

Scouts and birds chatter and learn

By Jamie C. Bennetts



BIRDS for LIFE



Katie



by Lauren Ageo

ALEX



age 10
B'd 12 June

Jenna



A big, beautiful, scarlet macaw is a looker, that's for sure. So it was only natural that a handful of Brownie Girl Scouts, all age 6 or 7, would "Oooo" and "Ahhh" at the sight of one on the cover of a book. Sure, the girls said, they would love to have a macaw as a pet. You know — so they could play with it and teach it to say clever things.

But this Scout troop was about to learn why one can never judge a book or a parrot by its cover, and why choosing a bird takes a lot of research even before all the work that comes with the real, live animal.

Janet Boeger, an AFA member and leader of Girl Scout troop 374 in Knightsen, Calif., introduced the girls to her two pet birds at a Feb. 3 Scout meeting and made a special AFA program presentation aimed at teaching children about responsible bird acquisition and ownership. After all, adopting a bird is — or should be — a long-term commitment. And, like child-rearing, it can have its challenges.

"I didn't know you need a certain type of food to feed them," said Lauren, one of the Brownies, after a thorough exploration of different types of food for parrots.

"Birds act differently than dogs and cats," observed Tori, 7.

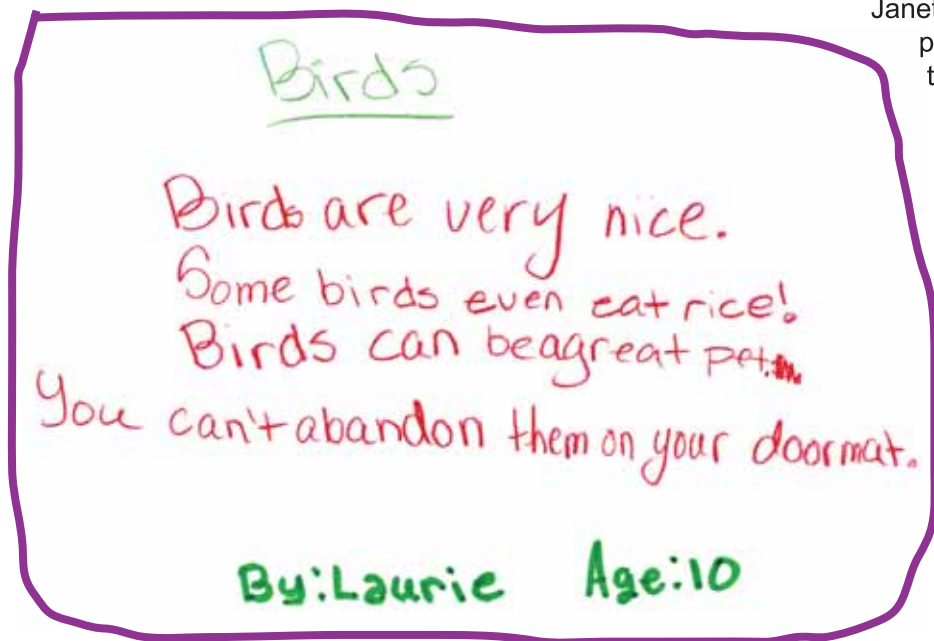
"Not all birds are nice," said Autumn, after Janet explained to the Brownies why the lovely macaw isn't for everyone: Its big beak can inflict a serious bite, it has a loud call, costs many hundreds of dollars, needs a huge and expensive cage, and is so intelligent that it needs a great deal of attention and stimulation. A smaller, mellower bird would be a better choice for a well-informed beginner, she counseled.

The owner's resources and time are at least as important as the size and behavior of the bird, Janet said.

The girls got the message. "You need to have lots of space that they need. But some people might live in a place like an apartment and don't have their basic needs," said Haley, a 9-year-old Junior Scout. And, added Elisa, "Some people don't have the time to give them attention or the money to give them the right toys."

Janet, who has owned birds since she was 11 years old, is now the married mother of two and has a small bird-breeding business in Oakley, Calif. She raises African Greys and black-headed caiques, and is a member of the AFA, OPA, and Contra Costa Avian Society, as well as a PIJAC certified avian specialist.

During the Scout meeting, she gave two presentations, the first for nine of the younger Brownies, and then another for the older Juniors, who are in fourth and fifth grades.



Janet began each presentation by asking the children what they would do if they were thinking about acquiring a pet bird. The answer, of course, was to do research — read books and internet articles, and talk with breeders.

For a fascinating show-and-tell portion of the presentation, Janet had the girls explore a variety of perches and think about

which ones would be the best for the birds. There were a smooth wooden dowel, a cotton rope perch, a Sandy Perch, and several natural manzanita branch perches that apparently looked somewhat jagged and unpromising to the young students. Many thought that the smooth wooden dowel looked best, and that the bumpy natural perches would be inferior. Janet explained why the smooth, even-diameter dowel was not the best choice, and how birds need a variety of textures and diameters for the health of their feet.

