Great-billed Parrots

Bill Duncan, Arbuckle, CA and
Susie McKinney, Vacaville, CA

Long time aviculturist (60 years),
bird show judge, author, lecturer and
officer in numerous avicultural organi-
zations, Francis Billie is gone. He died
at 2:00 A.M. February 10, 1997 of can-
cer of the throat.

Although Francis had the cancer for
a year or so, it did not seem to slow
him down at all. He continued to work
(handling the birds he loved at
Magnolia Bird Farm), drive and attend
bird club meetings right up to the time
he entered the hospital for the last
time. He died peacefully in his sleep
after only a few days in bed. Much of
his successful coping with cancer can
be attributed to his wife Erma who
spared no effort to care for him.

For many, many years Francis was
an avicultural icon, not only in south-
ern California, but throughout the
United States and many other parts of
the world. He was a great friend of
many of the most important avicultur-
ists and bird lovers of this century.

But Francis was never so happy as
when talking to and dealing with the
ordinary folks who were just learning
about birds. He was a very popular
speaker at local bird clubs where he
served as mentor and teacher to hun-
dreds of newcomers to aviculture.

Our sympathy goes out to Erma
who shared the love of birds and
everything else with Francis. Francis
could not have done it without her. All
of us will miss Francis. Aviculture has
lost a true pioneer.

was first introduced to the Great-
billed Parrot (*Tanygnathus megal-
orynchos*) through a newspaper
classified ad in 1989. It was an unfa-
miliar species so out came Forshaw's
*Parrots of the World*. Forshaw's
account really impressed me.

I bought the bird which sexed out
to be a hen but wasn't able to locate a
male until 1990 when a shipment of
birds came into a quarantine station in
Los Angeles. The new bird was young
with black eyes.

**Serious Chewers**

I soon discovered that these birds
were quite destructive and required
heavy duty wire in order to keep them
caged. The pair seemed to settle right
in to the daily routine. Unfortunately,
just before the breeding season, I was
forced to place my entire collection
out on a two-year breeders loan due to
an illness in my family.

With the collection gone, it seemed
a good time to build the new aviaries
that had been in the planning for
years. I had gone on many aviary tours
with my local bird club, Capitol City
Bird Society in Sacramento, and
gleaned a number of ideas from fellow
club members.

**New Aviaries**

The new aviaries (patterned some-
what after those of co-author
McKinney) now consist of three build-
ings with indoor cages connected to
outdoor flights. The flights are made of
\(\frac{1}{2}\) X 3 in., 12 gauge wire mesh and are
suspended. They measure 2 X 3 X 3 ft.
inside and 3 X 3 X 4 ft. outside. The
outside flights are 12 in. apart. The
inside cages are 20 in. apart to allow
for the hanging of metal nesting boxes
that measure 24 X 24 X 11 in.

Nesting material is a 50/50
mixture of pine shavings and orchid bark. The
birds chew this into a fine powder that
can leave the birds with a rust color on
their feathers. This also gives them
something to chew on while brooding
their eggs. I find that this mixture also
holds moisture better than shavings
alone. The nest box is left up year
around but the pair does not use it
unless they are getting ready to nest. In
fact I don't see much interaction
between the pair until they begin to
breed.

Each building is equipped with out-
side overhead misters that are on a
timer that goes off four times a day.
The misters usually stay on for about
an hour at a time. I find that the pairs
like to bathe early in the morning.

**Dietary Considerations**

I have found that not much has
been written about the diet and repro-
duction of this species. The first diet I
gave consisted mostly of seeds. In a
1993 article on the *Tanygnathus* parrot
species, Dale Thompson said he
felt that their diet should be made up of
about 50% seed and 50% fruit and vege-
tables. I began to increase the fresh
diet and experimented with their likes
and dislikes. I started adding nuts on a
daily basis year around. They get only a couple a day but I rotate the kinds. I use walnuts, pecans, almonds and coconuts, their favorite being coconuts.

The only time I see preening between the pair is at breeding time. The rest of the year they seem to ignore each other. I beef up the diet at this time making sure they have a variety to choose from. I use apples, pomegranates, pineapple, mangoes, papaya, melon, grapes, oranges and bananas. I occasionally throw them a whole lemon or grapefruit that they peel, eating the skin and leaving the fruit. By the way, they prefer the sour type of apples over the sweet. Delicious. For vegetables I offer broccoli, cauliflower, sweet-potatoes, frozen mixed vegetables, carrots and corn on the cob (they eat the cob as well as the corn). I have found that they seem to like the stem part of grapes and often ignore the fruit, and to my surprise, when I put date palms into their flight area for chewing, they stripped all the leaves off and devoured the woody stem. This is one of their favorites. When giving pineapple, I give them the entire fruit. The first thing they go for is the outside skin and the green leafy stem.

I Spy

I have an enclosed porch on the back of my house that I use to spy on many of my birds. I often take my morning coffee and cigarette out and sit and observe the pair for hours at a time. As you can imagine, I don’t get a lot done on these days. I have noticed that courting usually goes on for about a month until they settle down to the serious business of nesting.

Eggs

In 1994 the pair laid for the first time. Both clutches were infertile but I left the eggs in the nest for the full 28 day sitting cycle. The hen sat tight, only coming out when I left fresh diet. At this time I was able to examine the eggs and get her use to the idea that I would be looking in the nest daily. I have never chased her off the nest.

