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Good Business Good Aviculture

By
David Sefton
Austin, Texas

For most aviculturists whether they raise birds for fun or livelihood, their avicultural pursuits are affected by breeding profitability. Few aviculturists can fund their breeding programs solely from a savings account. In fact, quite a few breeders over the last decade, some rather prominent, couldn't sustain the cost of operating their aviary and eventually got out of aviculture. The size and quality of an aviary is, in some part, very dependent on its ability to make money from breeding. The more "profit", the larger, more diverse the aviary. To the extent that an aviary "loses" money, the aviary will be down sized or remain constant, and frequently cost-cutting steps are taken such as spending less on veterinary fees, equipment and disinfectants to run the aviary and the like. These cost-cutting steps might not be in the best long-term interest of a breeding program.

To the extent the quality of an aviary is dependent upon the revenues of the breeding program, discussion of good business practices go hand in hand with good aviculture. The more money an aviary produces the more money is potentially available for conservation. Consequently, all aviculturists need to consider their "bread and butter" avian breeders — those regular producing species that cover the basic cost of operations. I frequently look at my personal aviary in two parts: one for conservation, the second for paying expenses.

Watchbird is an excellent source to learn about the first part of the aviary (conservation). However, little is written regarding the second part of an aviary

(related to providing for the basic cost of operations). For the better part of two and one-half centuries aviculture has been the privilege of Dukes, Earls, millionaires and other cultural elite who didn't worry about operating their collection at a profit. In many regards aviculture is still considered an elitist avocation. The truth of the matter, at least in the United States, is that aviculture is comprised mainly of the every day person who has a few birds in the backyard. These can be teachers, truck drivers, accountants, policemen, even chefs and virtually all other demographics. For the everyday aviculturist, those without inherited fortunes, economics of aviculture isn't piratical, it's fundamental to successful preservation of species.

An aviary, if it is to be established for the long-term, must consider the "bread and butter" production that covers daily operating and feed cost. The most frequent mistake I see is novice aviculturists buying birds that are more expensive than they realistically can afford. It goes back to the elitist tradition in aviculture. Frequently, aviculturists are judged by the rarity of the birds they have in their collection and the size of the collection — *not their success at breeding*. Can you imagine a bank being judged on the size and beauty of its vault versus its financial condition? When the novice aviculturists consider initial purchases, they should concentrate on building their "bread and butter" stock to provide the groundwork (financial security) for their future aviary. As odd as it seems, frequently the "bread and butter" stock

is also the least expensive and offers the greatest profits. The profits from these early purchases can then be funneled into your breeding program through trades for birds or outright purchases. By buying prolific easy to breed stock initially one can build up financial reserves without going on a limb for purchases of birds that put your whole program at risk if you were to lose one.

Consider the recent dilemma of a friend. He purchased a pair of Moluccan Cockatoos for a good price. Lucky for him they bred rather quickly — in about six months. Less fortunate, they cracked their eggs (a notorious Moluccan trait). Second clutch, six months later, the babies were killed. A few months later the male killed the hen, again a trait commonly associated with Moluccans. He purchased a second hen (not at a bargain price) with subsequent mate trauma, and he invested another \$200-\$300 in vet bills. Then two years down the road he had eggs again, and again the eggs were crushed. He invested in an incubator. So it goes. This is neither an isolated occurrence nor uncommon. He now has almost \$3,000 invested in the pair of birds he "originally" got as a good deal. He has vet fees, over two years without production, expensive heavier cages and the like. Not surprisingly, he also is having a hard time supporting his cockatoo collection.

In a second example, two people in my club both paid \$250 apiece for a guaranteed sexed pair of mature Quaker Parakeets (Monks). In each instance these birds laid within 45 days of a nest box being put on the cages. Twelve months have not elapsed, yet each has had three clutches of five babies (average) and can expect one or two more by the end of the year. Each pair of birds, if the production continues, will have produced five clutches of five babies at a retail value of \$150 per baby. The income will be \$3,750 for each breeder for the year. In other words, in two years they each will have earned \$7,500. My friend with the Moluccan Cockatoo still hasn't earned dime one, yet he is still putting money out to maintain the birds. The novice breeders on the other hand, at the end of two years, can go out and buy two or three pairs of Moluccan Cockatoos with the profits made from the Monks.

