

Trash or Treasure?

by Waine Tomlinson

It has been said that one man's trash is another's treasure. This old adage certainly rings true when it comes to one's preference for birds. For example, few birds suffer as much abuse both physical and verbal as the lowly English sparrow (*Passer domesticus*). Avid bird watchers call them trash birds and resent their very presence at feeders. Personally, I find them interesting, attractive and loaded with personality.

Actually this bird is not a sparrow at all, but a Weaver finch and a hand fed baby makes one of the most enchanting pets imaginable. I acquired mine when she was about five days old and she has been a constant source of pleasure and entertainment. I have hand reared several species of native birds, both soft and hard billed, including eastern bluebirds, robins, starlings and chimney swifts. Usually the orphaned or abandoned babies are brought to me by people who know or have heard of my interest in birds and animals. As most readers will probably know, it is illegal to keep most of our native birds in captivity and those that are protected are carefully rehabilitated and released back outside. The English sparrow is not protected, therefore, no permit is required for keeping them.

How I came to possess her is an interesting story and a result of the soft spot that I have for my old canary hens that are no longer able to lay eggs and rear

babies of their own. It really bothered me to see them work so hard building their nests, sitting so dutifully and not be able to produce their eggs. I found that they were delighted when I gave them eggs from sparrows' nests and they reared the chicks like the old pros they once were. An interesting point concerning the sparrows as adults is the fact that they are as wild as their brothers and sisters outside. I thought this rather strange considering they were hatched and raised in my bird-room. I have never felt guilty about robbing the wild birds of their eggs, as they are so numerous and prolific. Besides, I never would take more than one or two from a clutch ranging from five to seven. Also, not one wild bird has ever abandoned its nest as a result of my interference. On one particular spring day, I was at the sparrows' favorite nesting site and placing my hand inside a nest, which was higher than my head. I was surprised to feel a nest full of fat babies as it was still so early in the year. I have since learned that these birds sometimes begin nesting as early as March. I took one of the babies from the nest and on the spur of the moment decided to take it home with me.

She dearly loved mealworms and was raised on them almost exclusively. I cut them in half and fed them from the end of a toothpick. She spent her days in the supply room of a large beauty salon, where I am employed as a stylist and her nursery was a plastic cannister lined with tissues or paper towels and a seven-watt bulb taped securely inside. Fortunately, I have an understanding boss and all of my co-workers are accustomed to seeing me arrive at work with baby birds that must be fed at least every hour. I spoiled this baby from the very beginning and even now she bullies me shamelessly. She grew rapidly and the older she got, the more demanding she became.

Now that she is grown, she frequently backs up those demands with her sharp beak. She lives in a large flight cage in my living room and is allowed the freedom of the house very often. If I am lying on the sofa, she usually sits near my feet and heaven help me if I move them for she attacks toes and feet with lightning speed and I have never seen any bird that could get in so many pecks in so short a time. Before I knew anything about them, I used to scoff at tales of how aggressive and determined spar-

rows can be, especially when it comes to driving birds much larger than themselves away from desirable nest sites. After all, they are no larger than a canary and there is certainly nothing so formidable looking about such small beaks. I am now convinced that they are capable of driving away almost any bird they want to. Those little beaks are as sharp as needles and mine does not hesitate to use hers on the top of my head or my feet, if I make some move that she thinks I shouldn't have.

When she was a baby, we always referred to her as baby bird and Baby Bird she remains to this day. Another interesting thing about her is her total disinterest in water. All the sparrows raised by my canaries love to bathe and are in the water as quickly as it is placed in their cages, but not Baby Bird. However, she just loves to flutter and "bathe" in anyone's hair. Afterward, she preens her feathers just as meticulously as other birds do after a normal bath.

She is just as friendly with total strangers as she is with me, and if she is out of her cage when we have unexpected guests, she is likely to take advantage of their hair for a quickie bath. No one ever seems to mind though and many of them vie for her attention by sitting in those places she is known to favor.

She used to love to attack the bald spot on the very top of my head, delivering several sharp pecks before I could stop her, but I put a stop to that by wearing a stocking cap when she is loose. I must admit a woolen stocking cap looks and feels ridiculous in the middle of July, but it is effective as she refuses to light on my head when I am wearing it. When she first started to fly, she would frequently attack her own shadow on the ceiling. Strange to relate, her aggressive behavior is never directed toward other birds. Our little pet budgie often plays on top of her cage and once I put her inside with Baby Bird just to see if they might become friends. The little parakeet loved her and tried her best to be friendly, but Baby Bird wanted no part of her. When any other bird is flying loose in our living room, she will not even look in its direction.