In the Spring of 1995 she laid again. The first clutch of two eggs was clear. I’m getting very discouraged. To my surprise, she laid again in May, this time three eggs. I continued to check the nest at feeding time. I have trouble in recognizing fertility in the early stages so I have to wait a full 10 to 15 days before I am absolutely sure one way or the other. At first I thought the eggs were rotten but left them any way. The eggs were due to hatch around the 10th of June.

My friend and business partner Susie McKinney was being given a surprise Over-the-Hill birthday party on June 11 so with no babies I decided to attend. Just before leaving I ran out to give the Great-billeds their vegetables and as usual I opened the nest.

Babies

To my surprise there sat an ugly, brand new baby. I nearly jumped out of my skin with excitement. I decided to stay home and keep a close watch on the activity around the nest. I called Susie several times over the next few hours. We decided to leave the baby alone as long as it appeared to be well taken care of. The second baby was hatched two days later.

Susie McKinney will now take over and finish this article.

Continued on next page.
I came into the picture on the fourth day. I had scheduled a trip to Fortuna, CA to trade blood lines in Blue and Gold Macaw babies. I had been talking to Duncan several times a day and since everything seemed to be going well with the Great-billed babies, Duncan decided to go along for the ride. When we arrived back in Arbuckle, he asked me to check the remaining egg for life. We slowly and quietly entered the inside area. The hen was sitting in the hole looking out which surprised Duncan.

**Trouble in the Nest**

When he opened the nest box, the nest had been scattered. The oldest chick had very little food in its crop and baby number two was cold to touch and had no food in its crop. I took the remaining egg and placed it between my portable incubators (mammary glands, boobs—if you must know). I took the chicks into the house and prepared a very dilute warm mixture of hand feeding formula. The second chick was very weak and we didn’t think it would survive. I always carry a microwave heating pad in my vehicle. We prepared a small enclosed basket and put both chicks on the heating pad. I then made a bee-line for my home in Vacaville, where my incubator was running with cockatoo eggs in it.

**Emergency Handfeeding**

Arriving home with both chicks still alive, I set up a Foster Parrot at 90° F. and deposited both chicks into it. At this point I panicked, how does one care for baby Great-billed Parrots? What kinds of diet? Who would better know than my good friend and fellow bird enthusiast Dale Thompson? To my surprise, Thompson had never hand-fed baby Great-billeds. He did offer me some suggestions, though, that I incorporated into my daily routine. He suggested that I not let the crop become empty as one would do with other species of exotic parrots. He felt that the crop should be kept with some food in it at all times for the first few weeks. He felt that the crop of Great-billeds was different from crops of most other exotic parrots.

**The Egg Hatches**

Two days later chick number three hatched. This chick seems stronger than baby number two that had been chilled and underfed.

The first week I got up every three hours trying to keep my little wards alive. Over night problems seemed to begin. The chicks appeared to be badly dehydrated looking very red with flaking of the skin. I called my vet Dr. Lorraine Sellers in Placerville, CA. We ran culture sensitivity tests and found that baby two had a bacterial infection. We put the entire clutch on Baytril and Nystatin for 14 days. Dr. Sellers suggested that I use Lactated Ringers in the place of purified water in the handfeeding formula. The lactate seemed to solve the dehydration problem. The babies grew slowly for the next few weeks gaining only a few grams a day.

**Out of the Woods**

At about three weeks of age things changed drastically. They started putting on 10 to 15 grams of weight every other day. Eyes were opening, dark stubble started to appear, then quills. At 30 days old they were fully feathered on the body and head, and had short tail and wing feathers. At this time they responded to the sight of me. I tried not to handle them very much since our intent is to have them become breeders instead of pets. There were no further set backs.

**1996 a Good Year**

This past year 1996 was another good year for us. The pair laid twice giving us another three babies. This time two males and a female. The hand-rearing went smoothly with no set backs. I used Lactated Ringers in the handfeeding formula for the first 45 days. The babies were given Pretty Bird Handfeeding Formula (19-8) for the first 30 days then switched to Toppers Handfeeding Formula like the rest of my collection uses.

I weaned the babies on Pretty Bird Weaning Pellets, Toppers Large Hookbill Total Diet, Dehydrated Fruits and lots of fresh vegetables served warm, along with any fruit that was in season.
Learning at the AFA Convention

After attending the AFA convention in Concord this past year and talking to other breeders that have pairs, I have come up with some of my own conclusions. Right or wrong here they are.

Successful Techniques

I believe that the success that Duncan and I have is due to making sure that a lot of high-fiber fruit and vegetables are available to the pairs each week. During breeding season we beef up the diet and make available a large choice of several different fruits and vegetables on a daily basis. When we see something that they want we give extra. Some days it's a particular vegetable, another days it's a particular fruit. Our misters are used every day from early spring through the long hot summer and into late fall when our rainy season usually starts. If we have a dry winter, we will continue to use them daily.

I believe that some of the tricks in hand-rearing are to use a brooder that maintains a constant temperature and that holds humidity.

As far as the feeding technique, I believe that the chicks must be fed often not allowing the crops to go completely empty for the first 15 days and using Lactated Ringers is providing extra sodium that helps the chicks to use food faster and easier.

Sharing Information

I would appreciate anyone sharing information with me about their pairs. I still have lots of questions that need answers. Hopefully we can all work together to help this species become easier to raise in our aviaries.

This past year Duncan and I have put together two more pairs, and have taken on a breeder's loan for another. We have a couple of extra hens for sale or trade. We are still interested in new blood lines and would be interested in taking on additional breeder loans.

Susie McKinney can be reached at Voice 707-448-0680 or Fax 707-448-9799