



Ringnecks and Rats

by Sheldon Dingle, Alhambra, California

History

Ring-necked Parakeets and Raunchy Rats were my specialty a few years ago. The story goes like this. During the late 1960s and early '70s, I served a five year avicultural apprenticeship with the great Dave West. My wife and I lived on his ranch near Hacienda Heights, California, while he lived at his home in nearby Montebello. Dave came to the ranch every day after taking care of his birds at home. At the ranch I was his factotum/general gopher and I helped in the daily care of his large collection. In return, was able to learn from the best while getting paid in birds to enhance my own collection.

The Ringnecks

Nowadays, when looking at Bastiaan's book, it is almost impossible to believe that while I was working for Dave West there were just three or four mutation colors in Ringnecks. I recall the blue, of course, the lutino, the "blue-green," and, eventually, the albino.

At that time there were just three "Mutation Masters" that I am aware of — Dave West (who received his blue Ringnecks from the Duke of Bedford, himself), Rae Anderson, and Gordon Hayes, the latter two gentlemen still breathing, if barely (just kidding, guys).

Dave was seriously dedicated to developing and promoting mutation parrots. We were working on the Ringnecks, of course, as well as Alexandrines and Peach-faced Lovebirds. The flagship species was the Indian Ringneck but, given time, Peach-faced lovebirds became very important also. It must be said the lovebird King was then and is still the venerable Lee Horton with his Chief-of-Staff, Roland Dubuc.

The point of this little history lesson is to establish that I was, indeed, involved with mutation Ringnecks in the old days — otherwise, the title of this story would not ring true. My job, though, was to follow the three Masters about, sweeping up after them as they met to discuss the various virtues of the mutations. Don't ask me any avicultural secrets, though, I didn't understand them then and don't now.

The Rats

Now, dear friends, comes the part I remember very well. I, myself, was the Rat Master. In order to visualize the circumstances, it is necessary to understand the construction of the main aviary complex at Dave West's bird ranch.

The complex was nothing more than four banks of flights arranged in a huge square like the walls of a fort. The backs of the flights were the outer walls (solid plywood) while the fronts opened on to a great quadrangle inside the fort. I don't recall precisely, but I believe there were about 12 flights to each side of the great square with each flight being four feet wide and generally eight feet long. At least one of the banks had flights twelve feet long. All the flights were eight feet high. The entrance into the "fort" was a door and hallway that otherwise would have been a flight.

Each flight was made of 2 X 2 wooden framing lined with 1 X 1 welded wire. There were solid plywood dividers between each flight (covered by the weld wire to prevent chewing). The top of the flights were covered with weld wire above which were 2 X 4 stringers supporting a plywood roof covered on top with asphalt roofing material.

In effect, we had 4 X 8 foot

flight cages (all four sides and the top) with plywood dividers between them. The floors were dirt.

Are you beginning to smell trouble?

This complex was built a couple of years before I arrived. It was not really an aviary complex at all. It was, in fact, the Ritz Carlton of all Rat Hotels.

The ground floor was indeed, ground. Rats LOVE ground. They constructed the most amazing series of connecting tunnels and nests. Their homes were rent-free. Every rat called his relatives to come to paradise — and they did.

Keep in mind, dear reader, that hanging on the wire wall of each flight was a large square tin "bowl" into which we place the daily mixture of chopped veggies sprinkled with vitamin powder. On wire racks also attached to the wire walls were the seed bowls containing the finest mixture of nutritious seeds money could buy. Each flight contained a water crock (also fortified with vitamins) changed daily.

Not a bird in the world ate better. Nor did a Rat.

Believe me, friends, Dave West raised the healthiest and largest rats on the continent. Every Rat could do 100 pushups. They had but to sally forth from their cozy holes, clamber up the very convenient wire and, voilà, breakfast is served. A nice selection of seeds for starters with a bite of lush veggies to top it off. Then suck down the invigorating cool water and head back to the old hole to make some more babies. Ahh, for the life of Dave's Rats.

Remember, now, that this Rat Ritz had a freeway system by which each Rat could travel anywhere it chose. Most of the travel was done thusly: The rat would leave its hole in the ground, clamber up the wire wall, slip through the wire ceiling mesh to run about on top of this wire highway. The stringers that supported the solid roof had gaps in them to aid air circulation and, as it turned out, to allow the rats free access to the entire complex.

Enough is Enough

Rats are a great pain in the ...er...neck. The following things happened regularly:

- The Rats ate more food than the birds did, more than doubling the cost of seed and goodies.

