



Exterior view of the Schmidt aviary.



Richard and Mary Jo Schmidt.



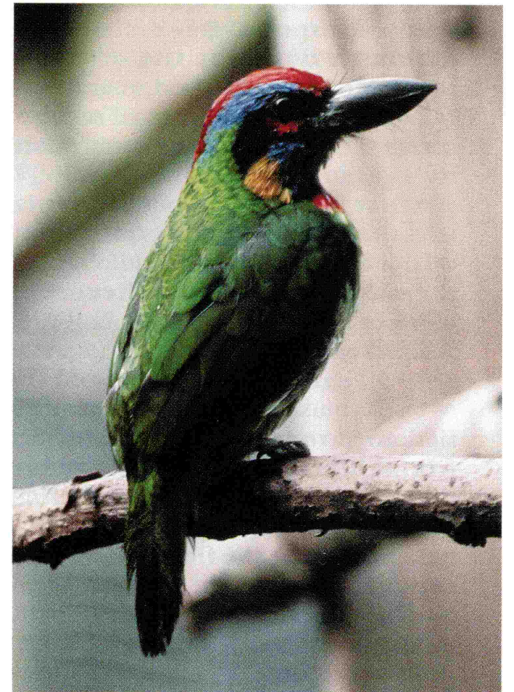
Interior view of planted aviary.



Long tailed broadbill.



Spotted laughing thrush.



Red crowned barbet.

The Aviaries of Richard & Mary Jo Schmidt

by Jerry Jennings
Woodland Hills, California

Spectacular! That is the best word to describe the unique and beautiful collection of birds housed in the Schmidt aviaries. With over seventy species of softbills, including nineteen species of fruit doves, it is one of the best of its kind in north America. Species virtually never before seen in American collections, such as Malaysian crested jays, long tailed broadbills, and spangled cotingas, are housed in spacious, planted flights, set in the tropical climate of Tampa, Florida.

Richard Schmidt, with the help of his wife Mary Jo, has carefully put together a breeding program that should assure the availability of a number of beautiful birds for the discerning aviculturist. Located on a former commercial cockatiel farm east of Tampa, the Schmidts have two acres to develop and progress is underway. A number of flights have been put together, *en banc*, surrounding a central aviary and work space. Radiating outward, the numerous flights, nearly twenty feet in length, contain mixed species in some cases, and single pairs in others. Several pairs of touracos are housed in one end of the complex, a single pair to a flight, while in other areas, species of thrushes, cotingas, and others may be housed together. Most of the flights are heavily planted, affording security for the birds in a natural setting that is quite pleasing to the eye.

Richard's interest in birds has been a long one, beginning in his days as a college student at Western Kentucky University. He started with Modena pigeons, which he raised for the show bench. A two year interest in bantams followed, which saw him win at the first national show in which he participated — a Cochin bantam taking the honors. While Richard's interest in birds developed in other directions, he kept a few bantams for many years and still has a fondness for them.

After college, Richard moved to Virginia where he worked as assistant basketball coach for the University of

Virginia, keeping his pigeons on the side. Eventually, he moved to Nashville to take on the job of head basketball coach at Vanderbilt. The pigeons were left behind in Virginia, being too difficult to move. However, his interest in birds was still alive, and Richard began a collection of finches, including violet eared waxbills, and a number of different species of Australian birds.

In 1981, Schmidt was offered the position of head basketball coach at the University of Tampa, where he moved and has remained since. The finches moved with him and have gradually evolved into his present collection.

The Schmidts have not been content to build their collection on what they could find available in the United States. Rather, they combined an interest in travel with their avicultural pursuits and set off on several trips to the Orient. They have visited the People's Republic of China, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore and Hong Kong, where he has obtained the birds in his collection today.

Schmidt describes the bird markets in the Orient as "amazing" in their size and variety of birds available. The Sunday Market in Bangkok, he says, "is like a huge flea market selling everything under the sun, including a section of animals of every variety. Even North and South American birds unavailable in the U.S. are for sale."

In addition to the bird markets are numerous private collections of birds, some of which are mind boggling. Birds of paradise are commonly kept, and one collection he visited had over a hundred specimens — far more than, perhaps, any zoological park has ever maintained anywhere in the world. Hornbills are also a group frequently seen and the abundance of them, even species listed as endangered on Appendix I of CITES, was astonishing.

Notwithstanding the numbers of birds for sale in the oriental bird markets, the habitat destruction

Schmidt has observed is far more devastating to wild bird populations. Rapid human population growth on limited land area does not bode well for the future, either. It is Richard's hope, therefore, that the birds he brings back to the U.S. will be quickly established through captive propagation efforts so they will be available to American aviculturists after the inevitable cessation of imports.

In establishing his collection, Schmidt has focused on housing, diet, and ease of maintenance. He believes strongly in providing a natural setting and enough space for the birds, which is also more enjoyable for him. Diet is the key to maintaining the birds in good physical condition, and the ease of maintenance is critical for someone who must work full-time and care for their collection themselves.

The Schmidt diet is a varied one, but centered around a dry diet. Richard has found Purina Trout Chow to suit that need to a tee. Trout Chow is heartily eaten by not only all his softbills, but the fruit doves as well. The fruit doves and the touracos are also fed an apple-flavored horse pellet. All the birds receive supplemental feedings of diced carrots, potatoes, beets, and black-eyed peas. These are purchased already cut up and are mixed in with the pellets. He also offers a few mealworms, crickets, and moist dog kibble. When there are young in the nest, the amount of live food is increased. Fresh water is provided daily automatically.

The Schmidts have been on their "farm" only since November 1987, but have accomplished a great deal. The work is never done and building new flights is their never-ending fate. Richard says, "You never have too many birds," a good indication he has been terminally infected with aviculturitis.

The Schmidts have two children, a boy and a girl. Steven plays basketball for Dad and Stacy is a junior in high school. Mary Jo is a horse trainer, specializing in saddlebreds.

The Schmidts are always willing to share their interest in birds and encourage others to work with softbills and fruit doves, whose incredible variety make them more interesting to the Schmidts than psittacines, of which they do have a few — several species of fig parrots. And, there is no question the Schmidt bird collection is one of the most interesting around. ●