

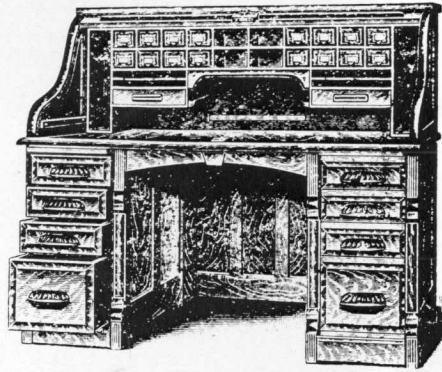
NOTICE

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

Sheldon Dingle
P.O. Box 340
Norco, CA 91760

From The Editor's Desk

by Sheldon Dingle
Norco, California



Many things, gentle reader, have transpired since we last visited in this column. Of the many, the one most pertinent to aviculture and the one closest upon my mind right now is the so called 'Amnesty Act' recently passed by Congress and approved by President Reagan. Without bothersome legal jargon, the jist of the act, it seems to me, is that millions of illegal aliens (chiefly Latin Americans) who can prove residence in the United States prior to a certain date will be given amnesty and legal status. So be it. I'll leave the fruitless pro and con arguments to those with nothing better to do.

Indeed, my only interest in the matter is that I think the same favorable status should be conferred upon the many avian individuals which are presently classified as illegal and are subject to confiscation and other harassments by Federal and State authorities.

No one deplores and fears bird smuggling more than I do. Everything possible should be done to eliminate it. But what, I ask, is to be done with the thousands of excellent pet parrots that were smuggled into the country ten years ago, five years ago, or even two years ago? By now these individuals have proven (by the very fact that they are still alive) to be free of the deadly diseases that we all so fear. Many, probably most, of these individuals are beloved pets in various households across the country giving joy and satisfaction to folks who know and care nothing about rules and regulations regarding avian imports.

To bring the point even closer to home, I confess to having in my possession several pairs of Amazon parrots picked up over the years at this pet store or that or from various families who no longer wanted their pet bird. Judging by the amount of Spanish spoken by some of these excellent birds I feel that somewhere in the past some of them entered the U.S.A. via less than honorable trans-

portation — and against their will, I might add.

The thing that motivates me, I suppose, is that I like birds a great deal more than I like people and I feel the illegal birds already here should receive

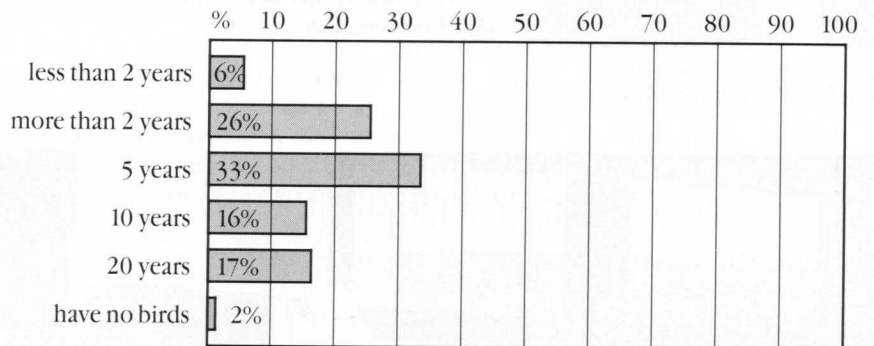
the same magnanimous generosity afforded their illegal human counterparts.

The AEA, I am told, is working on just such a deal with respect to Mexican thick-billed parrots. I should be very

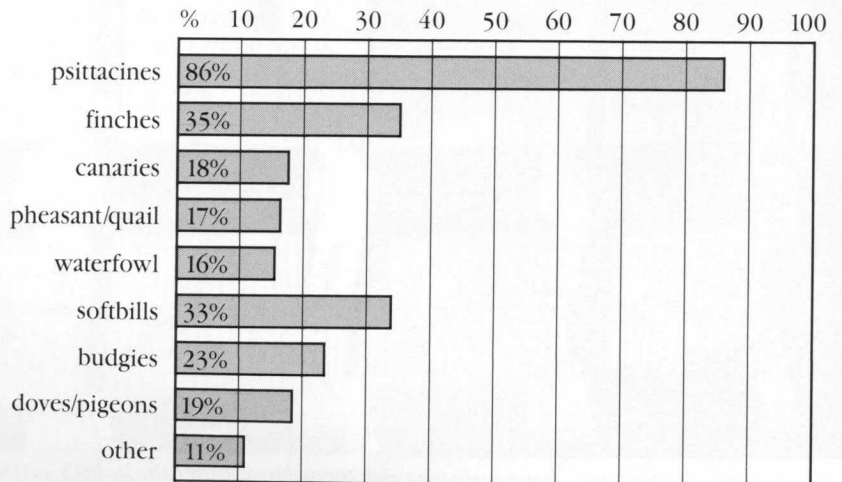
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glad to see this come to fruition.

