



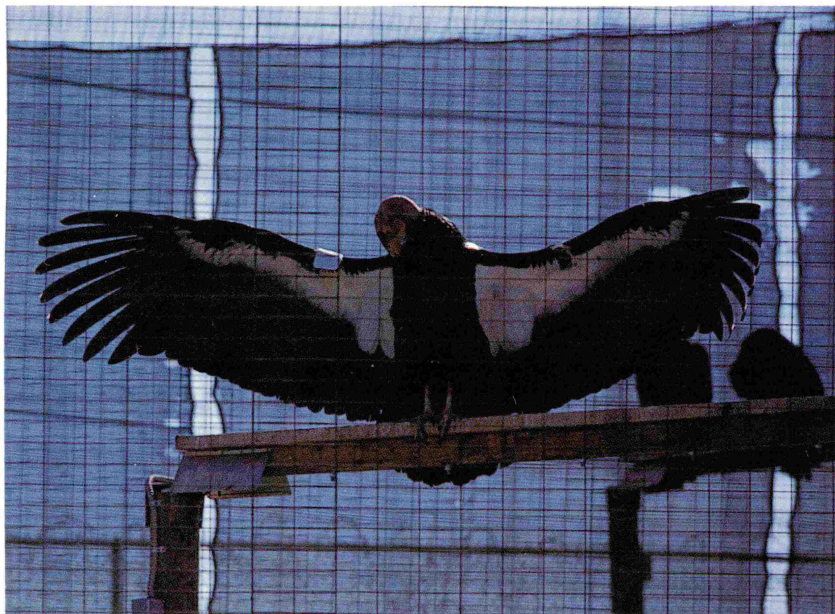
# The Role of Private Aviculture in Bird Reintroduction Programs

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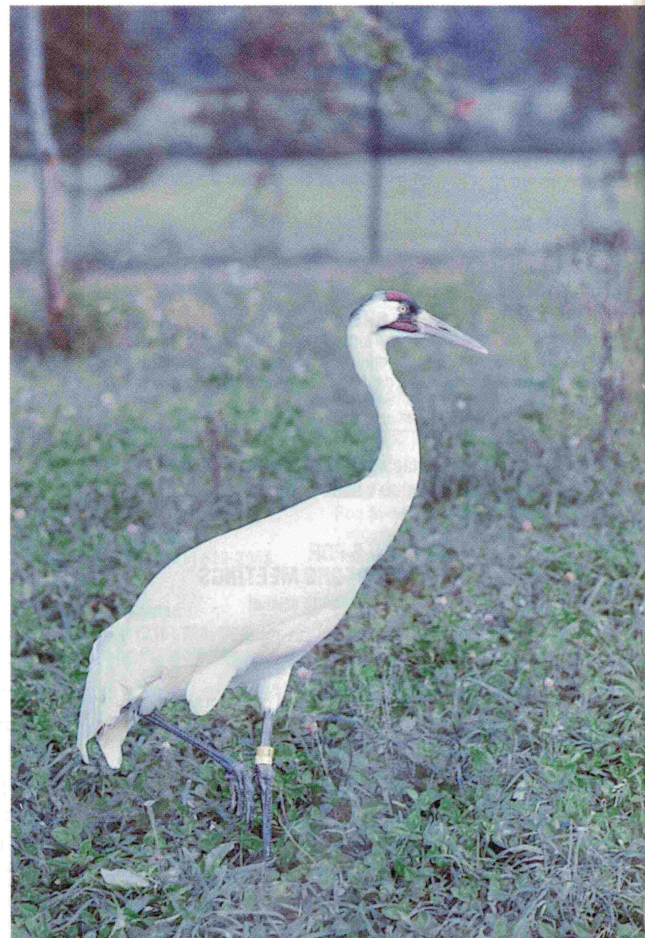
It is the rare opportunity that we as individuals, as members of private bird clubs or as representatives of conservation organizations can personally take part in an effort that can make the difference between the extinction or survival of a species. It is my intent in these few paragraphs to review the re-introduction of endangered species as a conservation strategy, and to explore the role of the avicultural community in furthering the goals of conservation.

