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Getting Started in Pigeons

by Jan Parrott-Holden
Vancouver, Washington

Being a bird lover I can't help but get excited when afforded an opportunity to introduce others to the surprising world of pigeons. Right away I want to expose you to some of the most elegant of the fancy breeds, to point out the flying athletes we thrill to watch, even brag about those big "meat birds" I found so prolific at the Grand National in Houston. But the thought that resides uppermost in my "bird" brain is involved with knowing *how* to get others to explore this world of pigeons themselves.

Perhaps this simple, but sincere composition might help smooth the way for those of you toying with the idea of *Getting Started With Pigeons*.

IN THE BEGINNING

My father calls the northwest "God's country." But my father has never raised pigeons. He never had to consider the needs of a flock of birds who have yielded some of their freedom and much of their responsibilities to a human being. He never had to determine whether putting his breeders together in February would result in a high mortality rate, or whether allowing his birds to nest through the moult would subject them to unusual stress. He never had to face the challenge of creating a top-notch show specimen prior to the fall show dates. And he never toyed with the idea of moving to California in order to lengthen his breeding season by three months.

IN A NUT SHELL

The breeding of pigeons, like that of any cage bird, is an art that requires a great deal of patience but produces phenomenal rewards in personal satisfaction if not in monetary gain. For one thing, the climate *does* play a role in breeding. Pigeons were never intended to live in one's house (though I must admit I've given a few pets such liberties upon occasion.) In truth, as long as their aviary is kept free of drafts and rain, these hardy birds can handle the cold temperatures. But it is foolish to consider breeding them when the days are short and the thermometer doesn't push above 40 degrees. What does this mean for many breeders? Well, it means that the ideal time to pair birds is when your geographical area is experiencing "spring-like" temperatures. To plunge into the project too soon would mean

running the risk of losing squabs through exposure. Whether given a long breeding season or a short one, there are a few devices you can practice in order to make the most of the time allotted you.

First, you *must* give each pair their own nest box. Sounds simple. Yet many beginning breeders, myself included, have fallen into the trap of allowing birds to nest on the floor. Before you know it there are a pair of eggs behind the door, another pair in a dark corner and considerable fighting over floor space.

The solution may be as simple as securing some fruit or vegetable crates, which will serve quite nicely for nest boxes until you acquire time, experience, or enough clever neighbors to construct something more substantial. The important thing to keep in mind is that each mated pair requires enough space and privacy to enhance their nesting instinct. If you haven't an eye for big production, you won't need extra nesting facilities. However, should you want to work your pairs harder, it is wise to have boxes available for a pair or two of feeders. (Feeders might be pigeons you do not care to breed but who have a proven record for being excellent parents.) The only trick then is to steal the feeder's eggs and replace them with those of your breeding pairs. Of course you'll need to keep some kind of records or you'll find yourself missing the blessed event. If you do, there will be others, as nature takes its course.

Nature may need a little assistance, however, if your first pigeon project is going to flourish. I don't think it's too simplistic to suggest that a high-quality diet and clean feeding vessels play a major role in any successful breeding campaign. Still, I can think of exceptions. For instance, I used to frequent a bird ranch where the charges subsisted on a handful of wheat tossed upon the ground twice a week. Grit was fed only once a month. Yet the birds appeared to be managing with their limited fare. What their keeper hadn't considered was the crucial importance of extra protein and vitamins during stress-filled breeding months. I suppose a pellet might afford the best insurance that your flock gets full benefits from their



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rations. But I prefer feeding a mixture of grains including corn, maple peas, safflower, wheat and millet. In addition, I mix vitamins in their drinking water and slip them a cod liver oil capsule (10 minims) once a week. It's a very good idea to supplement the amount of calcium given by lacing the grit with a high-potency mineral powder. This extra calcium is extremely effective in preventing what is known as "soft-shelled" eggs (a state in which the egg itself and membrane appear normal while the outside shell coating appears completely non-existent).

