

Aviculture another perspective

by Bob Elgas
Big Timber, Montana

For many, the term aviculture suggests the husbandry of such birds as parrots, finches, doves, perhaps even waterfowl and pheasants. However, aviculture can be, and should be, much more. Most birds, when provided an appropriate environment, adapt well to captivity. Unfortunately, here in the United States, existing regulations largely preclude private individuals from possessing all but a few of our native birds. Aside from wild waterfowl, and various game birds, most other native forms are denied to aviculturists. In my opinion, and for very practical reasons, this is unfortunate.

Many of us remember a time when regulations were less restrictive. A time when it was possible to keep different kinds of native birds. Many a youngster had a pet crow, or perhaps a Red-tailed Hawk, and no one denied them the pleasure. As a boy, there was never a time I didn't have birds — birds of many varieties. The knowledge and experience from those earlier years has been invaluable in later avicultural pursuits.

One of my early fascinations was with birds of prey. At various times I have reared everything from Kestrels to eagles. Frequently they were babies



Photo by Bob Elgas

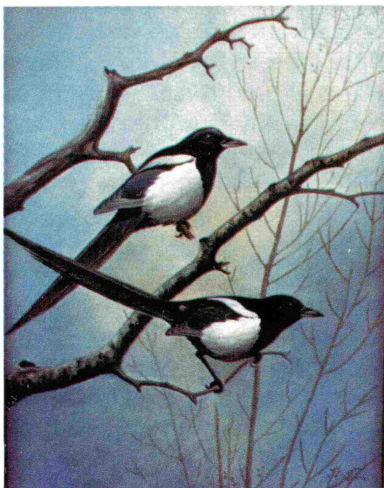
The author has three Steller's Jays sharing a large flight cage with a pair of Hyacinth Macaws. They are perfectly compatible with each other, even sharing the same food dish.

taken from the nest and handreared, but many injured birds came to me for care. I recall a male Sparrow Hawk (Kestrel) that had a broken wing. The wing healed, but in such a manner the bird was unable to fly. On nice days he spent his time on a falconer's block on the lawn where he could enjoy the warm sunshine. At the time, I was rearing a brood of four babies which

were about half grown. On one particularly nice day, as the old bird was on his block, I took the babies out on the lawn to feed them. Grasshoppers were plentiful, and a mainstay of Kestrel diet. As I was feeding the babies, I noticed the old bird had become immensely excited. It finally occurred to me he wanted to feed the youngsters. Somewhat gingerly I placed one of the young ones within reach and gave the old bird a grasshopper. He hopped down from his block and, with a little "chirring" call, reached the hopper out to the baby. The young one responded in an appropriate manner. From that time forward, the babies had found a new parent much to my delight and that of the birds involved.

One of my special favorites was a Red-tailed Hawk named Clipper. Clipper was reared from a fuzzy baby and, as is true with most birds of prey, was incredibly gentle. As he grew older, he spent much of his time on the lawn. Once a week the yard was irrigated by flooding with a couple of inches of water. Like any youngster, Clipper liked to play in the water. He would

Painting by Bob Elgas



Members of the Corvidae family including the Black-billed Magpies (above) have an unusual peculiarity among birds. Most birds either hop or walk; this family of birds do both. The author has reared many magpies.

THE POSITIVE APPROACH TO PARROTS AS PETS

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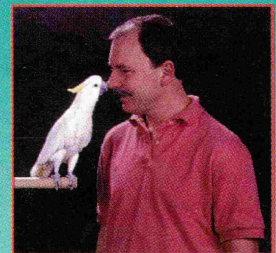
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puddle and splash until he became quite soaked, whereupon he would climb up onto his perch, spread his wings to the sun, and dry himself like a piece of laundry. His diet was heavily slanted to gophers. After he learned to fly, he would accompany me on excursions to procure his lunch. When a gopher was taken, I would wait for Clipper to fly overhead. I would throw it as high into the air as I could (I had a pretty fair throwing arm). Clipper would make some remarkable maneuvers, and seldom failed to catch his prey in mid-air. He would then fly home to his favorite perch on a limb on one of the trees in our yard, there to properly enjoy his lunch.

Perhaps the most awesome birds I have owned have been Golden Eagles. I have reared a number of them from babies. They become wonderfully tame, and are one of the most majestic of birds. Few people are aware of what an incredibly large bird a Golden Eagle is. The best possible description might be summed up in a single word — magnificent!

Another group of which I am particularly fond is the family Corvidae — crows, magpies, ravens and jays. They are highly intelligent, adapt well to humans, are hardy and easily cared for. They are omnivorous and eat a wide variety of both plant and animal foods. They adapt well to captivity and are a delightful addition to an aviary. Although they are frequently considered pests, and often destroyed as such, it is still not lawful to possess them. Only exotic varieties can be kept by aviculturists.

I have reared many magpies, which are truly spectacular. Their plumage is a handsome mix of jet black and gleaming white. The wings and long tail have iridescent shades of blues and bronze, a combination that makes them quite remarkable. Members of the Corvidae family have a peculiarity that is unusual in birds. Most birds either hop or walk, but members of the jay family do both. Interestingly, Hyacinth Macaws share the same peculiarity. Although I have not kept captive magpies for some time, they do receive special attention. Each summer there are numerous nesting pairs in our area, and a feeding program is maintained for them. They soon learn no harm will befall them here, and they become remarkably

tame. As a result, they will feed almost at one's feet without fear . . . how nice!