On another tack altogether, I am happy to report the results of the questionnaire that we included in the Oct/Nov 86 Watchbird. The charts will show the statistics easier than I can tell them.

The above charts show the cold percentage responses to our direct questions. Many people have interests that overlap the various categories so, naturally, the total of the percentages does not add up to an even one hundred.

Number 4 on the questionnaire gave the respondents the opportunity to write in their personal choices regarding the types of articles they'd like to see more of. I went through the first 100 questionnaires and extracted the categories that were shared by more than one person. The following chart displays the write-in categories and the percent of respondents who supported each.

Number 5 on the questionnaire merely asked for additional comments. There is no way known to man to categorize these and break them into percentages. I'll extrapolate and sample a few of them for your entertainment and education.

The first one said merely, "the editor needs a helper." I'm still puzzled. Is it because my work is substandard? Could it be because I don't do enough? Should the helper mow my lawn or help me edit? Whatever the writer's reasons, I'm more than happy to agree and will gladly accept said helper to be put to the best possible use.

Several folks said, "How about going monthly." I summarily discarded the suggestions.

One respondent said, "No domestic pigeons. If you continue to have articles on pigeons I will subscribe to *Cage Bird* or *Bird Talk*." Several others said they want more on doves and pigeons and the survey indicated 19% of the respondents had a strong interest in

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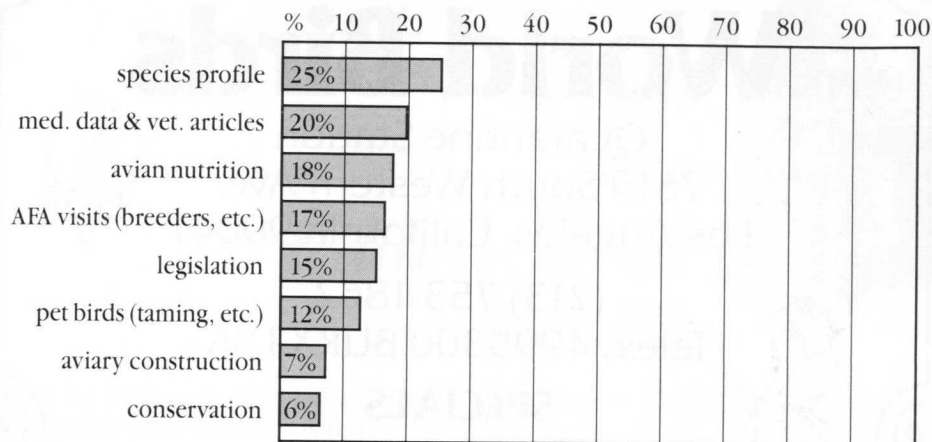
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these birds. The pigeon hater will have to go elsewhere I'm afraid.

The following comment was repeated (with variations) many, many times, "I think Watchbird has done an excellent job of keeping all of us educated on legislative issues."

Another person said, "You do a wonderful job — against enormous odds. Keep up the good work." Another mind-boggler. I don't know if he (or she) refers to the AFA's legislative efforts or to my own efforts as editor. Both thoughts are valid. The AFA *has* been a David versus a number of political Goliaths.

Several other comments have reflected very perceptive thinking. One person noted, "A magazine that is too diversified for reasons of wider circulation becomes *less* interesting to all since most readers specialize." The writer went on to outline a very imaginative procedure whereby we would, in effect, publish a series of special segments any one or all of which, on a rising price rate, members could subscribe to. The idea has merit but the logistics horrify me. The writer has pinpointed a difficult truth, however. Perhaps the Watchbird is trying to be all things to *all* people. That may not be possible.

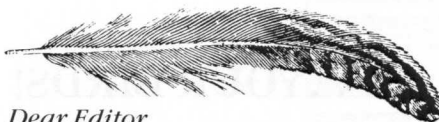
On the same head, we are faced with the difficulties expressed thusly, "I love your book but sometimes find it a little over my head. . ."; and, "I'd like articles to continue to be more serious, more scholarly."