Medicating birds seems to be a subject of much dispute among pigeon breeders. I know several fanciers whose birds have probably never tasted fresh "unspiked" H₂O. Month after month they are given medications to prevent the occurrence of canker, para-typhoid, coccidiosis and worm infestations. Some of these birds are actually killed from the cure, so to speak. Thus, the majority of breeders seem to opt for medicating just prior to and at the conclusion of the breeding season, while maintaining reasonably sanitary loft conditions.

One of the preferred worm medications is Tramisol, which is considered very effective against everything but the tapeworm and is easily administered in the drinking water.

A three to five day treatment of Emtryl is effective in combating canker, and Nitrofurazone seems proficient in the control of paratyphoid and coccidiosis. Of course there are other illnesses common to pigeons as with all cage birds. And the trouble always seems to be "pinpointing" the problem, as many of the symptoms are similar. In such instances, it doesn't pay to play doctor. I always prefer turning to a good veterinarian with a specialty in bird ailments. It can cost a bit of money, but it can save your hobby. You must consider the consequences of guesswork versus expertise.

With your first breeding season, you will make mistakes. It's part of the game and simply cannot be avoided. But imagining you will create a mirror image of some judge's standard sheet is probably the biggest mistake of all. You must breed the bird *you* like. If it comes close to what the picture shows, you

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An ice pigeon cock guards his domain while the hen hovers over her eggs.

Photos by Jan Parrott-Holden



Using an inverted V perch helps facilitate clean up. An Old Dutch Capuchine, one of the "fancy" varieties, is shown.



Don't let the term "loft" fool you. With imagination, a pigeon house can be attractive.

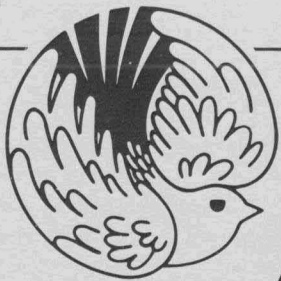
This bank of nest boxes has varying width doors to accommodate different pigeon breeds.



can feel a sense of true accomplishment. (Now what other bird could offer such a challenge?) With each new season you will add another layer to the foundation of knowledge and another year of fascinating fun to your life.

You'll get lots of opinions and a bit of knowledge from other breeders. But the best investment you can make in learning will come from a well-stocked library. Why even lifelong hobbyists tell me they repeatedly return to the pages of Levi's *The Pigeon* for a quick refresher course each season. Its twelve chapters and 615 pages touch upon every major aspect of these remarkable birds. Texts like Levi's can make a real difference between success and failure.

Well, there it is. Not a bequest of limitless knowledge I will grant you. Perhaps it is more of a tease, a challenge to try something new, or pick-up again on a childhood endeavor. It happens every day! Yet if you are wondering *why* breed a bird that cannot be taught to sing or talk—that cannot be considered valuable by forces concerned with production of food for human consumption, I'm not surprised. There's no way to discover the joy of pigeons without getting a pair. Now what do you say we get started on your loft plan! ●



AFA in action... **NEWS and VIEWS**

APRIL 1986

A.F.A. Joins U.S. Fish & Wildlife in Its Stand on California Condor Capture, Captive Breeding Controversy

The California condor is near extinction in the wild. The only hope for saving the species appears to be captive breeding which has successfully taken place in California. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently proposed to capture the remaining condors to protect them and institute a captive propagation program. The Audubon Society has obtained a court injunction prohibiting Fish and Wildlife from doing this. In light of this, AFA authorized the sending of the following letter.

February 20, 1986

The Honorable Donald P. Hodel
Secretary of the Interior of
The United States of America
Washington, D.C.

RE: United States Fish and Wildlife Service Condor Program

Dear Mr. Secretary:

I am pleased to write this letter on behalf of the American Federation of Aviculture and its board of directors representing its approximately 55,000 affiliated members and its 120 member avicultural organizations throughout the United States and worldwide. The American Federation of Aviculture ("AFA") is dedicated to the preservation of avian species through promoting captive breeding.

