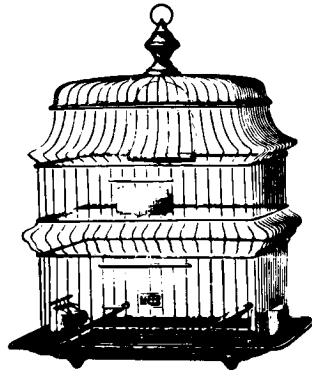


# Birds in Gilded Cages

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Do you remember hearing the phrase, "free as a bird"? I do. And for years I assumed it had true significance, that is until I really became interested in birds and wanted to possess some of my own. It was only after constructing cages and securing them with locks to keep out the neighborhood rascals, that I realized

I was a warden and these creatures were my captives. The lot of them, including parakeets, finches, doves and canaries were birds in gilded cages, surrendering some of their freedom and much of their responsibility to be fed, watered and put to bed by a human being.

Birds are kept for many reasons. Most often, however, they are kept for the beauty of their plumage or the quality of their song. Some, like the mynah and parrot, are coveted for their quickness in learning to imitate speech. We've kept and bred these creatures so long that it's little wonder we've finally reached a degree of specialization. We can now select canaries for either their color or performance as songsters. We can conjure up an even wider array of color in our parrots and other exotics. Yes, we can even work magic with pigeons. (They too have to be considered birds in gilded cages, though the gilding may possess a minimal lustre and the bars be more illusory than real.)

Why have we thrown ourselves so completely into our roles as bird keepers?

One reason must surely be our ever growing realization that we must be preservationists in a world of exploiters. Since time began, the feud between these alien groups has existed. The passenger pigeon affords a classic illustration, albeit one that has no happy ending. Here was a bird whose numbers literally blackened the sky during migration. (Audubon and Wilson recorded flights of more than two billion birds passing in a single flock, darkening the sun as it might appear during eclipse.) Whether or not their calculations were bonafide may be a matter for debate. One thing, however, is not debatable. This once beautiful bird no longer exists. (The last of the species died in 1914, a captive of the Cincinnati Zoo.)

Now the factors in the extinction of the passenger pigeon were mainly twofold. First, and perhaps most marked, was deforestation. Destruction of the forest land where these birds fed

and nested reduced their numbers quickly. Hunting, too, was the second element leading to the disappearance of a once prolific creature. It was probable that the very fact that these birds *were* prolific led hunters to doubt total annihilation could occur. But occur it did. And the slaughter continued. (People were no more far-sighted then than we are today.)

We can still pick up a book, a newspaper, or magazine and read the continuing saga of our threatened birds. Deforestation remains a key issue, diminishing the numbers in Africa and, more specifically, Latin America. Sadly, we can also read of the inhumane treatment meted out by the captors of these creatures, interested only in financial gain — heedless to the pain of their "merchandise." These are the exploiters.

On the other hand, we can also read about groups like PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) and Trans-species, only two of the numerous organizations concerned with the future and the welfare of endangered animals. We owe a great deal to the ornithologists and the literary naturalists, whose writings then, and now, keep us abreast of what is vital information for all bird lovers. These are the preservationists.

And where do we figure in all of this?

Am I an exploiter because I keep my birds in their gilded cages? Have I taken my role as "God" too seriously by separating two birds that might enjoy each other's companionship, mating two I think will achieve a desired result? Admittedly, if nature were a garden of Eden, these birds would probably be benefited by "free flight." But when the choice lies between annihilation in the wild, and life with a *responsible* bird person, I think the latter must be considered preferable.

As I walk out to my loft in the early morning, I can't help but think along these lines. The trees are filled with grosbeaks and jays, chattering and seemingly enjoying their ration of sunflower seeds and suet. Behind their "gilded cage" my doves and pigeons seem just as content, spreading their wings to catch a weak ray of sun, squabbling good-naturedly over the seed hoppers. It makes me feel "revived." And so I continue picking and choosing and moulding their futures, unable to imagine my bird cages without this focal point to life. I don't really *own* these creatures. But I do care for them. And that, I believe, justifies birds in gilded cages. ●

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