- While inspecting nest boxes, a startled rat would pop out onto my shoulder and shinny down the ol' leg while making it for the safety of the rathole — my heart was permanently damaged.

- The Rats ate the birds — including Dave's very first lutino peach-faced lovebird (they took the lutino from among a clutch of normals. It must have been the red eyes).

- The Rats heaped up mounds of dirt in the flights, the walkways, and every open space. One could not walk without without stumbling through the dirt.

- Rats stink.

When the deplorable situation reached the point of having the Rats sit up on their haunches waiting for the dollop of fresh veggies; when the

Rat looked you in the eye and gave you the finger if you caught him in a nest box; when your foot would often collapse a tunnel and cause a stumble; when the Rats overran the place by day as well as night — Dave finally decided to take action.

Attack, Attack, Attack

Electronic Devices

Dave mounted his own attack on the Rats. He was not a good warrior. First he bought a number of electronic devices to drive like stakes into the ground around the property. These things, we were told, would, when plugged in, emit some sort of ultra sound that the Rats would hate. They would leave the noise and the neighborhood. Not true. The Rats would come out and dance to the music. Indeed, they invited all their friends and relatives to the dances and they STAYED. The Rat population increased tenfold.

Flooding

Unwisely, Dave decided to

drown the Rats. I helped. Being in an agricultural area with irrigation, the water pressure was excellent. We got large one-inch hoses and stuffed them down the Rat holes. On with the blast of water. Mistake. It didn't take long to collapse the entire flooring of the aviary complex. The tunnels caved in and the entire dirt floor sunk about a foot. The gaps at the bottom of the flights left room for even an Alexandrine to duck out under the wall. We had to call in dump trucks of dirt and wheelbarrow the stuff into the complex. What a chore.

And while we were flooding, the Rats scampered up the wire and grinned at us while eating seed like popcorn. When we repacked a couple tons of dirt back onto the floor, the rats built brand new homes in the wonderful, upgraded dirt. The Rat Ritz renovated.

Poison

Things were not going well. As much as Dave disliked the idea of poison around his birds, he was des-



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perate. We laid in a ton or so of the stuff used at the time — warfarin, a poison designed to cause the Rats blood to thin and eventually the internal hemorrhaging would kill them. Not OUR Rats. The buggers were eating so well their cholesterol was up and their arteries were clogging. They couldn't have lasted much longer anyway. But the warfarin lowered their cholesterol, thinned their blood, cleared their arteries, and put them back into good health. That was 30 years ago and I'm sure some of the little SOBs are still alive.

Take a Break, Dave

Through all this, poor Dave was losing his birds and his mind while paying a fortune to feed the Rats. Frazzled is the word. Unravelling. After a hard but losing day at the ranch, he told me he was going to a movie on the way home to relax and get his mind off of Rats.

The next morning when he showed up he looked terrible. His hair was on end, his eyes were wide open in a "thousand yard stare," he was trembling and incoherent.

"Dave." says I. "What's wrong?"

He stuttered — and drooled a little.

"Come on, Dave. What happened? I thought you were going to relax at the movie."

"I, I jus' w' w' walked into the theatre and sat down. Didn't care what the movie was. Rats, Rats, Rats."

"Whatcha mean?"

"Rats, Rats, Rats. The movie was WILLARD!!"

Poor Dave. He never really recovered from that.

The Solution?

Dave was useless for a couple of weeks but when he finally regained a little balance we discussed a possible solution the the Rat problem. Shoot the son's a bitches.

I was an expert shot in the army, serving on numerous competitive shooting teams. I gained a number of first place awards in competi-

tion against civilians and other branches of the armed forces. I suggested to Dave that perhaps we could cut the Rat population dramatically by shooting them at night when there were hoards of them scrambling all over the wire.

In desperation, he agreed I could have a go at it. The next night I slipped silently up to the complex. It is very hard to describe in words the great rumble of thousands of Rats running across stretched aviary wire — a bit like a train passing in the distance.

I had a good flashlight and my trusty .38 caliber revolver. When I opened the door to the complex the Rat rumble ceased — dead silence while they listened for more strange noises. Soon they resumed the running and rumble.

The easiest place to nail a Rat, I assumed, would be inside a flight where they hold the nightly feasts. The really huge rats had trouble squeezing through the 1 X 1 wire (the fat pregnant ones couldn't make it at all), so I figured I'd nail them when they slowed down for the squeeze.