Our organization recognizes that extinction of avian species is not acceptable in this world of humane concern and great scientific accomplishment. While we can enact legislation to protect various avian species, we cannot guarantee that these species will thrive in the wild or ensure that their habitats will be protected. In addition, as we all know, we cannot always guarantee that all people will abide by the law.

While AFA and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service have, from time to time, disagreed on various matters relating to the best interests of aviculture, over the years and in the truly important issues, our organization and the Fish and Wildlife Service have reached common understandings which in the long run have represented great strides in protecting and preserving avian species. For this we are grateful and look forward to continued accomplishments in this regard.

AFA has always been quick to advise Fish and Wildlife when

it has done things contrary to what AFA considers to be in the best interest of aviculture; therefore, we feel that we owe Fish and Wildlife a corresponding obligation to inform it when it is taking what we deem to be positive and appropriate action.

We wholeheartedly support your protecting, preserving and saving from extinction the remaining California condors by placing them in captivity for the purpose of ensuring their survival and maximizing the chances of their continuing to propagate with the ultimate goal of re-introducing them into a safe and protected habitat. Furthermore, AFA hopes that as a part of this program you will use all means at your disposal to provide a safe habitat when these birds are ready to be released. We, too, are committed to these ideals and view our purpose as saving avian species from decimation and destruction in the wild resulting from habitat destruction, predation and hunting for food. We, too, believe that captivity with commitment to captive breeding and for those species which can be domesticated even as pets to preserve avian life is far better than their destruction and potential ultimate extinction.

We abhor the tunnel-visioned, short-sighted prejudices of those who favor death and extinction of avian species to captivity. In our view these attitudes are anti-conservation, inhumane and deprive the world of these beautiful creatures and the potential for re-introducing them into the wild when habitats can be protected and people educated.

Many of the individuals with whom you are working in the condor program are involved with AFA as well. AFA pledges its support to the Department of the Interior and the Fish and Wildlife Service in your efforts in the California Condor Program with the hope that you will be successful in ultimately prevailing in your quest to secure these majestic birds, save them from extinction, successfully breed them to ensure their continued existence for the sake of the species and for future generations of mankind and ultimately to re-introduce these birds into a safe habitat.

We are delighted to have you join with us in leading the way in these true conservation efforts.

Very truly yours,
American Federation of Aviculture, Inc.

Gary P. Lilienthal
National Legal Counsel ●

Maryland Aviculturists Kill Exotic Bird Bill

by Ro Dahle
Maryland State Coordinator
Severn, Maryland

Photos furnished by Ro Dahle



Lee Phillips, A.F.A. legislative vice president, testifies against SB 497.

On Tuesday, February 18, 1986 a spirited band of approximately 150 Maryland aviculturists and retail pet dealers crowded into a hearing room of the state's General Assembly to protect their rights to purchase, breed, and sell exotic birds.

The hearing, which took place in Room 200 of the James Senate Office Building in Annapolis, Maryland, was the result of the introduction of Senate Bill 497 on Jan. 29, 1986 to Maryland's Economic and Environmental Affairs Committee by state Senator James Clark, Jr. (D-Howard Co.). In essence, the bill, if passed, would have prohibited the sale of any exotic bird, unless captive bred. The introduction of the bill had originated from a request to Sen. Clark from a zealous member of the Potomac Chapter of the Sierra Club.

Prior the hearing, a general letter, dated Feb. 6, had been sent to each Maryland A.F.A. member by Lee Phillips, legislative vice-president, and myself. The letter informed members of the bill, urged them to write each senator on the committee to voice their opposition, and to attend the public hearing.

