

The Aviary of Walter Moe

by Jerry Jennings
Woodland Hills, California

Many aviculturists refer to their aviary as a "bird ranch" or "bird farm." While many of these are quite genteel in nature, a few meet the conceptual connotation implied in the word "farm." A farm is typically a place where agricultural practices are employed to produce a crop, and it implies a certain intensity of purpose. Nothing better describes the aviary of Walter Moe, a finch farmer par excellence!

Walter's aviary is geared solely towards the production of finches of a wide variety of species. These include most of the Australian grass-finches, as well as many different African estrildid finches such as Purple Grenadiers, Fire Finches, and the Twinspots. Other unique species include the Parrot Finches, among which are the Bamboo, Red Head, Tri-colored, and Pintail Non-pareil.

Walter's aviary is entirely indoors, even though it is located near the

coastal area of Ventura County in an almost perfect sub-tropical climate — agreeable enough to permit the year around growing of bananas! The reason for this is that all the birds are caged, in quarters measuring 32" x 15" x 12". The cages are kept in rows, several tiers high and the facility boasts over two hundred of them. The cages are made of hard, opaque plastic on the back, sides and top. Only the front and bottoms are wire, thus providing ease of maintenance.

Each cage houses only one pair of birds, each of which is unable to see and be bothered by its neighbor. This sense of privacy, Walter believes, contributes to a high rate of successful nestings for most pairs. Further, all cages are completely serviceable from the outside, including nest boxes, permitting minimal disturbance of the birds inside.

The diet consists of a high quality finch seed mix, ground Roudybush pellets, and ground cat chow. Each of these is fed separately from a small plastic feeder attached to the outside of each cage. The feeders are designed so that the wasted seed hulls and seeds fall into a catch box at the bottom of the feeder, dramatically reducing the mess. Greens from dandelion to lettuce are offered daily along with egg shell, oyster shell, charcoal, salt, and fresh water. Nopstress™ vitamins are added to the water twice weekly.

A typical cage may contain a pair of Lady Goulds or Owl Finches. Each is provided with the above diet and a nest box measuring approximately six inches on a side, which are larger than nest boxes one normally encounters at other aviaries. Nesting material consists solely of lawn clippings, which have been allowed to dry before being placed into the box. The birds do quite nicely with this, and do not require long strands of grass to weave, as others have suggested.

Once a pair of finches has laid their eggs, the rearing process is under way. Sometimes Walter lets the target species raise their own young, though he often removes eggs and places them under societies for cross fostering. Cross fostering helps when some finches are unwilling to rear their

own young, and encourages them to recycle, producing more offspring. Having seen all the young birds at Walter's, his is, without question, a successful operation.

Walter came to aviculture like many of us — by accident! He was interviewing a job applicant four years ago and asked the fellow what hobbies he enjoyed. The applicant responded that he reared exotic birds and invited Walter to pay him a visit. The man had six outdoor flights full of finches — mostly Lady Goulds. Walter was amazed at their color and couldn't believe they were real, asking, "How long did it take you to paint them?"

Greatly impressed, Walter had to have some Goulds himself. He began to search for literature at every opportunity and devoured what little there was in print. The more he read, the more confused he became. One book would describe the ideal conditions, the next would say the opposite. Even the breeders he spoke with were contradictory, and few were willing to share much information at all, suggesting Walter needed to "pay his dues." Walter persevered nonetheless.

Walter's first cage was a Rubbermaid food box 24" x 12" x 12" to which he added a wire front and bottom. This he mounted at the end of his bed where he spent much time observing the birds within. He had four of these for about a year, then set off to design the perfect bird house. After working through twenty-five different models, he hit upon the finch "condominium" which he now uses and which he has licensed to Erect Easy Wire Co. Erect Easy markets Walter's condominium under the brand name, Hotel Stoddard.

Even though Walter feels 50% of what he has read about finch breeding is wrong, he nevertheless had immediate success raising Lady Goulds. He attributes this to his intense observations of the birds, which taught him that a proper environment and diet were the keys. His initial ignorance was probably beneficial, he believes, since, combined with his skepticism of some of the books he read, it helped him avoid repeating the mistakes of others.

Walter Moe is a native of Lichtenstein, who grew up across the border in neighboring Germany. He went to school in Vienna, Austria and in England before emigrating to the United States in 1955. His first U.S. stop was in Fargo, North Dakota. Cody, Wyoming was the next spot on

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his itinerary, where he worked for a short time as a cowboy. Cold weather encouraged him westward to Los Angeles, where he worked for a while in the movie industry as a stand-in.

Moe was not a man of singular interests and while in the movie business, he also worked as a mechanical engineer in the tool & die field. The animal fascination was starting to bud at this time and soon Walter would open a tropical fish store. Then there were two. Finding the right equipment, however, was a perennial problem. The solution? Why, make you own and we now find Walter in the manufacturing business building aquariums, stands, and pumps.

