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## SPOTLIGHT ON AVICULTURE

# RICK JORDAN

This edition of the *Watchbird* features a spotlight on professional aviculturist and world-renowned authority on parrots, Rick Jordan. He is the author of the online courses, AFA's Fundamentals of Aviculture; *A Guide to Macaws as Pet and Aviary Birds*; *Parrot Incubation Procedures*; *African Parrots* (with Jean Pattison); and *Parrots: Hand-feeding and Nursery Management* (with Howard Voren). He appears in Expert Companion Bird Care Series II, created by avian veterinarians Scott Echols and Brian Speer. He has written more than 150 articles that have been published nationally and internationally. Jordan is a much sought-after speaker and lecturer. He has bred more than 100 species of birds. Since establishing Hill Country Aviaries in 1996, he has banded more than 10,000 parrot chicks. He is a tireless advocate for avicultural education.

By Concetta Ferragamo

### Dedication to Aviculture as an Industry

In addition to being the contracted AFA Business Office manager, Rick Jordan volunteers as the AFA CITES Committee chairman, Conservation and Research Committee chairman and sits on the AFA Membership Committee. His devotion to aviculture seems tireless and he often volunteers to assist in the preparation of AFA handouts or legislative matters and bylaw changes.

Jordan wrote the majority of the FOA courses, which were made possible by a grant from Pet Care Trust and the Schubot Exotic Bird Health Center, College of Veterinary Medicine at Texas A&M University. Other authors and contributors of the FOA courses include Barbara Heidenreich, Robin Shewokis, Jason Crean, Dr. Donald Brightsmith, Juan Cornejo, Jeannie Meisle, Lyrae Perry, Matt Schmit, Linda Seger, and more. The Fundamentals of Aviculture (FOA) are online courses that are offered exclusively through AFA and provide veterinarians and vet techs with Continuing Educational Units (CEU's). These educational courses are a great resource and highly recommended for anyone interested in birds, from the novice to the professional. Jordan and team are currently in the planning stages of FOA III which is expected to be released in 2014.

### Childhood Memories Ignite Avian Interest

Jordan's curiosity about avian breeding biology started in his youth. He reminisced about incubating eggs from doves, robins, pigeons and other species that he studied as a youngster. Through constant study of wild birds Jordan was able to witness developmental stages of the embryos—wild birds often discard undesirable eggs from their nesting sites.

Jordan said, "I studied and learned about eggs, birds, incubation, and biology. I used to watch with fascination the barn



swallows in my grandfather's barn as they built their nests of manure, mud and sometimes the string used to bind the hay bales together."

As with most aviculturists, Jordan's parrot passion began with an American Budgie. Jordan said, "I always loved my grandmother's parakeet. At about age 10, my uncle bought me a parakeet and cage set-up and my interest in caged birds probably blossomed from that little 'keet.'"

As Jordan grew up, so did his interest in avian biology. In 1978 Jordan joined the Air force. He secured a bank loan and bought a wild-caught Blue and Gold Macaw (Carlos) as a pet. "My macaw arrived from the jungles with cut wings, a short tail and a ferocious attitude. I was petrified of that bird," he said.

He decided to get creative and built a giant jungle gym in the only spare bedroom of the apartment that he rented. At the time Jordan, was living off-base in Biloxi, Miss. His neighbors used to see him in uniform in the mornings as he headed off to work. They often inquired, "Do you have a pet duck or something. We hear a lot of honking going on from your apartment," Jordan said.

### Working His Way Up

In 1984, Jordan was discharged from the Air Force and



moved to Florida to find a job.

"Armed with my bachelor's degree from Southern Illinois University, I interviewed for many technical and engineering jobs. Who knew a great grade-point average and no experience would be such a detriment to job placement? As I scoured the want-ads for job openings in the area, I stumbled across an ad from the Avicultural Breeding and Research Center in Loxahatchee, Fla. The ad simply said: 'Come and work on our parrot farm.'"

Jordan went on to tell about how he was interviewed and hired as a weekend "crap cleaner" in the aviaries for the Schubot's. He was already working a part-time weekend job for Tom Ireland, a former AFA President and aviculturist in the local area. Between his two aviculture jobs, Jordan quickly learned how to feed aviary birds, clean baby buckets, wipe down counters and prepare soft-foods and vegetables for a large commercial facility. It wasn't long before Dick Schubot realized that Jordan was not content with his position and was called into his office for an interview for a management position.

Jordan was honest and told Mr. Schubot that he would seek a job with a future. He knew that Mr. Schubot was "in tight with the McDonald's corporation" and inquired about a referral for a management position with them. Mr. Schubot declined that referral; instead he offered Jordan a management position with his own parrot breeding facility. After accepting the management job at ABRC, Jordan resigned from his job with Tom Ireland and

relocated onto the property at the ABRC facility. Jordan's new vocation led to being on call 24/7 which is about the same pace that he leads today. It was from that point on that Jordan started his life career of aviculture full-time which led to his immersion into improving incubation techniques, and his first book on incubating parrot eggs.

