

# Buttons 'n Bows: the Beginning

by Jan Zeh  
Houston, Texas

Photos by Jan Zeh



*Cap'n Flint on the gangplank,  
the number one bird in my life now.*

My first birds were button quail. Upon seeing a handful of the tiny babies running around in an aquarium, I was hooked and in love. A few weeks later I bought my first pair of birds.

As the young pair grew, I decided to build an aviary. Even the name sounded exciting. I read all I could find about button quail, cage birds in general, and aviaries. Still, I was an inexperienced novice and made many mistakes. Some proved to be fatal.

As the button quail were ground birds, I felt it was important to have more floor space than height in their new home; in other words, long, wide and short. Soon my husband was giving input as he warmed to the project, followed by a neighbor who couldn't be left out. I was relegated to the background as my simple, inexpensive project developed into a neighborhood undertaking costing three times what I expected. The finished project was the result of ideas from folks who never owned a bird in their life rather than

what I wanted and knew to be safe.

A portion of the sides was covered with 1/4" wire mesh (I wanted finer mesh). The floors were wooden (I knew they would be difficult to keep clean). It was also long, narrow and tall. It had legs to keep it off the ground and a good roof and was functional if not beautiful. The entire unit was little more than a big cage but it would house birds and was therefore an aviary. My aviary! I loved saying it. Amid picture taking and applause, Buttons and Bows were released to their new quarters.

The buttons seemed happy with the space and ground cover and ate their seeds contentedly. I fussed with them and over them and enjoyed caring for them. To my delight, the female soon laid a clutch of eggs beneath a pine bough. I was as excited as an expectant grandmother. Early one morning as I left the house with their seeds and supplies, I was greeted by little cheeps from across the patio. My grand-birds had arrived! There they were; four tiny balls of fluff running after mother and cheeping loudly. I immediately mailed handwritten announcements to friends to share my joy.

But the book said to remove the babies, put them under a light and care for them in special ways. I wanted desperately to do everything right so followed the instructions to the letter. The babies did not do well. They did not respond the way the book said they would. They did not eat what the book said they should. They weakened and cheeped continuously. I began to believe they were calling their mother; worse, I thought she was answering them. I decided to throw out the book and return them to her. Surely she could not do any worse with them than I was. But, one by one, the cheeps were silenced as each morning I found another dead.

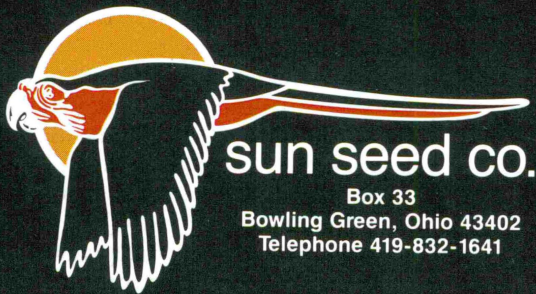
I hated it. I grieved and blamed myself and decided I would do everything differently the next time. Surely there would be a next time.



*The silent aviary.*

*Continued on page 6*





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Soon after the loss of the babies, I faced a new crisis. One day as I cleaned their home, the button quail escaped. They hopped from the aviary and took off in different directions. I was frantic. Both had disappeared in the underbrush and no help was available. After many anxious moments I caught the male in a net as he ran from the bamboo. The female had disappeared among the ferns but revealed her hiding place when she called to her mate. Following a complicated game of hide-and-seek which included scrambling around on my hands and knees, the female was, at last, safely in the net. When they were back in the aviary strutting around as though nothing had happened, I breathed a sigh of relief. Just another day in the life of a birdkeeper.

As the buttons occupied only the floor of the aviary, I decided there was a good deal of space going to waste. I filled that space with a pair of colorful zebra finch, a new stage in my ongoing affair with birds. Flying birds added an exciting new dimension to the aviary and to my learning about birdkeeping. I included perches, swings and branches along with a nesting cup and material. Maybe the latter was wishful thinking but it was something to look forward to. Now the place was really beginning to look like an aviary.

The zebras were clowns and a joy. They soon became accustomed to me and called loudly whenever I appeared. I loved the recognition and anticipated it each morning as I left the house with their feed. I even answered them.

All was going well. The zebras showed signs of nest building and the female button quail had deposited another clutch of eggs in the brush. I had never seen so many eggs at one time in one place. If every egg hatched I would have baby buttons galore! At night I would listen to the quail calling to one another and I felt warm and happy with my collection.

But something was wrong. Each morning the clutch of eggs appeared smaller. Surely it was only my imagination. To make matters worse, the female appeared to have abandoned them. So much for baby buttons. Again.

Soon the clutch had dwindled to a few eggs. It was a mystery as to what had happened to them. I knew she would eventually have another clutch and consoled myself with that.

One morning as I stepped out on the patio I was met with silence. This was most unusual as the zebras never failed to greet me. I called to them from across the patio and awaited their response. Silence.

For information about contacting any of these member clubs, please call that club's closest state coordinator. There is a state coordinator listing with phone numbers elsewhere in this publication.

I ran to the aviary fearing the worst. The button quail went about their business on the cage bottom, picking at seeds and scratching in the ground cover. The zebras had disappeared.

The aviary door was locked. There were no gaping spaces or holes. There was absolutely no way the birds could have escaped yet they had totally disappeared as if by magic. I couldn't believe it.

I did not have time to unravel the mystery as I had to leave for work. I turned over the crime solving to my son and left in puzzlement and grief. My son later phoned to announce that the mystery of the missing birds—along with the missing eggs—had, indeed, been solved. A snake had been sharing the aviary.

Although the wire mesh was only 1/4", the hungry young snake had slipped through. After feeding on the quail eggs he was too fat to leave. And why would he want to leave when he had it so good; with food, water and cover available he had all the comforts of home. After the eggs were gone he fed on the finch as they slept.

When cleaning the aviary the only area I did not disturb was the cover around the eggs. This must have been his hiding place and we were within inches of one another several times. I wondered what I would have done had we met face to face!

When I returned home from work my son displayed the young Texas rat snake that had stowed away in the aviary. Two bulges in his long body were evidence of his most recent meal—the zebras.

The button quail had been spared due to their size and seemed undisturbed by the visit of the unwelcomed guest. I missed the happy little finch and the empty swings and perches served as a reminder of the loss. Mostly, I missed their greeting each morning. The female quail continued to lay eggs that never hatched. Eventually the male died and the lonely female called for him for several days. I lay awake at night listening to her endless calling and grieved with her.

The aviary stands vacant now in the shade of the overhanging bamboo, occupied only by an occasional wasp nest. The ferns have spread to cover the door. My interest and love for birds is now channeled to parrots and an African grey shares our home as part of the family. I continue to learn with fewer mistakes. In the meantime, the little aviary is the memory of the joy—and pain—of my first birds. ●



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