

Aviaries or Musiaries

or

Revenge on the Rodent

by Sheldon Dingle
Norco, California

"Nooo! Not me!! No way! I've *never* had a mouse in my aviary." How many of you old-timers believe that B.S. when you overhear it at a bird meeting?

I confess openly to having had world-class experience with rats and mice. I've had aviaries in seven or eight different locations and have never been without resident mice. Rats, on the other hand, have only been a problem

once and I can tell some hair-raising tales on that subject but I'll reserve them for another time. This short article will consider just mice.

Speaking of mice, *Encyclopedia Americana* says, "This [Muridae] is the largest mammalian family in number of species, several hundred, at least, being recognized. It is also extremely widespread, almost cosmopolitan in distribution as far as wild forms are concerned and, in addition, several species, having become associated with man, are now found everywhere that man has penetrated."

Bad news, my friend. If you didn't already have wild mice in your area some witling of a neighbor brought domestic ones when he moved in. Believe me, gentle reader, there *are* mice hovering in wait of a fine meal intended for your birds.

Knowing that this everpresent threat exists, it only remains to figure out the best way to gain the upper hand. No one, not any one at all, has ever invented a complete and total mouse eradicator. There are, however, a few things an aviculturist can do to minimize the harm caused by the pesky little rodents.

Starting from zero, I suppose, the best thing to do is to build a mouse-proof aviary. There is no limit to the imaginative ways this might be done but one could run into financial and practical limitations. My first choice is to keep it simple and cheap (attributes in keeping with my own nature, I've been told). In a mild climate the Noegel cage or California breeder cage fills the bill if it is suspended by a means that the mouse cannot negotiate. We have a few Noegel cages that are on pipe legs. The mice can't shinny up the pipes as yet so the cages are rodent free. Such seeds as the birds spill out on the ground are eaten by an assortment of domestic fowls that strike terror into the heart of the boldest mouse. The average chicken, you know, will kill and eat a mouse that strays from safety.

If you prefer more standard-type aviaries it is almost an absolute necessity that they be built on a concrete slab if you are to thwart the mice. Mice can zip

through 1/2 by 1 inch wire without slowing down at all (except for the occasional pregnant mouse which has a little difficulty). If you build on a slab and use very small mesh wire and



screen the doors and windows you will inhibit the rodents. Most people do not like the 1/4 by 1/4 wire for several reasons the best of which is that you can hardly observe your birds.

So, even on concrete, if you have 1/2 by 1 inch or larger mesh the key to rodent control is seed control. The mice eat bird seed. If all the mouse finds in your aviaries is a stone cold clean swept concrete floor he will languish and become exceedingly puny in a matter of days. Such mice are no problem as they develop rickets, bad hearts, the shakes and are so feeble that they couldn't crack a sunflower seed if you handed it to them. It is only a matter of time. You must, of course, arrange so mice cannot get to your seed dishes and you must keep seed off the floor.

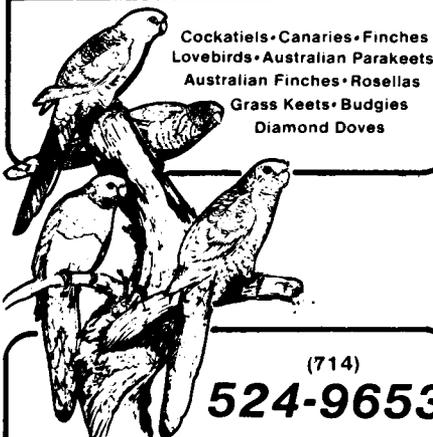
If you have the old standard aviaries on dirt floors you have a veritable mouse Mecca. They love to dig tunnels and nests in the dirt. They particularly enjoy using 2 by 4 boards on the ground as perfect overhead protectors for great underground expressways that permit the finest of traffic conditions for mobile mice. The time will come when the mice are eating more seed than your birds are. If you don't believe me buy a hundred mice, put them in appropriate mouse cages and feed them every day. Soon you'll have five hundred mice and see how many sacks of seed *they* eat weekly.

But take heart. Even in the old dirt floor aviaries mice can be tightly controlled if not totally eliminated. Arrange the seed dishes so mice can't get to them. You may use a platform on a pipe,

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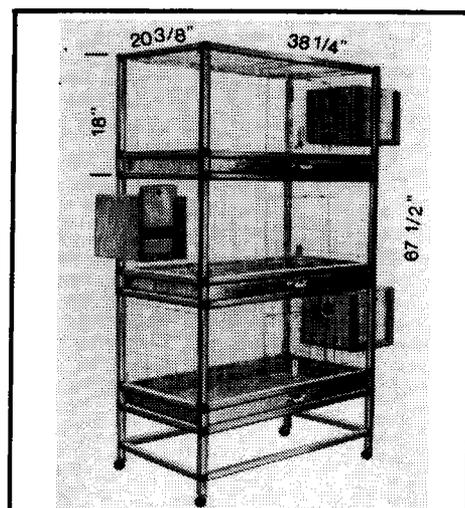
you may use sheet metal shields — you are limited only by your imagination and purse. The cheapest method I've found is to use five gallon plastic buckets. Put the bucket upside down in the center of the floor and put the seed dish atop the bucket. Spin their wheels as they might, the mice cannot climb the smooth sides of the bucket. By the same token, birds cannot climb the bucket either so be sure the birds can fly. Some Amazons and other assorted birds tend to climb more than fly so you must observe them carefully to be sure they can fly to and from the seed dish.

Once the seed dish is secure from the mice your work has just begun. Enough seed will fall to the ground to keep a few mice fat and happy so the ground must be kept clean. Still there will be the odd seed here and there (you'll never get them all up) that will attract mice so you might as well arrange to feed the fellows food of your own choosing. We use small mouse bait boxes and keep them supplied with various poisons. Many aviculturists are afraid to use poison for fear that a bird will get at it. Indeed, we lost a king parrot once to what I think was mouse poison. But if well constructed mouse boxes are used there is almost no danger whatever of poisoning a bird. In fact, we use bait boxes only in the aisle ways — never in the flights. If the mice have difficulty finding seed, and if they have no trouble at all finding tasty morsels of poison their population will decrease. Trust me.

For those of you who still can't bear to use poison, the same principles apply except instead of poison you use baited and other traps. There are three or four types of traps that seem to work well in aviaries. We use the wind-up mechanical cat. Years ago Frank Miser told me (I can't remember if he wrote an article on it or not) that when he set traps and also installed an ultrasonic device that bothered mice the catch more than doubled. He attributed the larger catch to the greater activity of the uncomfortable mice. The seed consumption at Frank's Magnolia Bird Farm also diminished by half once he got rid of the mice.

Books could be written on rodent control but we lack time and space here. The basic principles are: 1) clean up the whole area and eliminate nesting sites for mice, 2) build mouse-proof cages, 3) in other cages don't let mice get at bird seed either in the dish or on the ground, 4) poison and/or trap the little varmints until the resident population is gone.

Never let a mouse know you are discouraged. Keep your shoulder to the wheel, chin up, stiff upper lip and all that. Remember Churchill's famous words, "... We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender." With these words on your lips, shovel and broom in hand, get you out to the aviaries to continue the battle. Victory can be ours. ●



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