### One Good Thing Leads to the Next

After almost four years, Jordan left ABRC and took a position working at Loro Parque, Canary Islands, Spain, which is home to one of the world's largest parrot collections. Jordan managed the incubation and nursery facilities at Loro Parque. He said it was "mind boggling" to work with all those different species. The only thing he didn't like was the isolation from his family, and the almost \$2000 plane ride to go home for a visit. After a year, he moved back to the States and began work with Kathleen Szabo at Luv Them Birds in Miami, Florida. Kathleen's enthusiasm and passion for birds has had a lifelong influence on Jordan. Kathleen allowed Jordan to keep his own personal birds while he worked as the collection manager of her facility. Jordan revealed many stories about his tenure with Kathleen all of which were entertaining, and heartfelt.

In 1992, Hurricane Andrew tore straight through Kathleen's farm. Jordan explained that even after the rebuild, "It just was not the same anymore." Jordan said leaving was extremely hard, but

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he had to move on with his life. With a rental truck and a slew of bird carriers and his Great Dane, Jordan returned to his home state of Pennsylvania to pursue a new path with his business partner, Mark Moore. They operated out of the house in Pennsylvania for a little more than a year before the opportunity to relocate to Dripping Springs, Texas was presented. In 1996, Jordan and Mark relocated and joined forces with Dr. Darrel K. Styles, taking over the old Luther Dean Parrot Farm.

### An Impression That Lasts a Lifetime

Jordan said many experiences about special people in his life. When asked about mentors, he said memories of Mr. Robert J. Berry. “Only a few dared to call him Bob,” said Jordan. Mr. Berry was a breeding consultant that Jordan met while working at ABRC. Perhaps Mr. Berry saw potential in Jordan and “Mr. Berry shared a lifetime of avicultural experiences” with Jordan. Mr. Berry was patient with Jordan and put up with Jordan’s anecdotal observations and clumsy ways of moving about a bird collection. “He taught me the way to look at birds and their behaviors in a scientific way. I will be forever in his debt and he was surely my mentor. He made the biggest impression on me with regard to understanding birds and eventually becoming successful with incubation, hand-rearing, and husbandry of parrots,” Jordan said.

### Hard Work and Passion

Jordan has benefitted immeasurably from a lifetime of opportunities working with an “estimated 200 plus species of parrots and other birds.”

I asked him what species were the highlight of his career. After some reflection, he said, “Fairy Lorikeets, Stella’s Lorikeets, Palm Cockatoos, Spix’s Macaws, Pesquet’s parrots, Tahitian Lories, Red-tailed Amazons, Red-spectacled Amazons, Gang-Gang cockatoos, Black cockatoos, Hyacinth macaws, Buffon’s macaws, Blue-headed macaws, Golden Conures, Hawk-headed parrots (both species), Purple-bellied Parrots, White-headed Pionus Parrots, Short-tailed Parrots, St. Vincent’s Amazons.”

The list went on and on!

Today in Texas, Jordan and Mark Moore have an amazing bird farm, Hill Country Aviaries LLC, that spreads over 16 acres. Their personal collection consists mostly of “more commonly seen species such as conures, macaws, cockatoos, amazons, mutations of many species, and the occasional pheasant, goose, duck, chicken, pigeon or touraco.”

When asked what he felt were the most prestigious and/or important accomplishments, Jordan said it must be the breeding of “Gang-gang Cockatoos, blue mutation Yellow-naped Amazons, Blue-throated Conures, Palm Cockatoos, and one of our U.S. First breeding awards, the Blue-checked Amazon at Hill Country Aviaries.

“We may have done them all by accident, but maybe that is



The habitat of the Lear's Macaw in Brazil is a mountainous arena. The nesting cavities are shared by Blue-fronted amazons and other parrots. Above center, a pair of Lear's macaws circles the cliff top preparing to land.

what aviculture really is—isn't it? You try to be intuitive about the birds you keep. You attempt to breed them by the same methods that others have used successfully, then you give that up and



Top, Hill Country Aviaries recently added a weaning facility to its nursery. Center, Mark Moore (left) and Rick Jordan (right), with longtime friend Kathleen Szabo. Above, A captive Lear's Macaw at the Sao Paulo Zoo, Brazil.

just do what you feel is right for them. The hatching of the first Gang-gang Cockatoo at Hill Country Aviaries was such a big deal to all of us.”

### Cherished Memory

Jordan talked about one of his more memorable expeditions in Brazil. As directed, he climbed a tree approximately an hour before dawn to wait for the sun and do a count of the Lear’s macaws on a nearby cliff face. The other biologists on the team went to a different area to count birds.

