

The AFA Watchbird archives now available online

Constance Woodman



As soon as the AFA Watchbird Archives team put the older articles online, other people found them using the Google web search and Google Scholar search engines. Bird breeders, bird keepers, researchers, zoo keepers, and conservation program managers have already accessed archived Watchbird articles before this announcement went to print.

The team was started by Mary Ellen LePage. Dr. Ian Tizard funded the archive creation by hiring a student worker through the Schubot Exotic Bird Health Center. Constance Woodman from the Schubot Center worked with the Texas Digital Libraries to produce an online archive and developed the process for a graduate student worker to follow while uploading articles. Graduate student worker Maryam Tavakoli applied for a federal award to fund three-quarters of her work hours. By working together, two and half years of pushing got the archives online. It was not always easy, Mary Ellen had many of the older articles scanned, but others had to be tracked down. Gene Hall found an original newspaper print of the 1977 New Castle supplement in storage, and mailed the article to the AFA Office. The supplement was eventually scanned by staff from the Special Collections library at Texas A&M University.

People have immediately utilized the archive. For example, the Red Siskin Initiative project leaders, based out of the Smithsonian Institute, are currently breeding Red Siskins for release in Venezuela. Through the archive, they had access to all the historical Red Siskin Project articles in the Watchbird and passed the archive links to their team.

An article on cross-fostering was utilized by a European researcher studying cross-fostering in conservation breeding when Scarlet macaws were used in an emergency to

Left: First Watchbird Issue August 1974

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foster Blue-headed macaws. An author from a U.S. University who is researching parrots for an upcoming book has the ability to research the history of U.S. parrot breeding through the Watchbird Journal. The decades of information in the Watchbird can help private breeders, pet owners, veterinarians, students, researchers, and conservation managers.

The Watchbird and Libraries

Print copies of the AFA Watchbird are available through 16 libraries, according to the library search tool worldcat.org. These libraries include the Smithsonian Libraries, Wildlife Conservation Society Library at the Bronx Zoo, the California Academy of Sciences, and the staff education library at Disney’s Animal Kingdom. Unless you happen to live down the road from these libraries in the United States or Germany, (or work at Disney) it can be very hard to read an old copy of the Watchbird. Our readers in Asia, for example, have only had the option to write to the AFA office or contact other AFA members, asking for older article copies. Texas A&M University Libraries have copies of the Watchbird, so it was logical to work through Texas A&M to get the archive online.

The Watchbird Archive Team worked with a digital library to fix this problem, so the unique knowledge and history contained in older Watchbird articles could be shared instantly and globally. The Texas Digital Library is an online library founded in 2005 by four Texas members of the Association of Research Libraries: Texas A&M University, Texas Tech University, the University of Houston, and the University of Texas at Austin. Like a real physical library, “TDL” tracks how many times a specific article or magazine is used by a visitor. There is no record of who viewed the article, so browsing the archive is anonymous. As Texas A&M University financially supports the TDL, it was free for the Schubot Exotic Bird Health Center at Texas A&M University to create a digital archive.

People start finding the AFA Watchbird on the web

The articles took two years to put online, so the oldest articles have had time to start becoming popular on the web. The month before writing this article, April, 2017, showed some interesting trends. Of the many thousands of people visited the Watchbird archive, 8,714 opened up a single article or browsed an entire issue. The most popular

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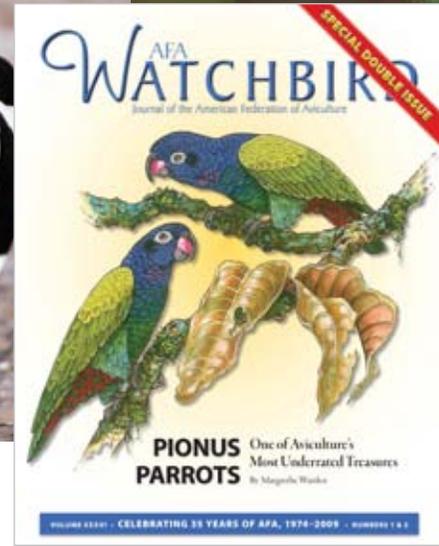
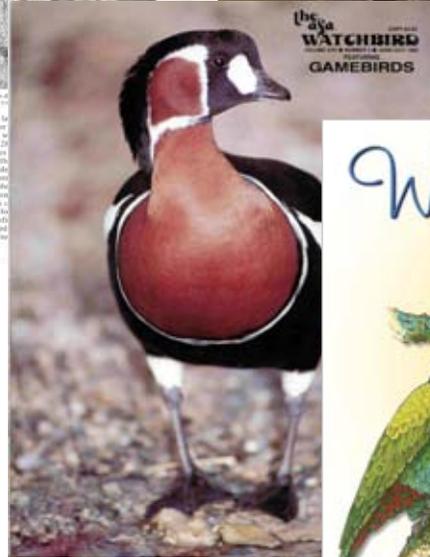
entire issue, with 273 people viewing the whole magazine, was January-February 2001. That magazine focused on Eclectus parrots with a cover and matching article about the blue Eclectus mutation. To open a whole issue, people must visit the archives and browse. So those 273 issue views represent people taking the time to explore the AFA Watchbird after finding it on the web.

