

## Emerald Forest Bird Gardens, Inc.

by Sheldon Dingle  
Los Angeles, California

The whole thing really began in India in 1969 while Jennings was traveling. He bought a pair of Tricolored Nuns from a roadside vendor. Although his travels lasted a full year, Jennings kept this pair of birds with him in his car—a mobile aviary, as it were. He was hooked.

Eventually Jennings returned to Southern California and settled down to work. He also began a bird hobby to satisfy his fascination with finches—a hold over from his travels with the Nuns. I've had the enjoyment of watching Jennings, the bird hobbyist develop into Jennings, the serious conservationist, aviculturist and owner of one of the nicest bird farms I've seen—Emerald Forest Bird Gardens, Inc., in Fallbrook, California.

I'm not sure if Emerald Forest is labor efficient or cost effective but I don't really care. It's the pristine beauty and tranquility of the location that I enjoy and the way in which Jennings has blended the captive collection of birds in with the local environment, and the environment is rather wild and natural. Native wildlife includes coyotes, bobcats, the occasional cougar, racoons, opossums, and skunks. Most of these critters pose a predatory threat to the captive birds (fat meals) so Jennings has had to take special precautionary measures to keep the varmints out and the birds in. The area is also home to 12 kinds of snakes including four species of rattlers. The property has a natural pond about an acre in size that attracts numerous species of wild birds. Some you won't find in the average backyard are Great Ibis, Cormorants, three species of heron, Mallard Ducks, Green-winged Teal and American



*From the hilltop where the house is, one can look down into the valley and see some of the banks of aviaries. The long bank in the foreground is full of macaws but their noise is not the least bother at the house.*



*There is a wide variety of waterfowl on the pond, many of them quite rare and beautiful. The pond affords a much appreciated sanctuary for such visitors as Blue Heron—much to the annoyance of the fish.*



*In this remote corner of a huge pond, the Whooping Swans and Bar-headed Geese feel right at home.*





*This enclosure is built on a dirt hillside for a reason. The resident Blue-crowned Mot Mot's are burrowing birds and find this habitat very much to their liking. They dig like a pair of miners.*



*The Toco Toucans are always curious and alert. Their next door neighbor is a Red-billed Toucan — a species for which Jennings received a World First Breeding award.*



*This pair of Black-headed Caiques still have a jungle environment but don't have to worry about predators or working for a living.*



*Jennings leads the way more or less followed by one of the trusty guard dogs. If I remember correctly, this beast has bitten numerous folks caught unaware. It's not safe to cruise the grounds unescorted.*



Wigeon. Dusk brings on the chirping and booming of two species of tree frogs and at least one huge bullfrog.

The Jennings home and office overlooks a large valley. It's the valley that contains the pond and aviaries. The aviaries are scattered about seemingly at random but the effect is excellent. There are enough hills, gullies and glades that many of the aviaries are rather isolated. The birds have a great deal of privacy and, in some cases, probably feel they are still in their own jungle habitat.

There are 250 flights that include a few large pasture-like enclosures. The pond is fenced also. Some aviaries are constructed in the old steel-frame-on-the-ground, traditional manner (except they are on cement pads) while others are of wooden construction and are actually on the dirt. There are numerous banks of the "California Breeder" aviaries which are suspended from frameworks so the birds never get on the ground. Jennings was happy to point out that all the aviaries are designed to be serviced from the outside. This gives the birds a great sense of security and, of course, is

easier for the attendant.

In addition to the aviaries there are several important outbuildings on the farm. The 1,000 sq. foot nursery is located somewhat in the center of the property. During the heavy breeding season the nursery is fully utilized. During the off season, the odd handful of babies are cared for and hand fed in the main house. There is a large hospital room that is self contained even to having a full shower installed; and a new kitchen that will contain all the modern equipment necessary to provide fresh, clean food for the large numbers of birds is currently under construction.

Emerald Forest Bird Gardens really does house a lot of birds. There are 110 species on board. They are divided about one third parrots, one third soft-bills and one third waterfowl. I remember when Jennings had a very excellent collection specializing in various finches. Over the years his interests have expanded and the current collection reflects this.

In the soft-billed category Jennings specializes in the *Ramphastidae* — toucans, toucanettes and aracaris. Indeed, the world's largest and most diverse collection of toucans is right here at Emerald Forest Bird Gardens. Jennings has 20 species of this colorful and somewhat absurd family of birds. Their vivid splashes of color are appropriate to their clown-like antics. Entertaining birds, these.

