

# Kids and Birds

by Jan Parrott-Holden  
Vancouver, Washington

*"Youth's like summer brave,  
age like winter bare  
Youth is full of sport,  
age's breath is short,  
Youth is nimble, age is lame;  
Youth is hot and bold.  
Age is weak and cold;  
Youth is wild, and age is tame."*

— Shakespeare

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As I grow older, I come to realize that age and youth live in two different worlds. Worlds with differing interests and aspirations. Like it or not, kids and adults are lucky to find *anything* in common. And, when they do, it is often difficult for the adult to refrain from breaking that fine thread of kinship all because he sees things differently. That's the way it is in everything from fashion to finance. And that's exactly the way it is with birds.

If you have raised birds for any length of time, whether it be canaries, parrots or pigeons, you have probably attended an exhibition. You have gone either to enter your own birds or to scrutinize the entries of others. Often those "others" represent your toughest competition in the bird world. Their goal is identical to yours — to become a "master breeder," a legend in the world of budgerigars, doves, or love birds. It all adds up to points, to ribbons, to trophies, to recognition. Now what's happened to the old pride in ownership? In handling and caring for a creature for the simple pleasure that ownership entails? It's gone, my friend. And it has vanished because somewhere between youth and age we have lost the sheer appreciation of the bird's beauty.

I hold a position in the bird world. It's nothing lofty. It's nothing that will render me worthy of tribute either today or in the future. But it is a position with the American Pigeon Fanciers' Council which entreats me to work with any young person who might be interested in exploring the world of pigeons and doves. The job was "created" because pigeon keeping, like all birdkeeping, is not as dynamic (within the U.S.) as it once was. There are fewer and fewer people being drawn to birds to caring for their health, studying their behavior, exploring the field of conservation. The "old" hobbyist is disappearing, dying out if you will. The young are not coming in great enough numbers to replace the old. And it gives cause for concern.

It is not as simple as stating that young people don't care. That they aren't eager and willing to search out

encounters with nature and living creatures. True, some are not much interested in pets. They may have never owned a pet. And, for whatever reason, they may never have experienced the indescribable joy of knowing that some living thing *needed* them. But there are young people today living in rural settings, living in urbanized areas, who are spending their "leisure" time with living things rather than an Apple computer, the television set or a boom box. I like to think of these kids as an endangered species. They still exist but, without concentrated efforts, they may one day be as rare as the Socorro dove.

Not long ago I wrote to the National Headquarters of the Scouts of America. My intent was to see if they might consider an update of their antiquated "Pigeon Raising Handbook." It took several weeks to receive a reply. And, when it came, I was disappointed. Mr. T.J. Van Houten, associate director, informed me that the merit badge for pigeon raising had been abolished in 1980 due to lack of interest and that there was little chance of its being revitalized in the near future. I took a good look at the tired binding and dog-eared pages of the handbook which had come from the local library. Then I glanced at the borrower's card pasted just inside the cover. There was a period of more than ten months between my "borrowing" date and the date just preceding mine. Not exactly a hot item. But, taking into account the discontinuation of a pigeon raising merit badge, I could finally understand why.

Then, some three months later I spotted a Future Farmers of America display in front of a local grocery store. There were three or four "scruffy" looking fantail pigeons in a wire pen, a calf, and some chickens surrounded by bales of hay. The weather was miserable and the three high school students were trying, in vain, to appear enthusiastic. A few shoppers, especially those with children, stopped to pet the calf and exchange a few words. But all in all the project wasn't getting noticed. It occurred to me then that what was

missing was the support and encouragement of a few enthusiastic adults. There were none. Finally, I asked one of the kids the name of their leader.

The next day I telephoned the high school and arranged an appointment with the head of the poultry division for the school's FFA program. He, in turn, called in a 4-H advisor and the three of us discussed the future of kids and birds. I must say the hour we spent together was enlightening, though it probably didn't solve the problems of getting and keeping young people in a bird hobby. But there was one opinion shared by the group and that was the belief that boys and girls — even teens — need and want adults to help them *stay* in the hobby. To encourage and to advise.


I'd like to suggest that bird clubs are the answer. But, through much of my research, I must admit that they are not. Though there are many dynamic bird organizations and clubs which share their love of avian life with kids, there are many, many more which are actually discouraging kids, turning them off, leaving them cold. Why? I'm

not one hundred percent sure. But I suspect it may be due to the fact that many "old timers" simply don't want the competition that they may get from kids. Or, perhaps, they have forgotten how to view the bird world, with its infinite mystery and breath-taking beauty. (The way they may have viewed it in the beginning.) Chances are, the young hobbyist is in love with the overall creature, the glorious iridescence of a bird's plumage, the sometimes showy, sometimes shy courtship of a male. The extreme devotion of a young hen to her nest. The kid has yet to lose this enchantment and have it be replaced by the awful tendency to see only the minutia of the birds. The kid has not yet become so blasé as to dismiss a bird because its tail is an eighth of an inch too long, or its eye cere pink instead of pale. The kid wants to give each bird a name because it is different than the rest. It may well be that what the kid is *really* wanting is a pet. But the keeping of birds as pets and companions is, and always has been, a wonderful way to learn many of the joys of bird handling and, more

importantly, to discover some secrets to bird behavior.

So where does this all lead? What is the role of age in the bird world? What part have we in the future of bird-keeping?

In truth, what it boils down to is this — we are missionaries. If we do our job properly, we will bring fresh blood into the world of aviculture. We will teach others the value of conserving the natural habitat of wild birds and we will encourage captive specimens to be housed in the best possible conditions. Our role may be as small as inviting an interested kid over to see our aviaries. Or it might entail lecturing before classrooms at all academic levels. It might even demand we stand in the pouring rain with members of the Future Farmers of America to answer questions about pigeons, or chickens or geese. Whatever it takes — it takes.

The seasoned hobbyist cannot afford to be nearsighted when it comes to birds. For it is a simple fact. If we fail to share the fascinating world of birds with the young, we may have dealt aviculture a crippling blow. 

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