And attend they did! When the doors to the hearing room opened at 1:00 p.m., our state's dedicated aviculturists and retail pet dealers flooded the room. We wore bright red stick-on labels on sweaters, lapels, and dresses which boldly

proclaimed "No S.B. 497!" There was a scarcity of seats in proportion to our numbers; most of our people *stood* until 5:00 p.m. that evening until Sen. Bill 497 was finally discussed.

First to testify before the committee were the proponents of the bill. Spokespeople for the Sierra Club, Defenders of Animal Rights, and the Audubon Society alternately pleaded for the bill's passage as a measure to stop a "...cruel, inhumane, and deadly torture against over 1 million wild birds annually." James R. Kovic, vice president of Defenders of Animal Rights, Baltimore said, "Behind the sale of every exotic bird, there's a story of exploitation and horror." He proceeded to tell stories of birds being smuggled into the country in suitcases and in tire wells, legs and beaks tied and gagged. Others portrayed the current quarantine system as a "sloppy, irresponsible, and deadly foreign business," and exotic birds were painted as a threat to the state's poultry industry as well as a threat to human health. Perhaps most indicative of the proponents' tunnel vision, was the presence and testimony of Greta Nilsson, author of *The Bird Business*, who stated that the demand for exotic birds could be met by a current captive bred bird supply. After concluding their testimony, proponents of the bill, one of whom said that the committee would "hear



Ro Dable, Maryland state coordinator, speaks against SB 497 to a local TV reporter.

lies" from the opponents, left the proceedings, apparently not caring to hear the side of aviculturists and retail pet dealers who had stood patiently and listened respectfully.

Then, it was our turn! Opposition testimony was spearheaded by Lee Phillips who presented documented evidence from USDA on avian morbidity in quarantine stations. Her low figures blew the proponents' "fantasies" on this point right out of the water. Lee went on to provide proof positive that no incident of Newcastle in this country had ever been traced to a properly quarantined bird. For the proponents' "horror" pictures of dead birds in suitcases and tire wells, Lee had "horror" pictures of poisoned cockatoos in Australia. In countering Greta Nilsson's charge that no plan currently exists for the humane treatment of exotic birds, Lee offered the proposed Maryland Cage and Aviary Bird Improvement Plan as evidence of Maryland's aviculturists' commitment to humane treatment.

Others came forth; pet retailers, private breeders, and pet owners. They told of habitat destruction, transporting birds, surgical sexing, their own captive breeding programs. Many pointed out that even the most successful captive breeding programs would not be able to supply the current demand for exotic birds. As each spoke, I feel it became more evident to the attentive senators that the fate of exotic birds strongly rested on an active attempt at captive breeding to insure their survival rather than the "Bambi Syndrome" (just go away and things will be fine) of the proponents of the bill.

Our day (and evening) in Room 200 ended at about 8:30 p.m. As we left the senate office building, captive breeders and pet retailers walked out together, discussing the day's proceedings. We had been strongly united this day, in a combined, cooperative drive to save our birds and our rights. We had supported each other's testimony, we had spoken to the press together, we had been there for each other.

Maryland aviculturists and retail pet dealers did not have to wait long for their answer. On Friday, Feb. 21, the Maryland general assembly's Senate Committee on Economic and Environmental Affairs voted 7-3, giving Senate Bil 497 Exotic Birds — Sales an unfavorable report. The bill was killed in committee — we had won!

Although we were successful, our experience underlines the need for aviculturists and retail pet dealers in other states to keep in close contact with their state and local legislators. The timeline of our story was a very short one — the fight was upon us in 3 weeks. I don't think I would be an alarmist in saying that the introduction of similar bills in other states is a strong likelihood. However, the example of Maryland aviculturists and retail pet dealers demonstrates that with awareness, preparation, organization, and cooperation this kind of legislation can be defeated. ●

Legislative Round-Up

*by Lee Phillips, Legislative Vice President
Harwood, Maryland*

Legislative brushfires continue to plague aviculture in this country. In Ohio HB-611 introduced by Rep. Dan Troy would classify as a retail dealer anyone selling or trading more than fifteen pet-type animals per year. This bill is supported by the Humane Society of the United States and had already passed the House before it was brought to the attention of A.F.A. The bill is currently in the Agriculture Committee of the Ohio Senate.