Today, the conservation of wild animal populations includes such strategies as *translocation*, the movement of a wild animal or popu-

*Palm Cockatoo. Zoos and private aviculturists have joined consortiums to manage limited populations of Cuban Amazons, Palm Cockatoos and Bali Mynahs.*



*California Condor. Species conservation programs which include a reintroduction component such as for the Bali Mynah, Guam Rail, Thick-billed Parrot, Andean Condor, California Condor, San Clemente Island Loggerhead Shrike, Puerto Rican Parrot, Peregrine Falcon, Harris' Hawk, Bald Eagle, Vini Lories, Fijian Parrots, King Vultures, Trumpeter Swans and Whooping Cranes, all have borrowed liberally from the tradition of private aviculture.*



*Whooping Crane*



lation from one area to another; *introduction*, release of wild or captive animals into an area that was never inhabited by that species before; and *re-introduction*, the release of captive animals into a habitat that had or may still have that species. Each of these strategies has had criticism. Of the thousands of vertebrate species kept in zoos and private collections today, only a small proportion will ever be used for re-introduction, and this represents an even smaller proportion of the number of animals that will go extinct over the next 200 years. However, for many species of birds, captive propagation with the intent of eventual release may be the only hedge against extinction. The costs are high, and the effort can be monumental. Among the many considerations are the risk of introducing pathogens to an already perturbed habitat, the genetic heterogeneity of the released birds, the appropriate behavior of the released birds that will ensure survival, the genealogy of the released animals in relation to the wild population, the removal of the cause of the initial decline of the wild population, and the stability of the habitat into which animals are being released.

Critics of release programs claim that the cost of such programs would be better spent on protecting habitat to prevent future extinctions. Fair enough. But often times the resources generated for such habitat protection are raised from a public whose sensitivities were touched by a release program that featured a real animal, and not an abstraction of "vegetation community" or "ecological habitat" that often can be difficult for a non-scientist to comprehend. This is especially true in developing countries where the local community is often more receptive to the concept of species conservation. Overlooked are the benefits of mega-vertebrate releases into their native endangered habitats. Since, the large animal species are usually the first to suffer from habitat loss, the release of these species and the subsequent protection of their habitat is actually preserving not only just the species released — but all the organisms found in that habitat as well.

Some conservationists are supporting the concept of "mega-populations" of animals — captive and wild populations that are managed as one,

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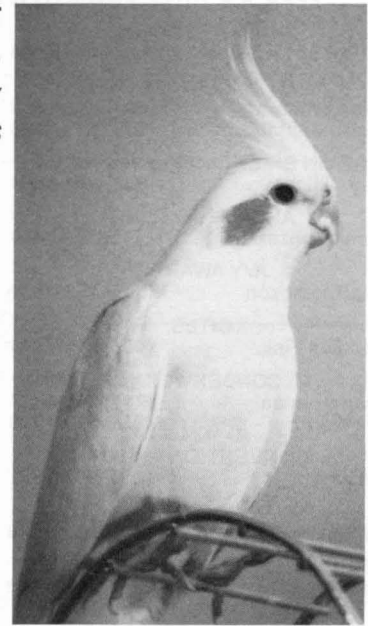
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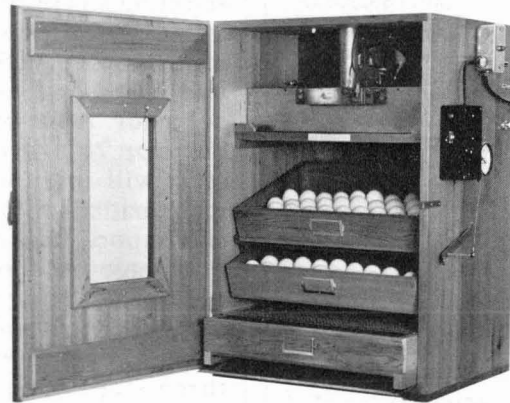


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with regular exchanges of individuals helping to support the genetic integrity of the world population. This strategy will require a well managed capture and release program, an ongoing genetic evaluation, veterinary input, and a permanent team of field biologists.