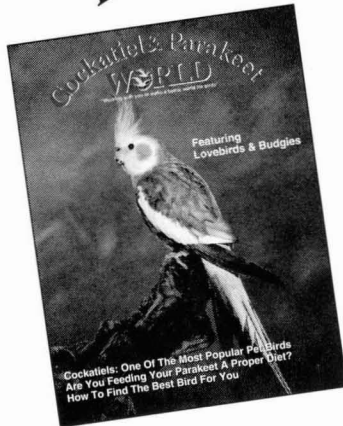
Query, which breeder now has more money to donate to conservation and preservation of aviculture? Which breeder is now in a position to set up

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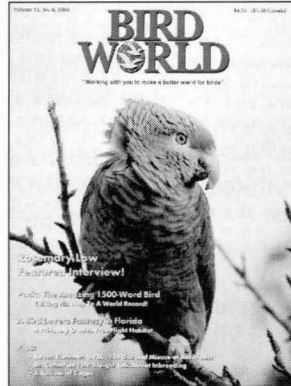
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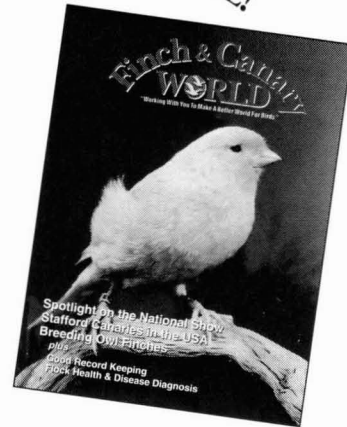


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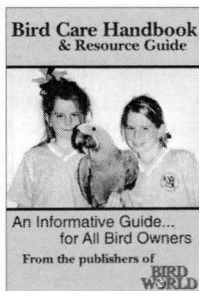
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species specialization that will benefit aviculture? Interestingly enough, at a social gathering of aviculturists, if one would ask the novice breeders what they bred they would say, somewhat chagrined "Oh, I *only* have some monk parakeets" whereas, the other breeder would proudly swell his chest and say "I breed Moluccans". The Quaker Parakeet breeder would automatically hold the Moluccan breeder in high esteem. Doesn't make much sense when we carefully analyze their respective success, does it?

The million dollar question is how to establish what is a "bread and butter" species. A dissertation could be written on this subject, however, we'll just cover some of the highlights. First and foremost, one needs to consider the market. Which birds are selling in your area. Aviculture is very regional; what is in high demand in one area is in surplus in another. Analyze who breeds what in your area. Visit all the local stores that retail birds. List for yourself those birds that you see in all the pet shops. Note if a particular bird has been in the pet shop for a long time. Start reading the paper every day and notice what kind of birds are for sale.

The emphasis is on avoiding birds that are over-produced in your area. For example, in central Texas we have an over abundance of Sun Conures. It seems practically everyone has a pair at home breeding. Conversely, when I spoke before the Utah Avicultural Society in Sale Lake City, practically no one had Sun Conures and the club members were amazed that they sold as cheaply as they did in central Texas and were as readily available. Many species suffer from the same regional shortages and surpluses. Of course the object is to get a bird that has market appeal, and for which a supply shortage has created strong demand.

I am a strong proponent of species specialization, yet don't specialize in a species that is prolific and someone else in your area has already established 20 pairs! The point is to specialize in a different species! Be very aware of a concentration of certain species in a particular locale. In addition, consider existing and potential legislation against particular species. Obviously this would very much apply to Monk Parakeets as I suspect a few more states will outlaw them in the future.

Trying to consider relative profitability of different species, with different

clutch sizes and different sales prices, etc. is hard for many people to conceptualize. The end result of analyzing "bread and butter" species should be maximizing yearly profit and minimizing both initial cash outlay and risk (specifically trauma). I have developed a rough mathematical formula to simplify the process of considering relative species. I have reduced these concepts to a rough tongue-in-cheek equation.