For Jennings, however, there is a serious side to keeping the world's largest toucan collection. He *breeds* them. The tropical and neo-tropical habitats of many toucans are disappearing quickly. Many toucan species are not established in aviculture at all and other species are represented by only a few pairs in America. Jennings has established a non-profit Toucan Preservation Center that has funded toucan research in the jungles of Peru. They have a 60' boat to explore the waterways and glean information on the resident toucan populations. The Toucan Preservation Center has published two scientific papers on their work.

In connection with the toucan research, Jennings owns a ranch in the Costa Rican rainforest where he hopes to preserve a suitable habitat to keep and raise toucans. His goal there and in Fallbrook is to establish large captive breeding populations of the tou-

can family. With trade in wild-caught birds essentially over, this captive-bred population will serve as a source for zoos and other serious aviculturists. Jennings feels that not many of the soft-billed species will make it in aviculture in the long run. When they can't be replenished from the wild, they will eventually die out in aviculture. He loves the challenge of breeding soft-bills — especially the toucans.

I've already said that I've known Jennings for 20 years. He is an authentic character who has travelled the world and has many wild adventures to tell about — mostly involving birds and learning more about them. All this while I've enjoyed knowing Jennings and listening to him. No matter where you stand regarding Jerry, bosom buddy or disinterested bystander, you have to give him credit where it's due. I consider him to be the world's foremost expert regarding the toucan family in aviculture. He has raised 17 of the 20 species he keeps and, of the 17, at least seven were world first breedings.

Although the toucans, toucanettes and aracaris dominate the Emerald Forest Bird Garden collection in importance and achievement, there are numerous other soft-bills that I was very glad to see. The Fairy Bluebirds have a beautiful, large aviary that shows them off to great advantage. The tanagers, troupials, mot-mots, touracos and hornbills are birds you don't see in many collections.

In the parrot department, Jennings has seven species of macaws, nine species of cockatoos, Hawk-headed Parrots, several eclectus species, a few Australian parakeets, and some little hanging parrotlets. Most of these birds reproduce.

The waterfowl are not as easy to observe as many of them inhabit the swampy pond and have plenty of cover. I enjoyed immensely just sitting and watching the action on the pond. It is a real nature treat. The Purple Gallinules are my favorites but the Black-necked Swans run a close second. Actually, at the time of my visit in early February '93, the waterfowl collection was in some disarray. California has had the wettest season in years and a great deal of damage has been done by floods. The large dam that creates the pond was broken by flood waters and many ducks rode the crest right out of town. Others had

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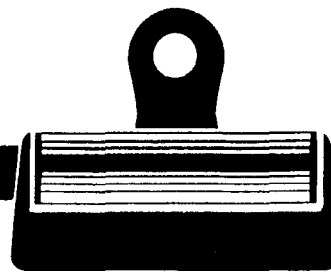
their nesting sites inundated and the local boat swamped. The dam had been repaired and things should be back to normal by the time you read this.

When you hike down the trail from the house, some of the first birds you come to are cranes. They are in enclosures that seemed to be a quarter of an acre or so in size. I had the opportunity to help Jennings move a couple of pairs of cranes from one pen to another. I was the sheepdog and Jennings was the catcher. I'm thankful no one was on hand to see a couple of middle-aged old guys running and leaping about like wild men. The cranes are much better at it.

During our conversation, Jennings and I reminisced how in the olden days (I hope you remember them, to) people kept birds for the joy and beauty of it. Jean Delacour and the Duke of Bedford come to mind. Many lesser persons also kept ornamental aviaries and just enjoyed the bit of nature — something like a living garden. The last 20 years or so have seen changes more toward the chicken ranch format and many exotic birds are kept in small, sterile, uniform, practical cages. Granted, this has, in many cases, increased the number of babies for many species, and the cage-incubator-nursery methods have been a boon in general, but the tranquil beauty of the garden aviary is missing.

Not so at Emerald Forest Bird Gardens. The setting is as natural as man-made aviaries can be. The aviaries are large and clean. They afford the birds all the blessings of nature — rain, sun, shade, shelter — all the ingredients to cause birds to be big, happy and healthy. To back nature up, Jennings works closely with two highly respected avian veterinarians.

All in all, Emerald Forest Bird Gardens Inc., is a commercial bird farm geared toward raising birds to supply zoos and individual aviculturists with the finest birds possible. It is also an excellent place to visit for the sheer joy of the environment. One could easily spend an entire day casually meandering about the extensive grounds. It's like a bird-watching foray into the woods. There is even a huge mutt that would pass for a bear, and of course, there's Jennings. I sincerely recommend the whole package. ●



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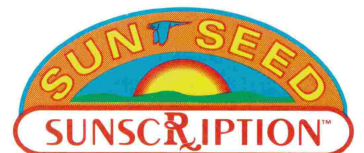


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