Another bill in the Ohio legislature, HB-283 introduced by Reps. Blessing and McClusky, would prohibit the private ownership of exotic animals but the sponsors, perhaps recognizing the difficulties that lie ahead for such a bill, have requested that it be held in committee. Ohio State Coordinator Michaelen Rogers is monitoring both of these bills and is planning a mailing to all A.F.A. members in Ohio.

In Alabama, S-466 introduced by Senator Cooley relates to the regulation and licensing of persons in the business of dealing in exotic or pet birds. Alabama State Coordinator Lorene Clubb has asked for a public hearing on the bill which was the subject of meetings last year between aviculturists and legislators.

Highly restrictive legislation covering all wild animals has been introduced in the Tennessee legislature but was later amended to exempt all avian species. A.F.A. member Deborah Dorsey is monitoring this bill.

In New York State, the wild-caught bird ban which originally was to go in effect on November 1, 1985 has been delayed until May 1, 1986. Although regulations have been formulated, no guidelines for enforcing the bill have been established according to Paul Gildersleeve, A.F.A. representative on the working committee. In an effort to modify the effects of the previous bill, companion bills A-8856 and S-7384 have been introduced in the New York state legislature; these bills would change the mandate of the Department of Environmental Conservation to one of regulating the commercial use of birds both imported and captive-bred.

The task force studying the Connecticut legislation voted 4 to 2 (State Coordinator Walt Willoughby and retail pet dealer Mort Brown in the minority) that the New York concept was a desirable approach but that Connecticut should defer any action for one year to give an opportunity to gather data and to observe the enforcement of the New York ban.

In Massachusetts the bill to ban wild-caught birds has been re-introduced and a hearing date set for March 20. Massachusetts State Coordinator Gary Lilienthal is coordinating opposition to the bill.

In Maryland SB-497 introduced by Senator James Clark (D., Howard) at the request of a constituent would ban the sale of wild-caught birds. Splendid cooperation and coordination between A.F.A., the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (PIJAC) and the newly-formed Maryland Pet Association resulted in an overflow crowd of 150 people at the public hearing. Testifying in favor of the bill were Greta Nilsson and representatives of the Sierra Club, The Audubon Society, Defenders of Animal Rights, the Humane Society of the United States and the Maryland Ornithological Society. Aviculturists, pet bird owners and retail pet dealers presented facts to refute the allegations of the proponents of the bill and the Senate Economic and Environmental Affairs Committee voted 7 to 3 to give the bill an unfavorable report, thus effectively killing it for this year's session.

I think it is time for aviculturists and the American Federation of Aviculture to take the offensive against the so-called animal rights activists whose sensationalized accounts, half-truths and misleading statistics present an unrealistic picture of the bird trade.

I urge every aviculturist to become aware of what is happening in his/her state legislature and to communicate with President Jerry Jennings or myself immediately if a threatening bill is introduced. We have accumulated a variety of material to help you in opposing restrictive legislation and will be glad to share it with you.

We must be vigilant! ●

A.F.A. Response to U.S. Fish & Wildlife Shipping Regulations

Recently the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, under the guidelines of the Lacey Act, proposed a rule for additional regulations for the humane transport of wild birds into the United States. A.F.A. requested its legal counsel to review the proposed rule and respond to it. The following letter contains those responses.