Clutch Size x Number of Clutches Per Year x Retail Sales Price x Number of Years of Production (in a five year period) = Profit Less Cost of the Bird x % Probability of Disaster

This formula gives a relative value only useful in comparing two different species being considered as a mutually exclusive purchase (meaning you can't buy both). In other words, if you were considering purchasing African Ring-necked Parakeets as opposed to a pair of Moluccan Cockatoos you would perform this calculation on each species and compare the overall five year profit (periods for over five years tend to be meaningless as too many factors can come into play). Considering, for example, a Sun Conure or Monk Parakeet, I would estimate the probability of disaster as being statistically close to zero. Yet for a Moluccan Cockatoo or a Crimson-winged Parakeet the probability of disaster will be close to 25% over a five year period. Admittedly this is a guess, yet some weight should be given to the frequency of occurrence of mate trauma and the species' relative hardiness.

Some species can be expected to lay within months of being set up. Others take years before becoming comfortable. The years of production represent an important consideration in terms of profitability with reference to species and accordingly should be taken into account. Of course, you can have a pair within a very prolific species that never lays, and conversely, a species normally difficult to breed that lays like chickens. A straight flush in a Las Vegas poker hand is a possibility, but it rarely happens and I doubt you would build your vacation around such expectations. In dealing with probability, consider the general trends, not the exceptions. Too many aviculturists build their breeding programs around hopes for the exceptions as opposed to considering the general trends. Not surprising, the immutable laws of probability wreak havoc on their profitability.

When considering a species as an in-

come generator (in other words, selling into the retail pet trade), one needs to consider its appeal as a pet. This could be based on price, coloration, ability to talk, temperament and personality. The market appeal will be some aggregation of these various characteristics. For example, a bird that talks well, is very affectionate and even-tempered does not necessarily have to be as brightly colored as another bird. No bird will score 100% in all of these categories. One has to tailor the bird to the market.

After narrowing the field to several potential species, consider proliferation and clutch size. I define prolific as the number of clutches the birds can have in a season *without harming health*. This consideration is intangible, yet for many species experienced breeders have a general idea of how frequently they can be bred without harm.

Average clutch size for a species is also very important. Some hookbill species have four to six eggs per clutch. One would try to concentrate on a species that has in excess of two eggs per clutch.

I think for the "bread and butter" species it is important to stay away from color mutations. Virtually all color mutations were created through inbreeding in some form or another. This may reduce both prolificacy and clutch size characteristics (although there are exceptions). If buying a domestic bird, it is crucial to find out the clutch size of the parents. This genetic trait has a propensity for being passed down to the offspring, especially the hen. A hen that comes from a large healthy clutch is much more valuable than a "bargain" hen from a normal clutch. It makes good business sense to pay up to 50% more for a hen from an extraordinary clutch when this can be verified through good records.

After a prolific species has been determined as marketable in your area, then consider sources for purchasing proper breeding stock. Attending AFA conventions are investments in your future. These conventions offer the opportunity of making contacts with many different breeders from all over the country. You stand a far greater chance of acquiring proper breeding stock through the AFA conventions and personal connections as opposed to making blind calls from the back of one of the mass circulation periodicals.

Most aviculturists seem to be working on limited budgets. If limited resources are a problem, then a breeder


should buy one less pair of birds than he can afford and be sure to set up the breeding stock with the best cages, feeding utensils and nestboxes available. I know many breeders, perhaps the majority, that buy birds and don't have nestboxes. Many times it might take breeders almost six months or a year to buy nestboxes. Of all the interesting behaviors of novice breeders I find this the most frustrating and the least understandable. Having a breeding pair of birds without a nestbox is like having a new car without wheels. What's the purpose? Yet, almost all aviculturists, experienced and novice, make this mistake. We have almost 20 unassembled nestboxes in our storage shed. We have a target of having a nestbox on a cage within two week of a bird's coming out of quarantine. We have even put nestboxes on cages in our own quarantine location and have several times actually had babies by the time their quarantine period was over. Just remember, no nestboxes — no eggs.

Setting the bird up properly is important. One should read relevant literature, and talk to breeders, especially the per-

son from whom you buy to determine what diet and set-up that would work best. One should consider fostering, incubation and environmental controls to increase production if applicable. Almost all of these topics are covered to some degree at the AFA conventions and in Watchbird. I realize I harp on the value of the AFA conference, but I wouldn't stress it if I didn't think it put money in my pocket.

