dwindling populations of species. How does the New York law solve this problem?

I keep being led back to the question: "What is their true motive?" The Seymours have heard all of the arguments that A.F.A. can utter. I must conclude that they are either unwilling or unable to recognize the truth when it is presented to them or they have a motive for their actions which they are not disclosing. In either event, the Seymours and B.I.R.D.S. are not our friends. It is my hope that the New York legisla-

tion will be repealed and that no similar legislation will be passed anywhere in this country.

Sincerely,

Hal M. Koontz, Bakersfield, CA

Dear Sirs,

Regarding the article in your February-March issue 1985, "The Long Bill of the Toucan," by Roger Williams and Elaine Radford, it is very apparent that the authors had little experience with Toucans. As an avid Toucan enthusiast and collector, and having spent many hours observing these wonderful birds, I feel compelled to take issue with their descriptions and theories concerning the beak of the Toucan. To ascribe to the beak a cooling function is to have a very poor understanding of physiology and anatomy. There is very little blood supply in the beak to provide heat exchange. Moreover, the beak is not a liability for the bird. Toucans use their beaks with efficiency and with dispatch. It is a very strong structure and I have seen my birds on occasion kill a wandering sparrow with a single thrust. Toucans do fight with their beaks, it is not uncommon to see wounds in and around the face, and Toucans injudiciously caged together will fight to the death. The beak comes into play greatly during mating time, the bird pair affectionately jousting preparatory to mating. The authors may consider the beak "awkward-looking." Those of us who are Toucan fanciers have a different appreciation of this magnificent structure.

Sincerely, Thomas M. Heric, M.D.
Santa Monica, CA

Sirs:

Oh, dear! Canadian addresses are such a pain to U.S. publications!

But I do hope you will set things straight. According to my by-line on page 26 of the Feb/Mar issue, you have me living in my Postal Code...Vee zero enn, One double-u zero...Sort of a tight squeeze. I really prefer living in Gillies Bay, even if you do say "Canada" instead of B.C.

L. Lorraine Lyons
Gillies Bay, British Columbia

I can find my way around in Old English, Middle English, Old Irish, Latin, Spanish, Sanskrit, and Hebrew, but I can't seem to get a grip on Canadian. It's a hard nut to crack, indeed. Sorry about the mistranslation.

Ed. ●

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Our 1985 convention will be held in the beautiful Cathedral Hotel, San Francisco (Van Ness Avenue and Geary Street), August 7th through 11th.

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The next Watchbird will carry more detailed information and all A.F.A. members will soon receive a packet in the mail. In the meantime one can contact: Jim Coffman, convention chairman, 1575 Bayshore Highway, Burlingame, CA 94010.

Make it a family vacation. San Francisco is a fantastic city of countless sites to see and things to do! Public attendance is invited and encouraged.



San Francisco's Chinatown has a photogenic front door. The gateway to the West's biggest Chinese settlement is guarded by temple dogs and roofed with green, glazed tiles surmounted by ocher dragons. Ornamental materials for the \$75,000 structure, which frames Grant Avenue at Bush Street, were made by Taiwan artisans and presented to the city by the Republic of China.

San Francisco Visitors Bureau photo by Craig Buchanan