The children nodded in deep understanding to Janet's explanation about a captive bird's need for toys! They discussed the different materials used in toys (wood,



A group of Brownie Girl Scouts from troop 374 enjoy the AFA Aviculture Badge Program. (l-r) Militzi, Tori, Autumn, Miranda, Lauren, Katie, Angelique, Eva and Jenna (with Picasso the Caique) - Photo by Janet Boeger.

rope, leather, acrylic), and how a variety of toys and materials are beneficial to a bird's emotional well-being (entertainment) and physical well-being (need to chew).

Janet also advised the girls to disregard the cage sizes recommended for birds in many pet stores. Birds need room enough to stretch and flap their wings, hop around and visit a variety of toys without feeling crowded, and many different perches to stay comfortable. "A good rule of thumb is to always go up to the size of cage for the next larger bird, as long as the bars aren't wide enough for the bird's head to fit through," she said. So, a cockatiel cage for budgie and a macaw cage for an Amazon.

Then there was the food. The girls looked at baggies of various foods, including sunflower seed, combination mixes of nuts, seeds and pellets, as well as commercial pellet diets in natural colors and fruit colors and flavors. Some of the girls picked the colored pellets and sunflower seeds as the likely best diet. Janet explained how gray-striped sunflower seed is OK as a treat or in moderation, but is too high in fat for sedentary pet birds. The colored pellets — which one of the girls said was the primary diet of her cockatiel at home — are fruity smelling and tasty-looking, Janet said, but contain unnecessary dyes and artificial flavors. The other downside: your bird can leave staining droppings around the house from

these colored pellets. She prefers a diet of natural pellets complemented by a moderate amount of seed/nut mix to keep the birds' beaks in shape, plus some vegetables, legumes and fruit.

Janet stressed how she preferred water bottles to bowls. Some girls chimed in on this point; they had noticed how their birds quickly and regularly sullied their water bowls with droppings. "Eeeeewwww," was the refrain.

A personal introduction to Dresden, the African grey, and Picasso, the caique, was saved for last — a perfect model of the idea of becoming informed before getting all atwitter about a particular bird.

"What are you guys up to?" Picasso chattered repeatedly in his fast, high-pitched, sing-song voice. "What are you guys up to?"

The girls giggled when they realized what the acrobatic little parrot was saying, and again when he showed off for them, hanging upside-down on his play stand.

Dresden, who is the more accomplished talker



Troop leader Janet Boeger with her pet Congo African Grey "Dresden", show the girls how to properly hold a parrot. - Photo by Pat Zahn.

The American Federation of Aviculture's Aviculture Badge Program



The Junior Girls scouts learn about safe and fun birds toys. (l-r) Adrina (with Picasso the Caique), Laurie, Elisa, Haley and Karlee. - Photo by Janet Boeger.

at home, was silent. "Typical grey!" Janet said. But Janet's Brownie daughter, Jenna, gave away Dresden's secrets. At home, he has learned to mimic the order Jenna frequently receives from her older brother, Preston: "Jenna, get out of my room!" No matter how the Scouts squealed and begged for a performance of this phrase, the bird kept his dignity and silence. More reserved and possessed of a larger beak, Dresden wasn't allowed to get too cozy with the girls but was well-mannered and sat patiently for some group pictures.

The girls came away with a new affection and respect for the parrot family. "My favorite part was holding the bird," said Adrina, one of the Junior Scouts. "I was afraid it might bite me. But it just went up and down my arm. I'm not afraid anymore."

Janet Boeger contributed to this story. Jamie Cackler Bennetts is mother of two young girls and a teenage stepson, and lives in Antioch, Calif. Formerly a newspaper reporter and editor, she has been an elementary school teacher for the past five years. ■

The American Federation of Aviculture has taken an opportunity to reach out to young people to teach them responsible bird ownership. This program was initially created by one of the AFA's affiliated clubs from Texas called the River City Bird Club. We would like to thank RCBC for their generosity in sharing their program with the American Federation of Aviculture and allowing us to in turn share it with our affiliated clubs around the country. The River City Bird Club has been giving this program in Texas for several years with great success. In early 2004, the program was piloted by AFA in New Jersey and sponsored by one of our specialty organizations, the Arcadia Bird Sanctuary and Educational Center by Terri Jones, New Jersey State Coordinator. In August of 2004, the initial program was delivered to all House of Delegates attendees at the AFA convention in San Francisco, CA. Over the course of the year, several more AFA Aviculture Badge packets have been sent to a number of clubs and organizations requesting information.

In early 2005, AFA determined that we should modify the Aviculture Badge program such that all content would be on a single compact disk. This way, each club or organization would be able to modify the content as needed – module information, schedules, quizzes, etc. The clubs could also modify the content based on the age or experience of the audience. The aviary tour has been revised as well as the overall structure and content. Special thanks to Howard Hammack, Nancy Speed, and Matt Schmit for photos and help revising the program onto CD. At the 2005