“The sun had not come up yet, and it was damned dark. I had never been to this area before and I could not see any mountain, only darkness. As the first rays of sunlight crested the horizon, I could make out the outline of a huge façade forty or fifty feet from me. As the light increased I realized it was the face of a mountain and I wasn’t far from it. I heard stirrings and honks, little chattering noises from other song birds in the area, and all of a sudden I could make out this giant mountain face full of cave entrance holes.”

“On the edges of many of the cave ledges sat one or two Lear’s Macaws waiting for enough light to make flight safely. I watched and counted but the goose bumps on my arms and up my spine made it hard to concentrate. I was privy to seeing an endangered species starting its day in its own habitat. Slowly, and one pair at a time the birds took flight, screaming and circling the mountain face. The small groups numbered six to 10 and each group circled and landed on the very top of the mountain. Chattering to each other, they took off in their ‘cliques’ to search for food. It was an incredible experience, one I will surely never forget. And, by the way, I totally lost count, so much for my degree in conservation biology!”

Experiences such as these keep Jordan focused on doing all that can possibly be done to help protect birds from extinction. The acronym “CITES” stands for Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species. The purpose of the AFA CITES Committee is to monitor or participate in the CITES meetings and to assist the USFWS when information about the trade in parrots or their keeping and breeding is needed. Jordan is the AFA CITES Committee Chair. For more information on AFA CITES, visit the AFA website.

### Reputation

Being a world-renowned speaker in high demand will take you on many adventures abroad. When I interviewed Jordan for this article eight months ago I quickly became captivated with his exciting and over-the-top experiences. All things bizarre seem to happen to him, and in all honesty, I have enough comedic material for an award-winning sitcom. Since there is an abundance of great material I have selected only a few of my favorite adventures for this interview.

Jordan had been invited to speak at a bird club in New Zealand. When he arrived his luggage had been claimed by someone who had the exact same suitcase and so he was left with no speaking material or wearable clothing. The “look-alike” suitcase that he opened (thinking it was his) was full of dresses, which he



said he could not wear. After a day had passed, the woman realized her mistake and the luggage error was then resolved.

Jordan's presentation was well received and delighted the members. Afterward, Jordan was approached by Don Merton who asked if he would spend a few days on Maud Island with the biologists to give input on the Kakapo feeding methods. Jordan eagerly accepted.

Not being fond of boats, Jordan climbed into a speed boat the next morning with a New Zealand wildlife officer and off they raced to Maud Island. Luckily, Jordan was distracted as he witnessed "some of the most beautiful islands I'd ever seen." The officer was pressed for time so he dropped Jordan off on the dock with a bag of groceries and instructions to seek the biologist in the station on the hill. He



Top left, the staff at Hill Country Aviaries. Above, Rick Jordan hand feeds a baby Military Macaw. Above left, a friendly White-bellied Caique enjoys lunch.



told Jordan to go to the station and simply introduce himself as being sent there to stay for three days under the direction of Don Merton. After unloading Jordan at the dock, the officer waved good bye, and sped away. Jordan grabbed his luggage and the groceries and hiked to the biologist's station. Much to Jordan's surprise, he was totally alone on the island; both the caretaker and the resident biologist were off on official busi-

ness. Jordan tells his story:

"Making the best of it, I sat on the porch of the field station and watched kingfishers and other beautiful birds frolic in the trees. Suddenly, out of the tall grasses came a Takahe hen and her chicks. She walked right over to me and began pulling on my shoe laces. It was amazing to say the least. Finally a biologist arrived by



"Hoke," the first captive-reared Kakapo, is in her enclosure on Maud Island, New Zealand.

boat the next afternoon, full of apologies and explained the mix-up and reasons for my isolation. He took me on a five mile hike and showed me how the telemetry tracking and collars worked that were being used on the male Kakapo. That evening I sat in the station listening to the Kakapo booming on the mountain behind us. It was one of the most eerie sounds and feelings that I have ever experienced, or probably ever will."

At that time "Hoke" a captive-reared Kakapo lived in a very

large walled-off enclosure on Maud Island. Jordan was privileged to spend time with her and walk about her "world inside the wall." A friendly bird, she gifted Jordan with a nip on the ear that was hard enough to draw blood. Three days later the Kakapo adventure came to a close when the speedboat arrived to retrieve Jordan. He waved goodbye to his new biologist friends and the five Kakapo parrots then living on the island. Jordan was headed back to Paraparamu to visit with friends, Pauline and Des Colpman, who Jordan described as being two of the most wonderful people on earth—they really love their birds. Jordan also stated that he would miss the Colpman's forever; they have since passed away.

### In Closing

If ever there were an ambassador to aviculture, Rick Jordan would certainly be it. The AFA, pet owners, breeders, businesses and the avicultural community in general are lucky to have such a dedicated, educated, and generous man working for their rights to keep birds.

As he leads the neverending quest to monitor restrictive legislation and to educate lawmakers worldwide on the importance of captive breeding, Jordan remains down to earth and easy to talk to. Simply pick up the phone and call the AFA Business Office on any given day, and say hello to a man who has dedicated his life to birds and the people who keep them.

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