Perhaps one of the most interesting birds I have owned was a big northern raven named Rasputin. He arrived as a baby just beginning to show a few black feathers. Initially he was reared indoors, but as he matured he was moved out of doors where he was allowed to roam freely. He bonded closely with the family and rarely strayed any distance away. He especially enjoyed dog food and could have easily played right field for a professional ball club. He was unerring in his capability to catch morsels that came his way and, be it a pop up or a long drive, he rarely missed. As is true with all members of the family, Rasputin was filled with thievery and mischief. Any small, brightly colored object was immediately snatched up in his big beak and whisked away to a secret hiding place. On the rare occasions when a cache is discovered, it is amazing to note the diversity of the treasures that have been hoarded.

All members of the jay family are mischievous. Rasputin was no exception. He took special delight in harassing the dog, a little border collie named Gyp. He especially enjoyed catching Gyp asleep, stretched out on the patio absorbing the warm sun. Rasputin would swoop down and, with that big, powerful raven beak, inflict a huge pinch upon Gyp's tail. With a yelp of anguish, the poor dog would bound to his feet only to discover in frustration Rasputin sitting high atop his perch quite out of reach. Gyp never did learn to cope with such mischief.

Rasputin stayed with us for a considerable period of time. However, as he matured, he gradually drifted further and further from home. Ultimately he formed relationships with others of his kind and finally reverted back to the wild. This, of course, was as it should be, but he left us with many fond memories.

I have never lost my fondness for jays, and even today I have a trio of Steller's Jays that were brought to me some seven or eight years ago as tiny nestlings. They live in my indoor aviary, sharing a large flight cage with a pair of Hyacinth Macaws. They are perfectly compatible one with the other, even sharing the same food utensils. Rather an interesting thing about them is the fact they had no

opportunity to learn normal jay calls from their parents. As a result, in place of the usual racous calls common to jays, these babies developed melodious whistling calls — quite pleasing, and certainly rather remarkable. The flight they share with the Hyacinths is some 16 feet in length. However, when I am feeding and watering, I frequently allow them to fly freely about the aviary which is 70 feet in length. This gives them ample opportunity to exercise their wings and satisfy their natural tendency to explore. They especially like plundering the food counter by stealing peanuts or other morsels, which they whisk away and stash into a secret nook for further reference. Such caches are invariably tucked into a corner, then covered with camouflage material in an obvious effort to keep the treasure cache secret. They are so tame they will alight on my hand for a treat. One of the things that make such birds so endearing is their seemingly unlimited energy and their sparkling personality. It is truly a remarkable experience to enjoy such marvelous birds.

As a result of my rehabilitation efforts, I have been privileged to keep a considerable variety of birds. Some that we have been successfully able to treat have included such varieties as ospreys, pelicans, various owls, assorted birds of prey, waterfowl and many smaller birds. Each has been a challenge and each has been an opportunity to learn. Each has broadened our perspective regarding aviculture.

As previously stated, existing regulations prevent private aviculturists from owning most native birds. In my opinion this is unfortunate. Current conditions, not only here in this country but indeed worldwide, are such that wildlife, particularly birds, are confronted with situations that threaten their survival. Spectacular and high profile birds such as California Condors, Whooping Cranes and Peregrine Falcons will be beneficiaries of heroic efforts to preserve their existence. Sadly, other species less widely known will not benefit to the same degree, and many will inevitably be lost.

Captive breeding programs directed toward preservation of endangered wildlife will be virtually impossible at either the state or federal level. The various zoos at best could provide but

limited assistance. By far the greatest opportunity to preserve endangered species exists within the private sector. There are many aviculturists, if but given the opportunity, who have the desire, dedication, and certainly the capability to breed rare birds. The time to learn the requirements for perpetuating any species is while those species are still comparatively abundant. Too frequently in the past, no effort has been made on behalf of a species in difficulty until it is at the brink of oblivion. Such a course makes not the slightest sense and we need to re-evaluate our policies.

Unfortunately, there are organized groups that are opposed to the keeping of wildlife of any kind in captivity. Such slogans as "better dead than bred," or "let them die with dignity" attest all too conclusively that certain people prefer extinction to preservation through captive breeding. Sadly, these groups wield considerable influence and too frequently their philosophy is allowed to prevail.

There are also those within various professional agencies who look upon aviculturists as individuals interested in keeping birds, but with little to offer that is meaningful. Nothing could be further from the truth. Aviculture contains many highly skilled individuals, dedicated and knowledgeable. People who have proven their capabilities in breeding rare birds and, given the opportunity, are ready and able to continue to do so. Information learned through captive breeding cannot possibly be duplicated by observations of field biologists. It is information that could well be crucial to the survivability of rare birds. If even one species were saved from extinction, it would be worth the effort.

It is my opinion that a system should be initiated which would allow aviculturists to keep native birds. This would enable them to learn the requirements and methods for perpetuation through captive breeding. The establishment of captive self-sustaining populations could be a powerful force against extinction, a potentiality that will only increase with the passage of time.

It is a grave mistake to ignore the potential of aviculture. It is long since time we be looked upon, not as the ugly duckling of conservation, but as the powerful force for preservation we truly are. ●



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