

A.F.A. Visits A Member's Aviaries

BERNIE TEUNISSEN

by Sharon F. Clause
Photography by Stephen R. Clause
Poway, CA



Bernie Teunissen.



Waterfowl have plenty of room to stretch out or rest in the shade on a hot summer's day.

Located in Riverside County, California, approximately 100 miles due East of Los Angeles is a four acre bird ranch. The lush vegetation shielding the aviary complexes from passersby and the summer heat reflects the permanence of the ranch. Wide, raked, earthen paths thread among the spacious bird pens painted to blend with the foliage. The immediate impression is one of peacefulness and care.

This is "Backache Ranch Bird Park", the culmination of forty years of aviculture as practiced by Bernie Teunissen.

Bernie's practice of aviculture combines hard work, good animal husbandry, and generosity of spirit.

A former dairyman, Bernie has been used to a lifetime of long hours and hard work. He has spent a lifetime of being up from dawn to dusk — and beyond. Retired to his bird park, he put in those same long hours caring for his extensive collection of exotic cage birds and game fowl, deer, cats and dogs, and even a gibbon ape named Tommy! His obvious pride in his ranch reflects the philosophy that one has to put his back into life to get something back from life!

As he showed us his collection, Bernie revealed his knowledge of aviculture in the care he puts into his aviaries. Each pen is clean, airy, and huge! They range in size from 4' x 16' to 28' x 16'. Many of the aviaries are planted; all are landscaped with trees and shrubs to blend into the natural surroundings. The pens have dirt floors kept immaculately groomed, as are the paths and boulevards between the pens.

A view of Teunissen space along side a double row of aviaries.



From years of experience and out of necessity, Bernie has developed his hassle-free system of bird keeping. His feeding system is simple — finch and parakeet seed, wheatberry bread or other breads free of preservatives, sunflower seed, grit, and fresh water. He feeds neither greens nor fruit because he has not found them necessary. He feels the birds thrive on this feeding program as evidenced by good fertility among his birds.

Bernie believes in providing a healthy environment and then allowing the birds to function without human interference whenever possible. He introduces a flock into a pen all at once and then lets it



An island aviary on the spacious grounds of "Backache Acres".

develop into a breeding colony. He tries never to peek into nestboxes (as if he had the time!) or otherwise disturb nesting fowl. His sole interference occurs when baby lovebirds fledge. Because the adults may literally harrass the young to death, Bernie places the fledglings in overturned wire mesh cages in each pen as necessary. The bars are far enough apart to allow the parents to feed their babies through them and close enough together to prohibit the adults from attacking the young.

When cockatiels fledge, he marks one wing of each bird with a water-soluble magic marker. Thus he can not only identify the young, but depending on which wing is marked and what color is used, he can tell when the baby fledged.

Bernie's generosity of spirit is reflected in his commitment to the advancement of aviculture. He and Helen host various avicultural societies annually, as well as inviting educational groups to tour his ranch and view his collection. For example, the African Lovebird Society, of which he is Vice-president, has visited him several times. Bernie belongs to several other societies and is currently the president of the Valley of Paradise Bird Club, as well as a staunch supporter of AFA for years.

Following our tour, Bernie relaxed in his study/museum containing memorabilia from his fifty-plus years in California, and the thirty-five years of his marriage to Helen. He spoke of his philosophy as an aviculturist. He feels that he is a caretaker, a guardian of the life he maintains in his aviaries. He sees his role as one of providing to the best of his considerable ability an environment conducive to the propagation of the

multitude of birds he keeps. He has been so successful, that this year, Bernie Teunissen was awarded the coveted Silver Avy Award for the continuous breeding of a difficult species; Bernie has successfully bred the scarlet-chested parakeet in colonies! It is this kind of success combined with his willingness to help budding and established aviculturists which makes Bernie Teunissen the widely known and respected aviculturist he is.

As AFA concluded its visit with Bernie and Helen, we were struck by his gentle and contented spirit. He paused frequently as he escorted us to the gate to pat an animal here, a bird there, or to point out a rare or favorite shrub. His affection for all of his charges was apparent. I realized that Bernie Teunissen is a man who has worked the land and seen it prosper until he has become one with it, attuned to his animals and their needs.

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