

*An Ounce of Prevention
was Worth a Pound of Cure . . .*
Surviving Hurricane Andrew
by Joan D. Redondo
Miami, Florida

The following is an eyewitness account of Hurricane Andrew from an aviculturist's view.

I am a small cockatiel breeder living in Miami (Kendall), Florida. I am vice president, newsletter editor and ACS representative for Tropical Cockatiel & Lovebird Club, Inc. As vice president of the club, I am responsible for programs. In June, 1992, a member of our club, Chris Fuchs, offered to give us a presentation on "Hurricane Preparedness for our Birds". Never having heard a presentation on this particular subject, I certainly thought it appropriate for this section of the United States. Among other things, Chris told us to have sufficient cages to bring our birds indoors, sufficient food and bottled water, long and short handled nets, first aid kit, emergency power for handfeeding, incubating, brooding, etc. (She offered her battery powered incubator for anyone that needed it). This excellent, informative lecture spurred me to action. I needed several cages to be able to bring all birds indoors. I purchased several. I vowed never to let my seed supply dwindle to nothing. As the thought of a hurricane is always in the back of one's mind, I felt better having accomplished these things.

On Sunday, August 23, our club had planned to have our annual picnic. Little did we know that Hurricane Andrew would interrupt. As late as Saturday, August 22, no warning was sounded on this storm. I just happened to look at Saturday morning's paper very early, saw a map with the storm on it, pointed directly at us. Immediately, I went to the grocery store, gas station and hardware store. True to my promise to myself, I had a good stock of cockatiel mix. Not until late Saturday afternoon did we hear that the hurricane might be headed our way and were put under hurricane watch.

On Sunday morning, August 23 (the day of our picnic), we were still not under warning. The warning came around 11:00 a.m. Everyone had very little time to prepare. Needless to say, we had to postpone the picnic.

My first concern at that time was to secure my birds and animals. I took

my time netting my cockatiels so I wouldn't lose any. I had two pairs of cockatiels sitting on eggs due to hatch in 2 to 3 days. I had to make a decision: 1) should I take the eggs to Chris to incubate, 2) remove the parent birds and discard the eggs, or, 3) move my very heavy cages (approximately 200 pounds) into my parents' garage? I decided not to take the eggs to Chris as I would have to handfeed from day 1 (not easy with cockatiels), couldn't just remove parents as eggs were close to hatching, decided on the third option because parent birds should be okay and perhaps eggs would hatch. My Dad devised a system where four of us could carry the cages with two long poles, one under each end. We carried them very smoothly into the garage. We closed them in and hoped for the best. We carried the rest of the cages in close to each other and tied them together with rope. I also have a pair of Maximilian Pionus who practically said aloud, "thank you for bringing us in the house". They seemed to sense the storm.

Each time I heard a new advisory, the storm had more intensity. At first the winds were 120, then 130, 140, 150 mph. I tried to remain calm, but my heart felt as if it wanted to jump out of my chest. Not knowing if the windows and sliding glass doors would withstand the winds, I placed the birds in the upstairs hallway with bedroom doors closed to create a barrier, downstairs hallway that had no windows or doors and the hall closet downstairs where I placed a large flight cage. One dog was in one bathroom, another in another bathroom and a cat in the half bath. After preparing and securing the house we drove three blocks to my parents' house which had shutters. This was about 5:00 p.m. on Sunday evening. There was no sign of a storm yet, just scattered showers and no wind. At this point in the evening we heard that the winds were at 160 MPH. Let me tell you, we were all afraid. At 8:00 p.m. the weather started to change. A big black storm started seemingly up the street to the east, moving swiftly. Soon we were all inside, six adults, two children and two babies. We watched the news on television constantly as the storm approached and the electric power stayed on until about 2:00 a.m. The weather was really terrible at that point. We were shocked to see a giant tree uprooted as if it were a