What's an editor to do? Some dear soul provided the very answer to that perplexing question saying, "Sheldon, you do a marvelous job — probably much better than if it were to reflect membership requests." Perhaps we should change the title "editor" to "autocrat." A rather nice ring to that, eh wot!

All levity aside, we have received much good advice and many points to ponder. Not one comment was hostile (the pigeon-hater excepted) and most were very generous. Several respondents took time to fill out full pages quite often containing very valuable viewpoints that we shall profit by.

Many thanks to all of you who responded. We will include periodic questionnaires for better communication and also for a little fun.

Now on to other things. A rather hot topic lately has been that of hybridization. I can assure you that there are pro and con articles currently in the making. For now, the following letters speak for themselves. To avoid personalities, I have excised a few overly harsh references to this or that S.O.B.



Dear Editor,

I read with interest the letter of R. Vagner to AFA president Jerry Jennings concerning hybrids in aviculture (Oct/Nov 1986); I must take issue with several points made in the letter.

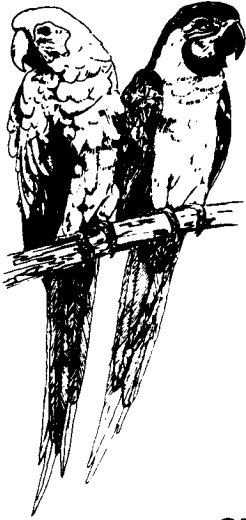
1) Mr. Vagner gives the impression that the value of our birds is determined solely by demand in the marketplace. While I have no objection to aviculture as a commercial enterprise in general, I feel that in certain circumstances profit must not be the primary motivation for avicultural activity. If the current trend of habitat destruction throughout the world continues bird breeders will surely become the custodians of many species that are extinct in the wild. When this comes about will less attractive (and therefore less valuable in monetary terms) species be neglected or forgotten altogether by aviculturists and allowed

to become extinct? If we in the AFA are truly dedicated to conservation of bird wildlife then there must be more motivation for breeding endangered species than simply the potential to generate financial income. Is the true value of a species determined by its price? If we are to successfully counter the charges made by those who would have private aviculture banned it is vital that we promulgate the message that aviculture is a useful tool in conservation and not simply a consumer of avian resources. Can we really claim conservation as our primary goal if we are breeding endangered birds for profit?

2) The definition of species does not incorporate the "ideas of selection toward a given fine tuning to the environment faced by the species" as Mr. Vagner asserts. The concept of species has been fundamental to biologists and nonbiologists alike ever since man began sticking labels on things thousands of years ago. It is true, however, that one of the ironies of modern biology is that even today we have no definition of species that can be applied universally. The most generally accepted view holds that a species is a group of organisms capable of breeding among themselves under natural conditions. A species therefore, is a group reproductively isolated from other groups and within which gene flow occurs. This definition is not without problems however. For example many species have disjunct ranges such as *Amazona ochrocephala*. The double yellow head from Mexico (*A. o. oratrix*) belongs to the same species as the yellow crowned Amazon *A. o. ochrocephala* from northern south America despite the fact that these groups are geographically isolated and therefore do not interbreed in nature (i.e. they are reproductively isolated from one another). If we accept the view of Mr. Vagner we must consider these separate species since they occupy different habitats and are therefore subjected to different selective forces. For that matter, if we accept the definition of species based on selective forces in the environment then strictly speaking no two organisms could belong to the same species because no two organisms can occupy exactly the same habitat at the same time; thus no two organisms are subjected to exactly the same selective pressures. Rather, if we accept reproductive isolation as the criterion for species definition then the Pere David deer is a species regardless of whether or not they are extant in the

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wild. Mr. Vagner is correct in the view that forces of natural selection acting on captive birds are quite different from those relevant to wild birds. That fact, however, should not be taken as justification for the intentional production of hybrids and mutations in rare species. Such practices will surely compromise the genetic integrity of future generations. How can the AFA espouse conservation and at the same time sanction such avicultural practices?

3) Mr. Vagner advises the AFA to back away from its stand against hybridization and to shy away from positions on issues that might offend any member. How can an organization the size of the AFA expect to stand for any issue that reflects the view of every member? There will always be differences of opinion, but the AFA must continue to stand up and be counted even if the issue is contentious. The best we can hope for realistically is that positions taken by the AFA on issues represent a consensus of opinion of the membership.