The IUCN-Species Survival Commission Re-Introduction Specialist Group has developed a five-point checklist for evaluating the efficacy of releasing captive animals into the wild:

- (1) Feasibility
- (2) Planning and Preparation
- (3) Decision whether to proceed with re-introduction
- (4) Release and Monitoring
- (5) Assessment

*Feasibility* takes into account the existence and condition of the captive breeding population, the current and historical threats to the wild population, and the existence of suitable habitat. It is also wise at this point to seek and confirm the collaboration of the national, provincial and local conservation authorities. This is true in the U.S. as well as foreign countries. Without the approval and cooperation of the bureaucratic infrastructure with whom one must work, the program is doomed. If a reintroduction program is deemed feasible, then one must *plan and prepare* by selecting an appropriate release site, training local personnel, and selecting the most qualified captive individuals based on health, genetics and behavior. After planning, the final *decision to proceed* is made. This step will include such logistical machinations as permits for export and import, transportation, cartage, brokerage and interim animal facilities needed along the way. The success of *pre- and post-release monitoring* will largely depend upon the first three steps. The condition of the birds, the selection of the release site, and the training of the personnel are key to this point. Finally, *assessment* will provide the field crew, the captive breeding personnel, the geneticists, the veterinarians and the biopoliticians with the information needed to fine-tune the program for continued success (or avoidance of future failure). Failure to properly assess the various steps of the reintroduction program not only makes it impossible to judge the success of a release strategy, but is also a criminal waste of information which could be useful for future projects.

The science of reintroduction is in its infancy, and if it is to develop more successful and cheaper techniques, published information about both successes and failures is essential.

What is private aviculture's future role in conservation through reintroduction? We are constantly being told by the AFA and other industry spokespersons that "Aviculture is Conservation." Does this only mean that someday the pet trade will depend entirely on birds produced through private enterprise? Theoretically, this captive production will satisfy the growing needs of the pet industry, conserving the wild population. The recently formed Cooperative Working Group on Bird Trade (CWGBT) hopes to make this a reality in five years. In addition, it should be re-stated that many of the husbandry techniques used in zoos and in the private sector for the captive propagation of endangered bird species, whether destined for release or not, were developed over the last century — often by the backyard breeder. No other group of private animal enterprise has contributed so much to the state of the art of animal keeping as the aviculturist. These same techniques are currently being used by zoos and private propagators to produce candidates for release programs around the world as well as in our own country. Species conservation programs which include a reintroduction component such as for the Bali Mynah, Guam Rail, Thick-billed Parrot, Andean Condor, California Condor, San Clemente Island Loggerhead Shrike, Puerto Rican Parrot, Peregrine Falcon, Harris' Hawk, Bald Eagle, *Vini* Lories, Fijian Parrots, King Vultures, Trumpeter Swans and Whooping Cranes, all have borrowed liberally from the tradition of private aviculture.

But I think aviculture can do more. How much of the above praise does the private aviculturist deserve other than that which was done for personal pleasure or profit? It has come time for the private aviculturist to become an active player in the world conservation community. It will not be enough to merely breed birds for fun and profit. All of us, from private breeder to zoological institution to governmental agency, will be participants in the effort to save disappearing species. This will require that we all prioritize our resources (e.g., space, time, finances) to include the participation in not-for-profit activi-

ties. How many aviculturists have participated in a regional or international studbook? How many have joined the consortiums formed to manage the limited populations of Cuban Amazons, Palm Cockatoos, and Bali Mynahs? The world's zoos do not have the resources or the space necessary to manage all of the world's aviculturally feasible endangered species. Where will zoos turn? We will have to turn to you, the private sector. It will no longer be acceptable to shrug your shoulders and turn palms up when asked to participate in a plan to save thick-billed parrots by housing and breeding two pairs of birds selected for you by the species coordinator of the consortium. Such participation may soon become a requirement in order to receive the future designation of "breeder" as mandated by pending legislation.

The role of aviculture in developing captive husbandry protocols can not be overlooked. Now the zoos and conservation organizations are taking the required steps to establish cooperative conservation programs with other countries, it will become even more crucial to find new and willing partners in the private sector. The expectation is not that each one of you in the private sector will enter into contracts with foreign governments and begin releasing offspring of your Red Siskins. But through your cooperation with national and international organizations each of you can play a part in these reintroduction programs. Take the time to learn about the various programs. Insist that your AFA develop a liaison with the AAZPA and the IUCN. Seek out those conservation programs which will offer you an opportunity to interface with field efforts. Follow the protocols developed for keeping consortium animals (reporting, record-keeping, banding, pairing, and rearing of offspring). At the moment there are but a handful of private aviculturists who are taking part in any of the conservation/release programs now in place. Consider your own operation and how much of your resources could be made available for the good of the species. There is no satisfaction greater than the knowledge that your avian offspring, or your technology, or your personal or institutional resources have contributed to the re-establishment of a population of endangered species somewhere in the world. ●

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