Finally, line up purchasers and review different advertising options before your first babies. I strongly recommend business cards, and especially recommend the photographic business cards. Leave them everywhere you go. Many restaurants, stores, and veterinary clinics have boards on which to post notices. Make good use of this free advertising. It's a little late to start worrying about selling your babies, after you have had your first eggs. Establish a special notebook to record everyone interested in purchasing a baby. Each telephone call may be money in your pocket and these names should be cherished like a trust fund. It takes many people as long as a year to buy a parrot, so take the names even if you haven't produced any ba-

bies or don't currently have any. All these people should be contacted when you have young ones to sell. If they have already purchased another bird, spend some time chatting with them, invite them to your bird club. In all likelihood they will become dissatisfied with the person they purchased the bird from, yet will be in love with the bird itself. Even though they didn't purchase a bird from you, they can be an effective sales force if you ask if they have any friends that might like a parrot. You can build your potential for sales with each contact you make. Realize though, sales don't happen with each call. You might have to make or receive fifty calls for each sale. Selling becomes an exercise in probability theory. The more occurrences the more likely a sale.

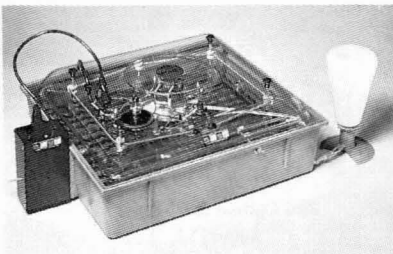
My interest is keeping people in aviculture long-term. All the good intentions of the world cannot mitigate the fact that it takes cash to run an aviary. With our avicultural interest and desire for preservation of endangered species, we should infuse a strong dose of good business sense. If we don't, then we won't have done as much for aviculture as we could. 



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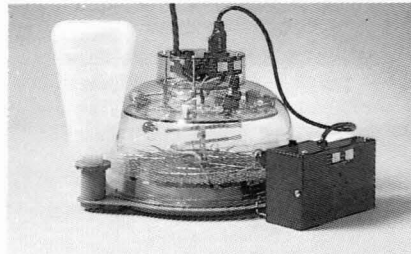
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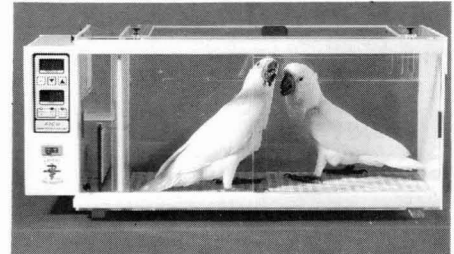
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Mon. - Fri. 10:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.
Sat. & Sun. 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.
Bird care seminar. Speaker Pat Huff, D.V.M.
Macaw Landing 7:30 p.m.
For information call: (503) 286-0882

Billings 1st Annual Pet & Product Trade Show May 13, 1995

10:00 a.m. - 7:00 p.m.
at the Boys and Girls Club
505 Orchard Lane

Texas Avian Expo May 13, 1995

Embassy Suites Hotel
San Antonio, TX
8:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
For information, contact:
Honey Wood (210) 695-2644 or
Denise Crisp (210) 612-3222
P.O. Box 380522, San Antonio, TX 78280

4th Annual Upper Midwest Bird Mart, May 20, 1995

9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Minnesota State Fairground
Empire Commons Building
Contact: Ken or Nellie Rohe (612) 854-6439
or Dallas or Marland Howes (612) 427-1046

Central New York Caged Bird Club's Spring Exhibition May 20, 1995

9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
Cicero Great Northern Mall
For information, contact:
Dave Dixon (315) 598-5927
RD #8, Box 1540, Fulton, NY 13069
or Martha Cardassi (315) 697-9934
RT #5, Box 80, Canastota, NY 13032

Erie Cage Bird Club Annual Bird Fair May 20, 1995

10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Perry Hi-way Hose Co.
8270 Peach Street, Erie, PA
For information, contact:
Michelle Bules (814) 866-6636
2520 Dorn Road, Waterford, PA 16441