March 4, 1986

Federal Wildlife Permit Office
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1000 North Glebe Road, Room 611
Arlington, VA 22201

RE: Proposed Amendment to Rules in 50 CFR Part 14

Gentlemen:

The American Federation of Aviculture ("AFA") has asked me to advise the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service of AFA's concerns with respect to the proposed rule appearing in the Federal Register, Volume 50, Number 233, Wednesday, December 4, 1985 as it affects 50 CFR Part 14 (the "Proposed Rule"). As the Fish and Wildlife Service is aware, AFA is concerned with the retrieval of avian species from the threat of extinction in the wild due to habitat destruction and their destruction as pests. We believe that appropriate legal importation and captive breeding of these species are two of the primary ways of accomplishing this. AFA values the relationship which it has established with the Fish and Wildlife Service in attempting to promote responsible enforcement of laws and regulations which will allow the continued legal importation of foreign wild-caught birds to establish captive breeding populations, save these species from extinction and to allow them to become human companions in this country. We recognize and applaud the concerns of the Fish and Wildlife Service in attempting to promote humane and healthful transport of birds to the United States and it is in that spirit that we offer these comments.

AFA is extremely concerned that while the Proposed Rule is offered with the best intentions, if implemented as is, it may result in promoting precisely the opposite effect than it is purported to have. As a result of this, as will be more particularly described below, we urge the Fish and Wildlife Service to seek additional professional advice from persons experienced on a day-to-day basis with the hazards and dangers of transport of avian species from the wild. Certainly, the improvement of conditions of transport on nothing more than an economic basis is favorable to commercial importers, and it is certainly desirable to aviculturists as a conservation and humanitarian device. We feel that the Proposed Rule, while well intended, has, in some cases, missed the mark.

1. Various sections in the Proposed Rule require furnishing feed and water containers and perches. Perches and feed and water containers can be inherently injurious to the birds themselves in transport. Birds could become lodged under perches, bruised by water or feed containers, injured as a result of perching on perches, feed or water containers and in the case of water containers, drown or become dampened and chilled from the water in the container. Fresh fruit as a water source and loose feed pose a far better alternative. In addition, larger birds might chew perches creating sharp objects on which they can become impaled. A bird slipping off a perch, in the case of being jarred, has

the immediate instinct to try to fly and could injure itself as a result of this. Birds on flooring have the ability to steady themselves by dropping their wings for balance.