4) My final comment concerns the apparent personal attack on Mr. Jennings. Sarcasm and innuendo have no place in the *Watchbird* and only detract from the quality of an excellent publication. I suggest that members with personal axes to grind restrict their comments to correspondence not intended for publication.
Sincerely yours,

Tim P. Birt
Department of Biology
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. Johns, Newfoundland, Canada

[Editor's Note: In all fairness to Vagner, his letter to Jennings was sent to Jennings and was not intended for publication. I, perhaps erroneously, published the letter along with Jennings' reply much to the surprise of Vagner. I am very glad to report that Vagner has displayed much good humor in the matter and is quite willing to defend his stance without any sarcasm and innuendo.]



Dear Mr. Dingle:

I read with great interest the letters on hybrids that you published in the Oct./Nov. issue of the *Watchbird*. I think it's pertinent to point out that many older aviculturists hybridized as

much out of scientific curiosity as a desire for economic gain. At one time, seeing which birds hybridized with which (and which pairs produced fertile young) was a valuable way to determine how closely related the species were. Many breeders may not be aware that hybridizing for this reason has recently become obsolete. Nowadays, biologists can compare genetic material obtained from blood samples and get an easier, more accurate determination of the bird's relationship to others. The new technique is discussed in the February 1986 issue of *Scientific American*. Co-authors Charles G. Sibley and Jon E. Ahlquist describe in detail how they have used the technique to determine the evolution of modern birds. If he hasn't seen the article already, President Jennings will particularly enjoy it since the development of barbets, toucanets, and toucans is discussed in some detail. In any case, I believe that most people who look up this article will be impressed enough to agree that hybridizing exotics for this purpose is no longer necessary — which is all to the good in a world in which we can't afford to waste a bird. Although there are certainly exceptions such as the dusky seaside sparrow which must be saved through hybridization since all known females are dead, I hope AFA members will support the policy of hybridizing only domesticated birds without impugning the morals or motives of those who did otherwise in the past.
Sincerely,

Elaine Radford
Metairie, Louisiana



Dear Sir:

I would like to respond to Richard Vagner's letter to Jerry Jennings which appeared in the October/November issue of *AFA Watchbird*. I applaud Mr. Jennings' restraint in politely replying to Mr. Vagner's attack on the AFA's position of not encouraging the hybridization of species that are rare or not well established as breeding stock in captivity. Not that I am totally against hybridizing; I think that if the time ever comes that macaws are as commonly bred as budgies we can play around all we want; but where is all the parent stock for these hybrids going to come from if the species themselves are nonexistent? Mr. Vagner must be

depending on the rest of us to do the decent thing and try to keep the species pure so he can buy them from us. In spite of Mr. Vagner's statement that he has a "scientific background," his continual mention of "the marketplace," lawyers, and challenging "the policy and status of the group" strikes me not as scientific but as merely mercenary. As far as "policies being somewhat naive and made by some who do not understand the full implications of the subject about which they speak," Mr. Vagner's reference to scarlets from *South America* showing faint traces of having been influenced by blue and golds strikes me as ludicrous. After all, in years past one of the tests of whether a particular bird was a separate species or merely a subspecies was to breed the bird in question to a bird known to be of the recognized species and then breed the offspring to see if they were fertile because hybrids are nearly always sterile. As far as Mr. Vagner's reference to "muling," Webster's *New World Dictionary* defines a mule in this sense to be "4. a hybrid; esp., a sterile hybrid: among bird fanciers, said esp. of the offspring of a canary and some other finch." The odds against two species of macaws hybridizing in the wild and actually producing a fertile offspring that survived in spite of its appearance and then which was actually accepted as a mate by one of the parent species and then managed to raise fertile offspring that looked like God-only-knows-what are probably phenomenal; I'm not saying that it's totally impossible but I don't think they'd give you odds on it in Vegas. As for Mr. Vagner's argument that a species is not a species if it doesn't exist in the wild — I, for one, would like to know what dictionary that came out of. To use Webster's again: "species: 4. Biol. the fundamental biological classification, comprising a subdivision of a genus and consisting of a number of plants or animals all of which have a high degree of similarity, can generally interbreed only among themselves, and show persistent differences from members of allied species." Not one mention of living in the wild or a high-rise or anyplace else. If one were to accept Mr. Vagner's definition the species *canis familiaris* that he uses as an argument for the variety supported by the marketplace does not exist since it does not exist in the wild; a poor choice to use when arguing the marketability of hybrids because our different breeds of dogs were not

produced by hybridizing but by selective breeding and the occasional chance mutation over a period of many generations and sometimes involving more than one lifetime of dedication to a specific goal. In any event there are already far more species of birds than breeds of dogs — the variety Mr. Vagner feels the marketplace will support is already available. Perhaps he should reread his own letter and pay careful attention to the statement he made on page 45. "Remember once a species is gone another heaven and earth must pass for it to be duplicated." That's one of the best arguments against hybridizing rare species I've ever read.

