

What Responsibility Does the Breeder Owe to the Birds?

by Paul Gildersleeve
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When I became involved with birds and their breeding I thought it was a good way to make money without doing much work. I thought I could go to work and the birds would be breeding and making money for me, and all I had to do was feed them and everything would fall into place. I have since come to the realization that it is almost impossible for someone to make money breeding birds without doing so at the expense of the birds themselves.

We must be aware that the rain forests are being lost at the rate of 53 acres per minute to provide man with land that he can cultivate, even though past experiences remind us that the land on which the rain forest grows is not capable of supporting farming operations. Man continues to disrupt nature through destruction or pollution of the forests, rivers, streams, oceans and even the air we breathe. As the rain forests disappear we must ask: where will all the animals go? What will be their future? In light of this we must breed these birds in captivity. If we are not careful with the birds now and do not take full advantage of the breeding potential, we are throwing away a great gift. This is where the aviculturist can help with his acquired breeding knowledge. Every aviculturist must understand that the birds are held captive at his behest no matter how large the cage or how well-fed the birds will be. In most instances the birds were probably free just a few months ago or were just born and removed from the parents' nest for delivery to the markets of the world which may save their lives and possibly save some species from extinction. The keeping of these birds is an awesome responsibility.

So what do we owe to the birds that we house and breed? Birds or any animal kept in captivity under optimum conditions can expect to live two to three years or maybe even four times as long as it would in the wild. I believe that we owe it to the birds and to ourselves as aviculturists

to take proper care of the animals since we have more birds and breed more birds than any other group. The birds that arrive here and end up with a good aviculturist who genuinely cares about the welfare of the animal, is a lucky bird. If we care for the birds properly, and in such a manner that they will breed and produce young, we then will be able to breed the young with other unrelated young and start the development of the domesticated bird. Over a given period of time, it should be expected that the birds being bred will respond to us in a similar manner as the domestic dog does now. Unfortunately, some birds will not end up with a caring aviculturist but one that is in the business solely to make a profit. This bird will not fare well at all, and a great injustice is being done to the bird as well as the aviculturist. By this I mean, inadequate food, housing, medical attention, cleaning and other areas where the breeder can skimp so as to make more money for himself. If we know of a breeder who does not live up to proper standards it is up to us to express our concern and offer to help him take better care of the birds. I am sure there will be opposition, since I encounter it quite often, as I am quite vocal about how animals should be treated. If we can help fellow breeders, we can show that we are, indeed, a caring group of people who want and love birds for themselves.

If we are lucky enough to breed these birds, we then can sell them to people who want and are willing to take proper care of them. I usually ask questions such as how many birds have you had before? Is there anyone home during the day to care for the bird? Are there any other animals in the house and what kind? Do you have other birds? Are they hand fed or tame, imported birds? What type of cage will the bird have? Where will the bird be in the house? Do you know how to properly feed the bird? This is just a partial list of the questioning that takes place before anyone buys a bird that I have bred or bought from a fellow breeder. I believe that the interested, prospective owner must show that they are going to properly care for the bird. They are not required to know all the answers to the questions, in fact there was one person who purchased a cockatiel from me for his fiancée for a Christmas pres-

ent who did not know anything about a bird except that it had feathers. The time he spent reading and questioning me gave me great confidence that the bird would not just exist in its new home, but thrive, and I am happy to say that it has thrived. I am willing to work with people who show genuine interest in owning a bird as a pet and need questions answered. If you, and most breeders have, handfed a baby bird you know the amount of time and patience it takes to bring one up to the point that they are eating on their own. It is not my intention to, after long, arduous hours of handfeeding, turn this bird over to someone who wants a bird because he has the money and his friend has one just like it, and it would look nice in the cage in the corner. It is the breeder's responsibility to see that this bird is placed in the proper home and environment so it will thrive in his new home.

The breeder has the same responsibility when selling birds to a pet store. The store must live up to the breeder's expectations of cleanliness, housing, food, water and medical attention, proper lighting and ventilation. I am very selective as to where any of my baby birds go, especially if they are still being handfed. If a store loses one of the baby birds while still handfeeding, it would be inconceivable that they could explain why the baby died and they would not purchase any more babies from me. Here again, the breeder must work with the store to make sure that any of the birds that you deliver are going to receive appropriate care. I have, on at least one occasion, worked with a small, new pet store, specializing in dog and cat grooming, to set up a bird department. It is quite modest by most standards but it is exceptionally clean, has Vita-Lite over the bird, feeds greens and some fruit and vegetables on a daily basis and changes the water and seed every day. He only has finches, cockatiels, parakeets and canaries that are well looked after. I would feel confident should he want to go to larger birds. This is an exception rather than the rule for a pet store but he shows me that he is interested in the welfare of the animal, and I like that.

