

Random Thoughts... on Witchcraft

by Dave May
Moab, Utah

There was a time, not too many generations ago, when almost everyone believed in witches, and spells, and magic of all kinds. It was a time when people knew that secret potions, special foods, significant dates, and certain rituals, if one could learn and apply them properly, would bring success and fame. A few people, even at that time, thought this witchcraft to be untrue. These few believed that knowledge would be the key to success, that magic could not make one wise, and that only facts could be used as building blocks of knowledge. Facts, they claimed, were those things that one could see, measure, compare and, eventually, explain. The things a person felt, or thought, or hoped to be true really were feelings, ideas, or wishes, and should not be called "facts" unless they could be proven by evidence. For the evidence to prove that an idea was a fact, the evidence had to be clear to anyone that chose to look at it. This same group of people felt that for a person to say, "I know...." something, instead of, "I believe...." something required that there must be facts and knowledge to back up the statement, not just ideas and wishes.

Except for their strange convictions, these people were just like everyone else. They were no more intelligent, nor better looking, nor richer, nor different in any way from all the others who believed in magic, witchcraft, and incantations, except for the way they thought about things and came to conclusions about those things. Because they would not follow the old ways, but insisted on trying to discover facts to explain things, a lot of people decided they were strange — even dangerous — and avoided them, would not listen to them or try to understand their ways.

As many years passed, however, more and more people did learn to look at things carefully and to examine ideas to find if they were built on facts or on superstition. In time, almost everyone came to understand that ideas are not facts unless one can prove them and that success is built

upon a foundation of facts. A passion for facts and learning spread across the land, and great progress was made along many paths as knowledge cleared the way. Still, even in this era of great learning, a few held to the old ways and used guesses, wishes, hopes, and magic to seek solutions to problems.

They all became aviculturists, and have been ever since.

The preceding is not a fairy tale, of course, but that last line is an exaggeration. The myth sometimes *seems* to be the reality, just the same, and the staggering number of experts that express their prejudices and wishes as "fact" becomes downright depressing at times. But the generation of real industrial strength discouragement comes at the hands and voices of the naysayers, the folks who just say, "I don't believe it," of any new idea and thereafter shut it from their minds. Almost as upsetting are those, at the opposite end of the spectrum (the "yeasayers," one guesses), who take *any* little piece of new evidence or information and pervert it into a proven concept. This latter group at least demonstrates a willingness to accept new ideas, however, and can be accused of a sin no worse than overenthusiasm.

The increase in avicultural knowledge during the last ten or so years has been very substantial, so there is good reason to feel encouraged. On the other hand, acceptance and application of that new knowledge seems mired in lethargy, reluctance, and misunderstanding. There is ample evidence, published in a wide variety of magazine articles, books, and technical papers, that many of our most cherished beliefs are simply that: beliefs, with little or no factual basis. It appears obvious to this author that, when our traditional beliefs disagree with observed events, it makes sense to methodically re-examine those beliefs and to challenge them. It seems equally apparent that continuing to trumpet our prejudices, our "conventional wisdom," as facts (when we have not a scrap of actual evidence to support them) can only retard our progress. None of this is intended to be an

attempt to throw away all that is old and accept everything new. Engulfing every "new idea" in a passionate embrace just because it is new is just as self-defeating as rejecting or ignoring new concepts just because they are new.

Aviculture is at a kind of crossroad, or even crisis, in its evolution. There is a growing number of very sincere, hard working, and devoted people who believe that it is immoral to "imprison" wild birds. They are joined by others who believe, with equal sincerity, that the collection of birds from their native habitats is a major cause of the decline of avian species on the continents of South America and Africa. The utter commitment of these opponents of aviculture and the zeal with which they will pursue their objectives are not something we can afford to view casually. We are viewed by many as careless enthusiasts selfishly playing with irreplaceable treasures, and all too often we act that way. The AFA and PIJAC have done wonders, lobbying on our behalf, and they have greatly slowed the trend toward prohibition of private ownership and manipulation of exotic birds. That trend has only been slowed, however, not stopped, and the anti-aviculturists have not gone off to pursue some other goal. Each conflict before a court or legislative committee gives our representatives new insights in defending our interests, but hones the skills of our opponents as well.