toothpick, lit up by lightning. We heard a sound like trains, screaming wind and then pounding on the front doors. We thought they would give way and were scared to death at this point. It sounded like a giant knocking on the front door wanting to enter. It was Hurricane Andrew, a giant, horrible storm. Throughout the night we withstood the storm, not knowing what was happening outside. As morning approached, we heard the great news on the battery radio that just fifteen minutes of the worst was left. That was the best news we had heard all night. As the sun rose dimly amidst the clouds, we could see the destruction through the back door. Probably 3/4 of the trees were uprooted or down. Almost all of our cars were wrecked with windows missing. I couldn't see my cages yet and I didn't know what had happened at my house with my birds and animals. As soon as it was possible (probably before we should have — around 10:00 a.m.), we left the house to try to go to my home. The roads were nearly impassable. Trees, branches, roof tile and roofs, glass, telephone poles, electric lines were all down in the streets. We could only drive a few feet into our street and walked the rest of the way. Most windows, doors and roofs were broken and blown off. We rushed to our house to check on our birds and other pets. All of them were alive. They all seemed scared and quiet. Seed was everywhere. Three lutino cockatiels (which were in the same cage) had bumped their wings and bled quite a bit. I pulled the blood feathers. All birds were unusually quiet. The dogs and cat were okay and very happy to see us. At this time of day it was still raining and the wind was gusty. I changed their water and left the birds in the house as fortunately no windows or glass doors were broken. I went back to my parents' house to survey the damage and found my cages scattered, tossed and bent but several were still usable. My two pairs in the garage seemed okay. They were still sitting on the eggs. On Tuesday morning, we were able to carry them back into the fresh air. I got them in place, checked the nest boxes and a baby bird had hatched. In a few days all eggs had hatched. This was really surprising because of the two moves and the horrible sounds of Hurricane Andrew. I guess I will name the babies — Andrew, Andrea, Andy, Drew, Ann . . . ! ●

Bird is First Identified as Poisonous

New Guinea finding held major discovery

by Natalie Angier
The New York Times

(Reprinted from The Daily News, Nation & World, Friday, Oct. 30, 1992 issue.)

Toppling traditional notions of how birds defend themselves, scientists have discovered the first known poisonous bird, a brilliant orange and black creature whose feathers and skin are laced with a potent toxin that is thought to deter predators.

Researchers were astonished by the discovery because they had never before found an example of a bird using a chemical defense against its enemies. Many insects, fish, amphibians and reptiles are equipped with noxious compounds that make them distasteful, but birds were thought to rely on quick flight to escape being eaten.

The bird, called a Hooded Pitohui (pronounced PIT-o-hooy), lives in New Guinea, is about the size of a blue jay and is familiar to local villagers and ornithologists alike. But only now have scientists learned that the bird harbors a poison.

"It blew our socks off," said Dr. Bruce M. Beehler of Wildlife Conservation International, a division of the New York Zoological Society. "There are about 9,200 species of birds out there, and no one has turned up this phenomenon of chemical defense in any of the species of any of the avian families. This was a bolt from the blue."

Beehler is an author of the report on the poisonous bird, appearing today in the journal Science.

The biologists believe the poison works by instantly repelling any snake, hawk or other predator that so much as licks one of the bird's feathers.

With the announcement that an animal they thought they knew has, in fact, a few surprises up its wing, researchers said they may have to reassess their assumptions and start looking for poisons in other types of birds.

Indeed, they suggest that some birds may be brightly colored not

simply as a way of attracting mates, as the standard explanation has it, but to announce to predators that they are poisonous.

"This is an excellent paper in every respect, a major discovery," said Dr. Thomas Eisner of Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., a pioneer in the study of chemical defenses in plants and insects. "It's opening up a fascinating door to the question, Are birds chemically protected more often than we realize? Is their flashy plumage sometimes a warning to predators rather than sexual adornment?"

Associated Press photo



The Hooded Pitohui of New Guinea is the only known poisonous bird.

Equally surprising to researchers, the toxin in the Pitohui has been seen nowhere else in nature except in the poison-dart frog, a South American amphibian and the source of the toxin that many Amazonian hunters use on the tips of their blow-darts.

That two such wildly different animals, a bird and a frog, living so far apart independently evolved an identical chemical defense mechanism is a completely unexpected finding. The poison, called homobatrachotoxin, is one of the most lethal toxins ever discovered.

John P. Drumbacher, a graduate student at the University of Chicago who worked with Beehler, made the discovery incidentally while studying birds of paradise in the New Guinea rain forest. The Pitohui often became entangled in the nets set out for the birds of paradise, and Drumbacher, while trying to free the

intruders, would cut his hands. Upon licking his wounds, Drumbacher found that his mouth began to tingle, burn and turn numb.

"In third grade they tell you to use all your senses to study nature," said Drumbacher. "We were moving so quickly from net to net that we ended up doing exactly that."

After consulting with local New Guineans, Drumbacher and others on the team learned that the villagers knew Hooded Pitohuis as "rubbish birds," not to be eaten unless skinned and specially prepared. As it turned out, the parts of the bird the New Guineans refused to eat were just those parts that contained the neurotoxin.

"They're completely familiar with their land," said Drumbacher. "They know every tree, every bird, every species in the forest." Not surprisingly, Drumbacher has abandoned the bird of paradise and instead made the Hooded Pitohui the subject of his doctoral dissertation. ●

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