Central Penna Cage Bird Club's Annual Bird Mart & Pet Bird Show May 21, 1995

10:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
Holiday Inn Harrisburg West
5401 Carlisle Pike, Mechanicsburg, PA
For more information, contact:
Sam Karns (717) 957-4846
2204 Whispering Pines Drive
Marysville, PA 17053
Pet Bird Show:
Gail Blake (714) 533-2393
1148 East Caracas Avenue
Hershey, PA 17033

Raleigh-Durham Caged Bird Society 7th Annual Pet Bird Fair May 27, 1995

9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
at the Holshouser (Village of Yesteryear) Building
State Fairgrounds Gate 6
Youth Center Road, Raleigh, NC
For info.: Kay Francis (919) 553-4710, in Raleigh
or Cindy Chappell (919) 779-1206 in Durham

Central Oklahoma Bird Club 6th Annual Bird Fair and Mart June 3, 1995

State Fair Grounds
Made in Oklahoma Bldg.
Oklahoma City, OK
9:30 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
For information, contact:
(405) 789-7881 or (405) 454-3866

Alamo City Bird and Exotic Pet Show The Biggest Little Show in Texas June 10, 1995

10:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.
Live Oak Civic Center
off 35 N & Loop 1604
For info.: (210) 648-0788

Maryland Cage Bird Society Annual Bird Mart June 17, 1995

9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Earleigh Heights Volunteer Fire Hall
Severna Park, MD
For info.: Laura Michel (410) 879-7843

Central Indiana Cage Bird Club's 7th Annual Fair June 24 & 25, 1995

10:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
Marion County Fairgrounds
Indianapolis, IN
Large raffle with proceeds benefiting
Avian Research and Conservation
For information, call:
Carrie (317) 297-0387 or
Sheryl (317) 241-3023

Northwest Exotic Bird Society Western Washington Exotic Bird Fair July 15, 1995

Puyallup Fairgrounds
10:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.
Birds, supplies, food, toys & more
Vendors call: Janay Teloo (206) 485-8734
All other info. call: Susan Hoyer (206) 441-0360

West Pasco Exotic Bird Club 6th Annual Exotic Bird Expo July 16, 1995

Ahepa Convention Center
1355 Rainville Road
Tarpon Springs, FL 34689
Contact: West Pasco Exotic Bird Club
P.O. Box 5032, Hudson, FL 34689
Jackie Feierabend (813) 863-7217

Exotic Pet Showcase Raritan Center Expo Hall Edison, NJ

August 5, 6, 1995
Contact: Vicki Clark's Expo USA
503 East Penn Blvd., Woodbury, NJ 08096-2823
(609) 848-3312, fax (609) 384-6704

Exotic Bird Club of Florida Bird Auction and Vendor Sales August 13, 1995

9:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.
Greater Palm Bay Senior Center
1275 Culver Drive, Palm Bay, FL
For information, contact:
EBCF, P.O. Box 1177, Melbourne, FL 32902
(407) 723-7739

Foothill Bird Fanciers Foothill Fanciers Bird Mart August 27, 1995

Roseville Fairgrounds
All American Blvd., Roseville, CA
Contact: Lewis Tuttle (916) 771-2336
4003 Lowdan Lane, Roseville, CA 95747

Avian Trade Shows & Seminars

**Central Alabama Avicultural Society
Annual Show and Fair
September 2-3, 1995**

Saturday: 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
Sunday: 9:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.
Governors House Hotel
2705 East South Blvd., Montgomery, AL
For information, call: (334) 857-3817

**Capital District Cage Bird Club
2nd Annual Birdmart
September 16, 1995**

9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
Howard Johnson's, exit 23 off NYS Thruway
For info.: Pat Huff (518) 732-2978

**Erie Cage Bird Club
Annual Auction
September 16, 1995**

Starts at 1:00 p.m.
Holtz's Auction Center
Norcross Road, Erie, PA
Contact: Michelle Bules (814) 866-6636
2520 Dorn Road, Waterford, PA 16441