If we are to have a future, we are first going to be required to demonstrate that we are competent, responsible, and capable in our stewardship. We must generate an aura of professional ability and commitment, in appearance of knowing what we are doing, and some semblance of organization and system in our activities. Most importantly, those superficial layers must be supported by a framework of fact and scientific knowledge.

This writer does not pretend to possess all the necessary knowledge, nor is it even remotely likely that any other single individual does. Our combined knowledge, however, is probably adequate to solve most of today's recognized avicultural management prob-

lems. The professionals in our midst, the veterinarians, are, for the most part, just as entangled in witchcraft as the rest of us, and the academics, the university types, are so limited in number and scope (only the University of California, Davis group actually seems to be publishing anything other than reports of endowments and personnel changes) that they can only begin to address the research needs screaming for attention. While basic research develops crucial technical knowledge, equally important practical management techniques could evolve from our accumulated experience — *if* we can cut through the bread and milk mythology and get down to facts.

One way to encourage that is to re-examine many of our established ideas and principles to see how they stand up in comparison with existing facts and alternate ideas. If birds must have privacy and seclusion to breed, why do so many nest successfully in very busy, public places? If they must be carefully protected from low temperatures, why do some get along very well at sub-freezing temperatures? Why can some aviculturists get their birds to switch over to pellets in two days while others say their birds won't switch? Inasmuch as none of the recommended cures for self-plucking actually work, why do experts(?) keep repeating them and why don't we systematically try to find out what will? With the field of genetics offering so many advantages to some aspects of aviculture, why don't more of us take the time to learn about it, record our observations and breeding results, and exchange the information? If our birds can visually identify the sex of other birds, why can we not observe their behavior closely enough to make that determination, too? If cherry wood is poisonous to birds, what is the toxin and who did the analysis that discovered it? If "grit" is a critically important part of avian diets, why do so many birds get along perfectly well without it? If breeding pairs must be separated after two or three nests in order to prevent debilitation and weak babies, what causes those problems and how come some pairs can breed continuously for years without the deficiencies showing up?

How's that, for starters? Those are just a few of the traditional beliefs that are included in all standard publications claiming to inform new or experienced aviculturists about birds. Those are some of the things that we routinely tell each other at conventions, in publications, and in conversa-

tion. In every case, there are reasons to question the accepted wisdom. Those reasons may not be adequate justification to throw out the advice, but they certainly are sufficient to make any rational person want to take a second look and to seek facts and evidence that support or detract from the beliefs. The intent of this column is to help stimulate review and re-examination of our cherished "traditional wisdom" by attacking the myths and attempting to supplant them with facts. In the course of doing this, hopefully, some aviculturists will jump up and down in disagreement and will produce evidence to support their views. Much of this column (most of it, in fact) is intended to be controversial, argumentative, and stimulative. It is *supposed* to get readers angry enough to respond, to participate in a dialogue that may help all of us better under-

stand where we are going and how we are going to get there.

In the meantime, while the U.C., Davis folks work toward the development of real basic knowledge and those Texas folks work on their next press release, we can have a lot of good fun! The author is very sincere in his wish that readers will react and argue (in the classic sense that an "argument" is a discussion with at least two opposing views) either directly to him or through this journal's Letters to the Editor column. It is important to keep in mind, however, that *Watchbird* publishes this stuff in the hope of stimulating discussion and *not* because the editor or AFA officers and staff necessarily agree with it! If you feel the material is a direct attack on you or your favorite experts, then it is just upon me, not upon the AFA or *Watchbird*, that you should cast a spell. ●

**When Quality Counts,
You Can Count
On *Eight*
in One**

We start with the finest ingredients available in the world today — pack them in the most beautifully designed packages in the business. Then our scientific quality control checks every product to assure excellence you expect from 8 IN 1. Consistent quality is the name of the game. We know. We've been experts at it since 1888!

8 IN 1 PET PRODUCTS, INC., BRENTWOOD, N.Y. 11717