In New York, we are under the Wild Bird Law which says all birds not on the exempt list must be close ring banded. Some of the stores have brought in close banded Yellow

Napes that have come down with Newcastle VVND. The closed bands on these birds, according to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, were of sufficient size to be placed on the birds well after they were babies, and possibly would be able to be put on or taken off at this stage. They are now looking at further restrictions in the law to restrict the sizes of the bands for the birds being sold in New York state. I have seen some bands on birds, now that I am aware of the new ways being used to circumvent the law, that could be taken off the birds when they are full grown. I do not sell to stores that use these practices since they would be jeopardizing my birds. A couple of problems arise because of such practices. First, the bird is more apt to be caught on something that protrudes from his cage. Second, this bird may be a swimmer, illegal, and have a possibility of VVND. If you are boarding a bird in a store that has these large bands, you may be taking a chance of losing your bird if VVND is found.

You must always keep in mind that the birds sold in the local papers may fall into the same category as the store. This person may also sell birds with no bands. This is not legal unless he has the paper work required by New York state law. If you see a deal that is too good to be true, you can bet it probably is.

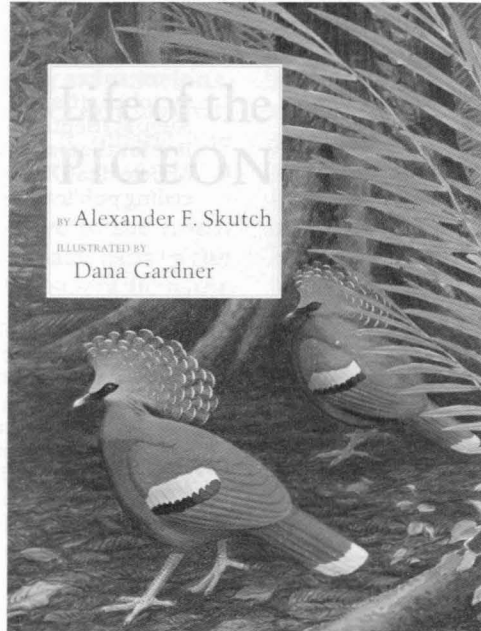
Banding a bird is extremely important to the bird breeder since he is able to trace the bird and find out if he has any other progeny from that pair of breeders. We have found that a lot of people do not band birds for many different reasons, one of them being you may not be hand feeding, and risk losing a finger while trying to get a bird out to band, then trying to replace it. Believe me when I say I know exactly what you mean. I have had to do the same thing and sometimes have given some blood in the process. It is worth it if that bird may ever become a breeder. It is vital to have a clean and true gene pool and to minimize inbreeding when we are unable to acquire new breeding stock.

These are my opinions and very strong ones to be sure. As breeders and holders of captive wildlife, we are responsible for their well-being. No matter what success we achieve as breeders in the eyes of the animals, we are nothing more than benevolent dictators. ●

EX LIBRIS: *Life of the Pigeon*

by Alexander F. Skutch
(illustrated by Dana Gardner)
130 pp., Cornell University Press, 1991

reviewed by Jack Clinton-Eitniear
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Once again, the prolific Costa Rican naturalist Alexander Skutch has produced a popular reading account on the life of a popular avian family. Having observed Central American pigeons/doves for several decades, he could certainly have written this book entirely from a New World perspective. His decision to include information on species throughout the world, however, increases the breadth and, therefore, usefulness of the book. "Life of a Pigeon" has a rather straight forward organization starting with a bit of history on the pigeon family, then progressing to "Eating and Drinking," "Daily Cycle," "Voice and Courtship", etc. The chapters on "Nests and Eggs", "Incubation" and "The Young and their Care" should interest the aviculturist. One should not, however, neglect to read the chapter on "Rate of Reproduction." Aviculturists often set their goals at 100% when it comes to pairs nesting, eggs hatching and young fledging. Information assimilated by Skutch into a table indicates that for nine species (Feral, Wood, White-crowned, Mourning, Eared, Gala

pagos, White-winged, Croaking Ground, and Ruddy Quail), only 54% of over 5,000 nests constructed were used for egg laying. Even more astounding is his data on the percentage of eggs that hatched. Of over 11,000 eggs laid, only 48% actually hatched!

The center of the book contains 24 color plates, including the rather well known Blue Ground Dove of the Fiji Islands. Throughout the book, the author placed 30 figures and four tables including "Incubation Schedules of Pigeons", "Schedule of Feeding for two Mourning Doves" and "Nesting Success of Pigeons."

For the pigeon and dove owner/breeder, this book makes an excellent companion to Derek Goodwin's "Pigeons and Doves of the World/Third Edition." The chapters on "Homing Pigeons" and "Pigeons and Man" should appeal to those with domesticated breeds. Finally, to the connoisseur/collector of fine books on birds, this book deserves a rightful place alongside Skutch's previous contributions, "Life of a Tanager," "Life of a Woodpecker," and "The Life of a Hummingbird!" ●