**The Biggest Little Bird Expo in Reno
September 16, 1995**

9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
Reno Livestock Events Center, Exhibit Hall
Washoe County Fairgrounds, Reno, NV
For information, contact:
Reno Area Avian Enthusiasts
P.O. Box 10393, Reno, NV 89510-0393
(702) 425-5125 or (702) 826-9714

**Greater Chicago Cage Bird Club
Annual Fall Bird Fair
September 23, 1995**

Saturday, 10:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. at
the Hattendorf Center
225 E. Elk Grove Blvd.
Elk Grove, IL
For info.: (708) 705-6260

**South Jersey Bird Club
South Jersey Bird Show/Research Expo
September 30 - October 1, 1995**

Garden State Racetrack
Cherry Hill, NJ
For info.: Vicki Clark (609) 848-3312

**Middle Tennessee Cage Bird Club
10th Annual Fall Show and Fair Eggstravaganza
October 7, 8, 1995**

Tennessee State Fairgrounds
Exhibitor's Bldg. and Annex
Nashville, TN
For information, call:
Fred & Helen Thompson
(615) 745-8179

**Arizona Seed Crackers Society
presents an
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October 8, 1995, noon - 5:00 p.m.**

Mesa Community Center
263 N. Center, Mesa, AZ
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Cherie Mason - avian behavior
Kate McCullough, DVM - avian panel
Daniel Burke, DVM - avian panel
Nancy Murbach, DVM - avian panel
For info.: Diane, (602) 983-6878

**Kansas Avicultural Society, Inc.
13th Annual Caged Bird Show & Fall Bird Fair
October 14, 1995**

Ramada Inn-Airport
5805 W. Kellogg, Wichita, KS
Contact: Pati Hazell (316) 942-8864

**Greater Rochester Hookbill Association
Annual Show and Exhibition
October 14, 1995**

10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Genesee Conservation League
1570 Penfield Road, Rochester, NY
For info.: Denise Testa (716) 768-8933

**New York Finch & Type Canary Club
3rd Annual Show
October 14, 1995**

Plattdeutsch Park Restaurant
Annex
1132 Hempstead Turnpike
Franklin Square, NY
For info.: Marie (718) 468-0881

**International Pet Expo and Conference
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Sands Expo & Convention Center
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For information, contact:
Tom McLaughlin, Show Management Office
406 S. First Ave., Arcadia, CA 91006-3829
(818) 447-2222, fax (818) 447-8350

**Massachusetts Cage Bird Association
78th All Bird Show
October 21, 1995**

Hanover, MA
Contact for info.: Glenda Boehner (508) 583-3966
or Carol Fraser (508) 588-3022

**Connecticut Association for Aviculture
19th Annual Exotic Bird Show
October 28, 1995**

"Tails-U-Win" Hall
175 Adams St., Manchester, CT 06040
For info.: Bob Sunday (203) 525-8338

**Exotic Pet Showcase
Illinois State Fairgrounds
Springfield, IL
October 28, 29, 1995**

Contact: Vicki Clark's Expo USA
503 East Penn Blvd., Woodbury, NJ 08096-2823
(609) 848-3312, fax (609) 384-6704

**Avicultural Society of Tucson
10th Annual Bird Fair
October 29, 1995**

Tucson Convention Center (AZ)
New Exhibition Hall
For info.: Casey Kilcullen (520) 743-3731
or Joyce Baum (520) 825-3400

**Exotic Bird Club of Florida
Annual Show
November 4, 1995**

Holiday Inn, 4500 West New Haven Ave.
(Highway 192) Melbourne, Florida
Motel reservations (407) 724-2050
For show info.: Yvonne Weir (407) 452-0706
or Mary Petty (407) 632-7494

**The Greater Chicago Cage Bird Club
63rd Annual Cage Bird Show
November 4, 1995**

12 noon - 6:00 p.m.
Rolling Meadows Holiday Inn
3405 Algonquin Road
Rolling Meadows, IL
General info.: (708) 705-6260

**Exotic Pet Showcase
Valley Forge Convention Center
King of Prussia, PA
November 25, 26, 1995**

Contact: Vicki Clark's Expo USA
503 East Penn Blvd., Woodbury, NJ 08096-2823
(609) 848-3312, fax (609) 384-6704