All went according to plan. I slipped open a door and poked my head, flashlight, and gun hand into the flight. Forty or fifty Rats were scurrying about. A Ringneck was on the perch. When the light came on, everything stopped. I drew a bead on a fat rat and let go.

It was like a cyclone hit the place. Every bird flew and every Rat ran. The whole complex exploded.

But the real problem was that I had blown a great hole in the back wall of the flight. I hadn't considered the damage a .38 dum dum could do to a sheet of plywood. Now a full grown raccoon could walk upright into the aviary.

The next morning was spent patching.

Refining the Solution

With a little experimentation, I refined the Rat shoot by using a Ruger single-six .22 caliber revolver with "bird shot" ammunition. This

lighter ammo did not blow holes in the plywood but did in the Rats. And it gave a little "pattern" of tiny pellets rather like that of a shotgun so it was easier to hit a Rat even on the run.

It may seem hard to believe, but the birds and the Rats actually became acclimated to the nightly light and crack of the gun. After the first few days, the birds didn't even leave their perches — even when shooting in their own aviary.

Usually five nights a week I took a box of 50 rounds and went on my Rat hunt. I never got fewer than 45 rats but, try as I might, I never got all 50 Rats. The average was about 47 per night.

Dave was delighted at the evidence — dead Rats everywhere. But the evidence soon developed into its own nightmare. Can you imagine hundreds of dead Rats between the wire and the walls of the flights — and on the top of the wire ceilings, and hanging halfway through wire almost everywhere? I had totally given up on trying to drag dead rats through the wire. But Dave couldn't stand the thought of NOT killing them.

It wasn't long until the West Bird Ranch smelled like a packing house. When folks asked, we said we thought a truck had run over a family of skunks.

Even though I was knocking off about 230 Rats per week, there was still a moving carpet of them on the wire every night. They seemed to be having 500 babies per week. Still, Dave delighted in dead Rats so I kept at it.

Hazards of the Trade

I modestly bow and accept the title "Rat King" — NOT "King Rat" as some have suggested. I was very good at croaking the nasty beasts. But the main thing going on in any well run aviary is the keeping and breeding of BIRDS.

Occasionally, my Rat-killing had an adverse effect on the bird end of things.

Keep in mind that this was in the early 1970s. At that time some

birds common now were very rare — the Yellow Rosella, for instance. Dave had a beautiful male, perhaps the only one in the country as he had been unsuccessful in locating any others. He loved this bird.

As it happened, on one of my nightly search and destroy patrols I was leaning into a flight and drew a bead on a moving rat. Tracking the Rat, I gradually applied pressure on the trigger and just as the damn gun went off I saw the Yellow Rosella in the sights. Horrors.

The bird spun off the perch and hit the floor. The Rat flipped me off and hauled his butt out of sight. What to do? The bird was not dead. There was nothing for it but to take the indisposed bird to a hospital cage in the house. I put him on heat and tried to think up a story.

When Dave showed up the next morning, I nonchalantly said, "Geez, Dave, the Yellow Rosella doesn't seem to feel well."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Dunno. Found him on the

ground. Have him in a hospital cage. Can I take him to Dr. Kray?"

"OK."

Off I went, bird in box, to see one of the few bird vets in southern California, Dr. Raymond Kray, whom I knew well.

At Kray's office it went sorta like this:

"The bird seems fat, there is no evidence of parasites, the tests all come out OK. What happened?"

"Mebbe you ought to take an X-ray."

"An X-ray. Why that?"

"Mebbe he hurt his head."

"Hmmm. I do feel a little bump. There is a slight trauma. OK. Let's X-ray him."

"What's it look like, Doc?"

"Look. There's a small BB in his head. It is more dangerous to operate than to leave it in. In time, it should encapsulate and seal itself off and the bird will probably be OK. How could that have gotten there?"

"Dunno, Doc. Pesky neighbor kids, mebbe?"

Dave was still at the ranch when I returned.

"What did Kray say?"

"Er...um...he thinks the bird has lead poisoning but he ought to recover."

The bird did indeed recover. Within a few weeks I put him back into his aviary where he was later eaten by a Rat.

The End of The Tale

Did we ever get rid of the Rats? Well, I did. I moved 50 miles east and put up my own bird farm with lots of suspended aviaries and cement floors for the others and small mesh wire on all. I had nary a Rat from then on.

Alas, poor Dave never got the upper hand on the beasts. He went to the Great Aviary in the sky with millions of Rats mourning the world's best landlord.



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