Walter is the proverbial tinker constantly in search of the better mouse trap. He has been the inventor of children's toys and designed the motorized surfboard. He now makes hydraulic presses for light and heavy industry at his factory in Camarillo, California.

Walter's search for perfection manifests itself in his pursuit of aviculture. He has eyes only for his finches and has no desire to branch out into other birds. Rather, he is determined to do the best that has ever been done with this group of birds. He is expanding his operation with a series of over 80 outdoor flights of his own design. Each will be approximately three feet wide by ten feet long, divided into a shelter and an open flight. The open area will have wire bottoms, below which will be planted seeding grasses. These will be allowed to grow up through the floor of each flight, providing seed heads for the birds. At the same time, the birds' droppings will fall through to the ground.

While Walter's collection now consists of 23 species, the ultimate plan calls for more than 80 varieties. He already has acquired species never before, or rarely, seen in the U.S., including the New Guinea Blood Finch, and the Spectacled, Teerink's, and Moluccan Mannikins, and the Timor Sparrow.

Acquiring truly rare species requires a special commitment, a commitment Walter is ready and willing to make. He is funding efforts to travel to the Philippines to trap the Many Colored Parrot Finch of Mindanao and the Green Faced Parrot Finch of Luzon. This October, his assistant, Frank Tromp, will travel to Fiji to bring back the Pink Billed and Peale's Parrot Finches. The Royal



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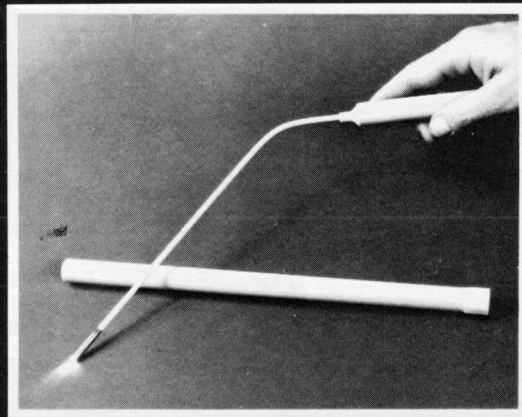
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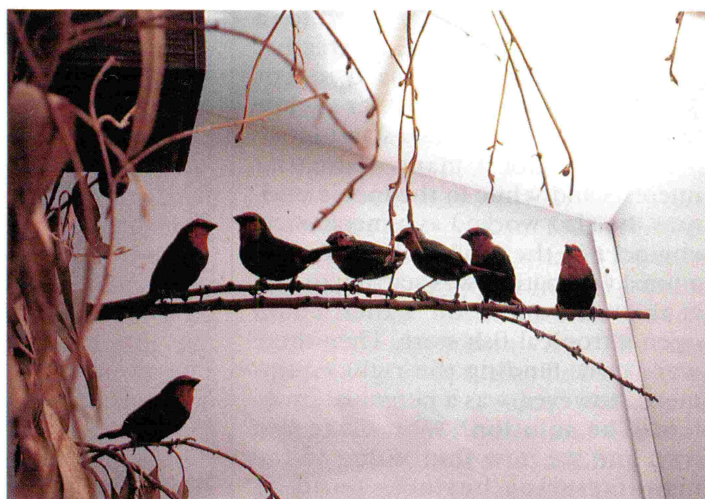
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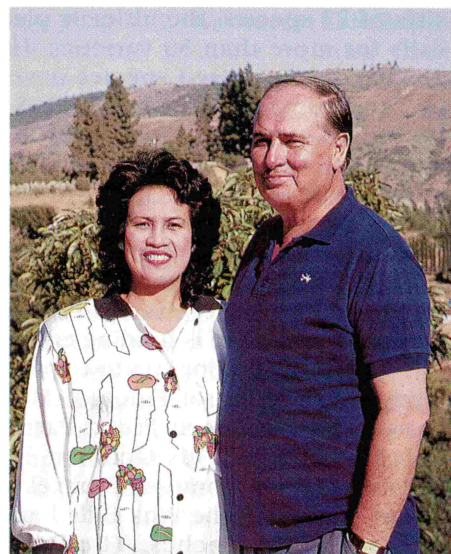
Walter's goal is to be able to provide domestic bred finches of the widest possible number of species to the finch enthusiast. The scope of his collection and the high production rate are geared to accomplishing this end. As countries close their doors to exportation, "we must be ever more successful at captive propagation," he says, "or there simply won't be any of these birds around."

Walter has time for a few other hobbies, as well. Most notable is his collection of cars, specifically the classical Mercedes. He likes to travel and has seen a great deal of the world. He is also a civil aviation pilot.

Walter shares his interest in birds with his lovely wife, Darla, who is his co-adventurer. Together they have a four year old son, Lance. They are members of the Avicultural Society of America and the AFA, and they plan to attend the AFA convention in Phoenix, Arizona. We will look forward to seeing them there and share with them their success. ●



Close up of breeding cages with individual pairs of Owl Finches in each cage.



Darla and Walter Moe