All the books I have read say that wild sparrows rear their young on a diet of seed and insects. Apparently insects are not absolutely essential to the growth and development of the babies because those reared by the canaries were fed

Association of Avian Veterinarians MEETING NOTICE

First International Conference on
Zoological and Avian Medicine,
sponsored by the Association of
Avian Veterinarians and the
American Association of Zoo
Veterinarians.

September 6-11, 1987

Turtle Bay Hilton

Oahu, Hawaii

Contact Sylvia J. Kornelsen, 1625
South Birch, No. 403, Denver, CO
80222, phone (303) 756-8380, or
Suzanne D. Silberman, P.O. Box
49325, Atlanta, Georgia 30359,
phone (404) 321-0948.

exactly as baby canaries, i.e., egg food formula, seed and greens. It is interesting to note that even though Baby Bird was practically raised on meal worms, she will not eat them now. If offered one, she will carry it around for hours, play with it, maim it and even try to feed it to me or anyone else, but she will not eat it herself. Her staff of life is standard canary mix, but she also loves oranges, apples, ice cream, cooked noodles and various vegetables.

She doesn't like any change in her surroundings and if we even change the cover on the sofa, she will not light on it.

Recently, I bought her a beautiful and much larger cage, but she hated it and so I was obliged to return her to her old one. She is not always the little demon I have made her out to be. Sometimes she will snuggle for an hour or longer under a friend's T-shirt and she far prefers the company of people over birds, but everything must be on her own terms.

Another contrasting characteristic between her, as a hand reared specimen, and those raised by the canaries is the latter's great fondness for cuttle fish bone while she, unfortunately, will not touch it.

One of the funniest things she does and one that never fails to break me up is her "eagle impersonation." This open beaked threat, complete with spread wings, is often employed whenever she does not wish to be disturbed.

For some strange and unknown reason, she is terrified of anything red. Even cherries. For this reason, nobody wears red in our house and most of our friends are aware of this condition and obligingly do not wear it when visiting us. She is such a joy to have around that we don't mind humoring her at all.

She would never play with any toy we offered her but chose, instead, lids from soft drink bottles. With these, she entertains herself for long periods of time. She is a little beggar and has to sample a little of anything we happen to be eating. Even when she is confined to her cage, if we are having a snack in the living room, she flies from perch to perch constantly calling for her share.

She is a funny little bird and we love her dearly. For beauty, she certainly can't compare to the colorful parrot types, but then she doesn't scream either. I love the parrots, but those powerful beaks are intimidating to me and though she is perfectly capable of taking care of herself as far as other birds are concerned, I know that she can't really hurt me. My relationship with her is very special and she is, indeed, a treasure. ●

World Birds

Quarantine Station
7519 South Western Ave.
Los Angeles, California 90047



(213) 753-1862

Telex: 4995300 BURX LSA

SPECIALS

Goffin's Cockatoos

Blue Fronted Amazon Parrots

Tucuman Amazon Parrots

Moluccan Cockatoos • Umbrella Cockatoos

Red Lories • Rainbow Lories

Great Billed Parrots

Sales: Chuck Sanders, Robert Morton, Willie Smith

No retail sales

Call or send S.A.S.E. for prices.

THIS IS FOR THE BIRDS . . .



. . . YOUR BIRDS!

No matter what kind of birds you love—canaries, cockatiels, parakeets, finches, parrots—Boston Pet Supply has all the supplies you need to keep them healthy and happy.

Boston Pet Supply is your center for bird supplies—in fact, it is one of the largest in the country. We carry over 30 different bird supply manufacturers' product lines—quality supplies from Nekton, Hagen, Eight In One, Lyric, Kaytee, and others.

BIRD LOVER SPECIAL OFFER;

Boston Pet Supply has a very special Bird Supply Catalog reserved for you. Send for it today, and you'll be able to spend time browsing through page after page of quality products. Take advantage now of this opportunity to keep your birds happy and healthy.

It's easy: Fill in the coupon and send \$5.00 (refundable with your first order) to:

Boston Pet Supply Warehouse Outlet

70 Carnegie Row • Norwood, MA 02062 • (617) 769-3474

Yes, I want to keep my birds happy and healthy. Send me my Bird Supply Catalog today.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____

State: _____

Zip: _____

My \$5.00 is enclosed. Please allow 3-4 weeks for delivery.