Individual articles can come up as results for web searches through search engines such as Google or Bing. There were 1,921 articles with 1-2 views, where the article was probably found from a web search. These tended to be specialty topics, such as the first breeding accounts of the Spot-billed Toucanet, and the Fiery-shouldered conure, or hybridization in the Chestnut-breasted Mannikin.

The most popular individual article in April, with 383 reads, was the 2000 article "Why Do Doves Abandon Their Nests?" by Tony Brancato. The second and third most popular articles were on canary keeping from 1979, "Line Breeding Canaries" by Sig Larson and "Canary Culture: Breeding Canaries in Aviaries or Cages?" by Tony Bucci. Considering that the Watchbird has had a more parrot-related theme the past few years, why are a dove article and two older canary articles so popular?

When the Watchbird becomes the top hit

Being the #1 result for a Google search is something people struggle over. For popular searches, advertisers pay large amounts of money to have their result inserted into the top results of a search engine. There are marketing companies that edit websites to make them become #1. For specialty topics in aviculture, there may not be a lot of competition, so



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a quality article from a frequently updated library site will have an advantage in the rankings. The Watchbird, at time of writing, is now the #1 result for “Why Do Doves Abandon Their Nests?” on Google. This creates a sort of loop. Because

searches. Jan Parrott-Holden’s 1986 article “The Budapest Short-faced Tumbler” is the top hit for Budapest Short-faced Tumbler pigeons. Watchbird articles are top hits for specialty topic searches relating to Pekin Robin breeding, Goffin’s cockatoo breeding, aviary ventilation, and others. Some of the articles are working their way up the results rankings. Levin Tilghman’s 1997 article on breeding Orange-cheeked waxbills is creeping up the results, it’s currently number six.

It would seem that the way to be recognized as a specialty expert in aviculture is to write a Watchbird article that will end up on the public archives!

The specialty nature of the AFA Watchbird articles is allowing aviculturists to find us, even if they have never heard of the AFA before. This is the case for those popular canary articles. It is not that people are going to the Watchbird to find canary information, it’s that the search engines rank the Watchbird

the article is relevant, it shows up as one of the top results, which makes it more popular, and likely to be linked to by another website, so it is more likely to be relevant and popular and be a top result. Eventually, a relevant article becomes the #1 result. This has occurred for a number of

articles as the most relevant information out there, and so the canary breeders are finding us as the Watchbird rises to the top for certain searches.

Google Scholar is another interesting way the digital archives are effecting the web. Academic journals publish research articles and reviews of topics. Because the TDL is tied into the Google Scholar search engine, when researchers and scientists search for a topic, the Watchbird may be a top hit. In searching for research articles on scholar.google.com, results from the Watchbird appear alongside results from prestigious research journals such as the Oryx, Auk, Current Biology, and others. Relevant writing by aviculturists is now being delivered directly to the hands of researchers, and the specialty knowledge



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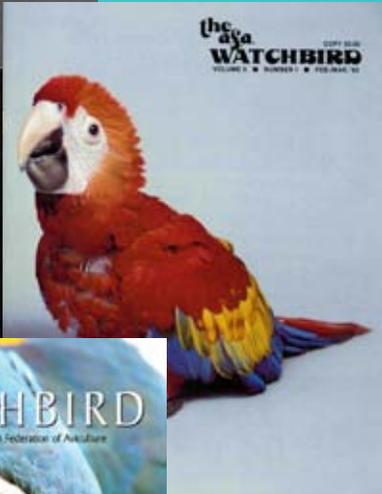
Ways to interact with the AFA Watchbird archive:

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Use Watchbird archive articles in your online discussions and mailing lists, you can link back to the archive.



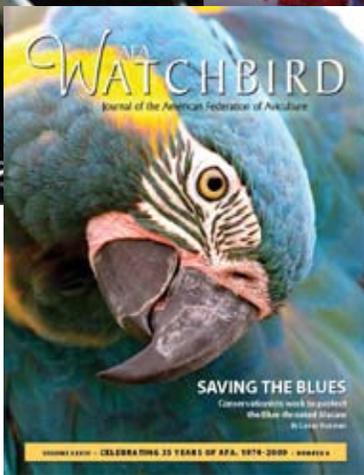
Read older articles in your specialty area. If you think you've improved the practice of aviculture submit a new article to the Watchbird!



from private practice is side-by-side with research papers. This is extremely important as some of the best techniques in conservation of rare species were originally developed by private individuals and the history documented by the Watchbird cannot be found elsewhere.

For example, I gave a talk at the most recent North American Ornithological Congress, in Washington D.C. I found myself at odds with a well-respected conservation scientist. He didn't understand why aviculturists often appeared anti-regulation and didn't more publicly share what species

they had and where they kept them. As I explained where government actors have gone terribly wrong, I started to feel like a wacky conspiracy theorist because slaughters of endangered animals or seizures of privately owned birds seemed so extreme. It was obvious that no one in the room believed such things could happen. The Watchbird archives showed the sobering realities. I started with the 1977 New Castle supplement from Gene Hall's attic and went from there. The conservation scientist and his colleagues had a very different reaction once they saw historical documents and there was a lot of education occurring about how valuable private breeders are to conservation science, as well as the chilling effects poor governing has on private breeders.



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