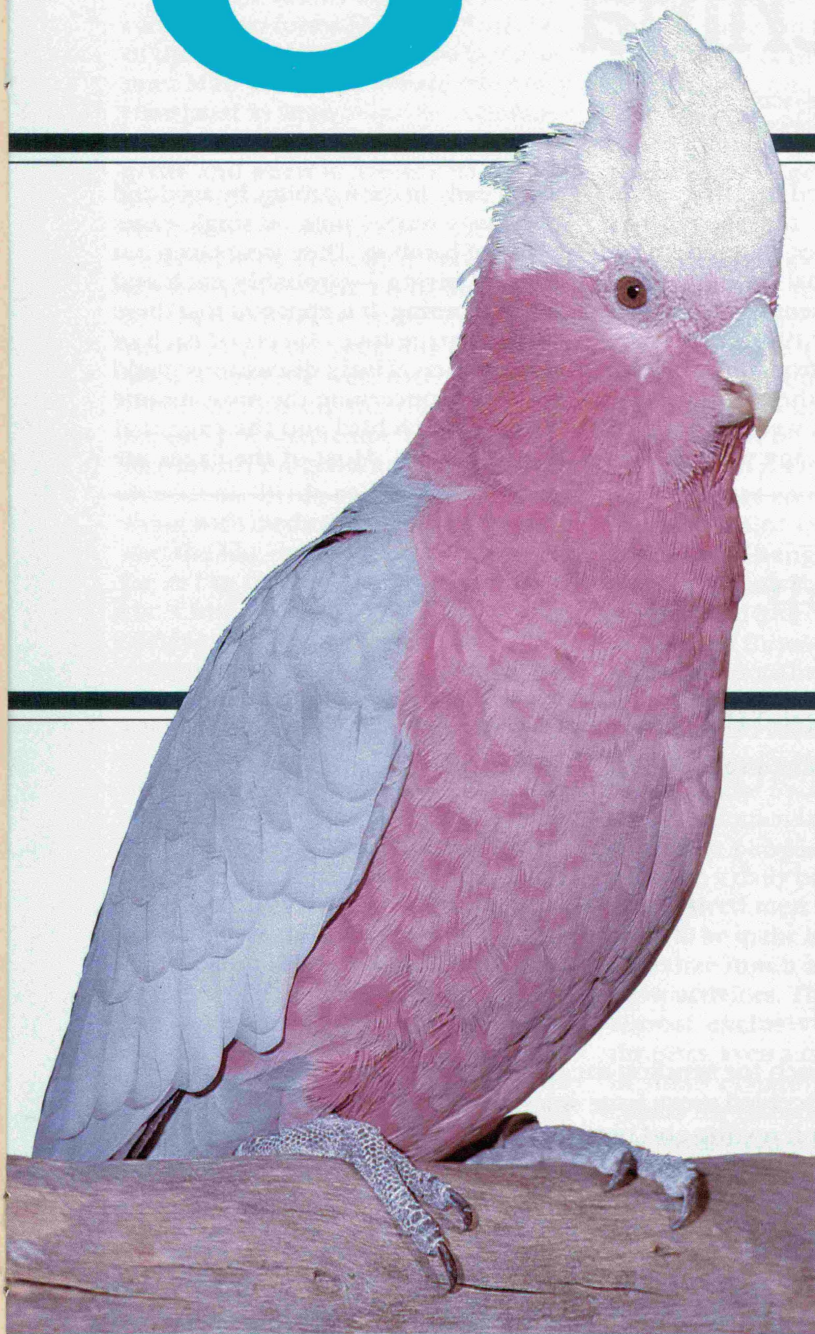
2. In Section 14.172.2, the Proposed Rule would require that shipping containers be free from protrusions which could injure birds. The requirements for feed and water containers and perches could create such protrusions.
3. The requirement in 14.172.3-5 requiring *easy* access for emergency removal with "secure" locking mechanisms will conversely allow the birds an avenue of escape, allow for potential inadvertent opening in transit and encourage theft. These animals are extremely intelligent and if there is a way out to be found, they will find it. This requirement will also thwart USDA security concerns.
4. In 14.172.6 the requirement of opening on all sides for ventilation disregards variations in climates and shipping times of year. This rule should be made appropriate to the climate and time of year for shipping.
5. There is no need to require birds such as parrots to be of the same species for containers. The species of parrot would have nothing to do with its compatibility. This is borne out by the fact that many species cross breed.
6. Litter should not be placed in shipping containers as it would retain moisture from droppings and/or fruit, now provided as the source for moisture in transit. In addition, litter will cause birds to slip, slide and thrash about unnecessarily. Wire bottoms in shipping are inherently dangerous to the birds as they will invariably become stuck and injured.
7. The requirement for instructions on care, feeding and medication presumes that anyone reading them will understand how to administer them, that such persons will not cause more injury to the birds by attempting to administer them and that such instructions could be condensed where they would even be read. It also assumes the availability of those items.
8. The requirement of a twenty-one (21) day holding period at the point of export disregards the fact that birds will be treated better in this country, in quarantine, by their importers than at an intermediary point between the place at which they are obtained and their final destination. It should be imperative to move them into responsible hands in this country, with due regard to foreign laws, as quickly as possible.

On behalf of AFA, thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Proposed Rule. We know that you share our concern in improving the conditions of transportation of avian species from the wild to the United States. We offer our support and assistance in promoting and promulgating responsible rules which will result in the improvement of the transportation of avian species with the ultimate goal of achieving humane conditions and as near one hundred percent survival during the transportation process as possible. We would be pleased to further participate in the process of improving these rules for the benefit of aviculture and avian species.

Very truly yours,
American Federation of Aviculture, Inc.
Gary P. Lilienthal
National Legal Counsel ●

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