A possible first captive breeding of the
Channel Bill Toucan

by John D. Robertshaw
Fort Lauderdale, Florida

This is a report of what I believe to be
the first captive breeding of the channel
bill toucan. Way back in 1962 I found
my first toucan; a Couvier purchased in
England. He was soon freeflying, estab-
lishing a total exclusion zone in my
garden and adi died following an
attack in 1966 on an unsuspecting
visitor.

My channel bills joined a pair of toco
and Couvier in the autumn of 1985.
Their cage was 10 ft. x 10 ft. x 5 ft. wide,
shaded above by palm fronds and
joined by a pair of Couvier to the
east and six Noble macaws to the west.
We rather feel that alternating macaws
and toucans both reduces the nesting
animosity and also uses the toucans’
rodent catching ability to some success.
A phone call to Jerry Jennings produced
three nesting boxes and we were in
business.

In early July 1986 the channel bills,
by far the most skittish and wildest of
my birds, showed great interest in their
box and both birds started sleeping in it
at night. By August we had no doubt
they were sitting on eggs. Both male and
female took it in turns to sit on the nest
but we did notice that both birds would
leave the nest for periods of up to half
an hour during the hot afternoon hours.
We increased our surveillance and on
the 17th of August we noted great
activity. Both birds would come out of the nest for short periods and were most excitable. A second check around 9 a.m. found an infertile egg in the water dish. By 10 a.m. a further check showed a hatched out egg shell immediately below the nest. It is interesting to note that this egg had been opened lengthways all around, unlike chicken eggs which open round the air cell at the blunt end.

So the remaining report is dated from this point, 17th August when we believed one egg had hatched and one was infertile.

We hurriedly re-read back issues of Watchbird. I had bred macaws in England from 1960 but no toucans. As these birds were exceptionally skittish we felt that regular checking would be counter productive, and decided only to check on a weekly basis unless there appeared to be a crisis.

24th August. One week old and we are hearing grunting noises from inside the nest. I am sure curiosity exceeded prudence as I took a flashlight and mirror and peeped through the opening. Two small, naked, wide but short beaked individuals apparently were unable to lift their heads from the floor of the nest. I did not look for more than five seconds and retired.

Continued on page 11
31st August. The start of their third week. Again using flashlight and mirror I inspected the nest. Still two naked birds, eyes closed and wide, short beaks, obviously well looked after and I saw no reason to interfere with nature.

On the 4th of September nature struck back. A tropical storm set in for the day and by 4 p.m. we had received over four inches of rain. We felt we should check the nest, as feared we found the babies deep in wet faeces and saw no alternative but to pull them from the nest, an event for which we were only marginally prepared.

We had Jerry Jennings’ articles from Watchbird on hand, we had heating pads and thermometers but neither myself nor my wife had actually hand raised before. We called Jerry in panic and he was most helpful suggesting diets, etc. We started on a diet of soaked Meow-mix and Purina Hi-pro dog food, diced banana, grapes, papaya and apple. A similar diet is fed to the adults with the addition of more fruits and vegetables and mynah bird pellets fed dry. A couple of days later on the advice of our local vet we added two teaspoons of yogurt to the diet.

Advice to feed every four hours seemed to be more commercial than ideal since we had noticed the parents carried food to them “little and often.” We tried to do the same during daylight hours giving them the last feed just before dark and starting again hourly in the morning at daylight.

The babies were housed in a cardboard box, a heater pad on the bottom and wood chips covered with paper towels over this. We kept the temperature between 83 and 87 degrees F and for the first couple of weeks checked them every four hours during the night.

7th September. Their fourth week and we named them Ramilles and Bobo. They were weighed daily and Bobo was to the fact that Bobo hatched up to one dozen the daily weigh ins. Bobo became impossible to feed. He had to “juggle” and every piece would miss on each throw. I have read that toucans often reject their young at this age and by the end of the week I could not blame them. Both were sleeping “toucan style” and both were using their preen glands on immature feathers.

September 21st. Their sixth week. Both birds stop gaining weight and end up at 11 1/2 oz. and 12 1/2 oz. respectively. Both birds are feathered like the adult female but Ramilles has white splashes on his primary and secondary flights. Neither parent have this white and, as the photographs show, both babies are much more vividly colored than the parents. Ramilles has brown eyes and Bobo’s are deep blue. During this week both birds learned to perch and Bobo flew about three yards culminating in an unsuccessful landing.

September 28th. Their seventh week. Both birds again weighed the same as last week and at this stage we abandoned the daily weigh ins. Bobo managing occasionally to feed himself but still having difficulty “juggling.” We introduced water bowls to the cage and, by gently splashing, tried to show them what it was about. Both jumped in and took their first baths although after they were thoroughly wet we had to towel them dry and attend them in their distress.

5th October. Their 8th week. By now we had completed a further stand of cages and we carried both birds out in the daylight hours. This is identical to their parents’ cage being 10 ft. x 10 ft. x 5 ft. wide with several tree branches for perches and sheltered with wooden laths placed ½” apart. We were still giving the majority of food by hand. Like all children, they can manage treats like grapes but just cannot pick up boring old Hi-pro. Although they now bathe and play in the water they do not seem to be drinking so we are still giving the Hi-pro wetter than usual. Cold rain still drenches through their feathers so after about 15 minutes of rain we bring them back inside. The adult channel hills do not show any interest in them and, as both chicks think they are human, an earlier idea to place all four together seems impractical.

12th October. 63 days old. The final photograph shows that our challenging raising period is over.