Sincerely,

Ms. Randy Griffin
Edwardsburg, Michigan



Dear Mr. Dingle,

After reading the comments by Mr. Gabel in the June/July 1986 edition of *Watchbird*, I feel duty-bound to present the following thoughts on hybridisation, particularly as I seem to be seen as one of Mr. Gabel's bad guys of aviculture.

Firstly I must stress that there is no way that I can condone the hybridisation between species just for the sake of hybridisation.

However there are many facets to aviculture, and not all aviculturists have the desire, good fortune or facilities to work with endangered species. Many aviculturists find their reward by producing perfect show standard strains of particular species, others are thrilled by colour mutations. Whatever aspect of aviculture holds our interests, and if these interests can be fostered and expanded by sensible and purposeful hybridising, or inbreeding, these practices must be condoned, even if only for the further expansion and strengthening of aviculture generally.

During the last five or six years I have established the olive mutation of the scaly-breasted lorikeet in my aviaries. The fact that this mutation is totally dominant, and that most species of Australian lorikeets are capable of producing fertile hybrids, led me to believe that the olive factor could be transferred into all Australian lorikeet species through hybridisation. In these few years I have produced olive musk lorikeets (15/16 hybrids) which

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are indistinguishable from normal musk lorikeets; have the first generation of olive hybrids with the rainbow lorikeet, and have established compatible pairs between olive birds and little, varied and red-collared lorikeets.

Perhaps many purist aviculturists will consider the whole project a pointless exercise, but avicultural history shows that the establishment of a mutation in a species, a genus, or an entire family always leads to an avicultural boom in the group which can only benefit aviculture generally, and the birds themselves in the long run. Recent examples of such mutation booms in avicultural avian species or families are cockatiels, African lovebirds, and Indian ringnecks.

Likewise, George Smith's theories on inbreeding for the purpose of producing mutants by limiting the gene pool, if handled sensibly, such as by combining inbreeding with selection for reproductive ability, can only further the development of aviculture.

I must stress that neither George nor I suggest that our methods be applied to endangered species. Just developing these species as aviary strains should be our contribution to future generations of aviculturists.

In a closed country such as Australia, where the importation of new avian material is prohibited, many exotic species become totally inbred as the gene pool diminishes. Infertility, susceptibility to disease and general weakness are the usual legacies. Such is the case with Nyasa and mask African lovebirds in Australia, but through hybridising with each other, or Fischer lovebirds, stronger, more prolific strains have been developed. The third generation hybrid is indistinguishable from the original species.

It is easy to be a purist and condemn purposeful hybridisation programs when you dwell in a country with almost unlimited avian material to work with. When you are faced with the choice of the loss of a species from aviculture within your country or a hybridisation program, surely not to choose the latter is a head-in-the-sand approach to the problem.

In conclusion I feel that if hybridisation can be used as a useful tool in the further development of any aspect of aviculture without being detrimental to our birds generally, then it should be used.

Yours in aviculture,

Stan Sindel
Fairfield, N.S.W., Australia

I'm sure we have not seen the end of the hybridization differences of opinion. But other pertinent letters have come across my desk also.



Dear Sheldon,

We have a complaint we'd like to share. Maybe it could help someone else also.

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We are very grateful for all replies we receive and are sorry we can't be near the phone at all times. Next to the phone, the mail is the most sure means of communication.

All we ask is that when someone is courteous enough to enclose a s.a.s.e., please be courteous enough to return it.

David Brown
Princeton, Louisiana



Dear Mr. Dingle,

While reading Sherry Rind's article on finding bird care during vacation time, I realized that she had not mentioned an excellent source of experienced bird people — your local zoo. Many bird keepers are willing and able to "moonlight," and with adequate advance arrangements could even use their existing skills to tend nesting pairs and hand-feed young. Not only that, but such contact could further enhance understanding and communication between the private sector and the zoo community. All it takes is a phone call to test the receptiveness of your zoo's avicultural staff, and the potential for a mutually enriching relationship is great.

Sincerely,

Deborah Reed
Bird Keeper, San Antonio Zoo ●