It Was A Dark And Stormy Night...

Story and photographs by Scott Lewis, Old World Aviaries

At about 3 a.m. Jan. 25, 2012 Linda and I awoke to intense thunder and lightning and the sound of a freight train apparently traversing our backyard. We hurried to the sun porch that point, there wasn’t much more we could do except wait for daylight.

Morning brought news that the damage was more severe. Alongside the storm damage was a bird escape. To our surprise, we found no injured birds. In fact, most of the birds appeared to be taking things in stride, calmly perching wherever perches remained or clinging to the sides of cages. However, one Timneh was later found dead in a cage that was crushed beyond recognition.

Later that day, we determined that 10 birds were missing, of which we eventually recovered 6. That’s 10 out of about 150, many fewer than we had first feared. I give primary credit to reinforcing hog rings. Our cages are assembled with standard, 18-gauge, stainless hog rings. However, they have much heavier hog rings about every 1.5 to 2 feet and at each corner. I believe that without the heavier rings, many of the cage seams simply were bolted to the cages instead of simply hanging from them.

A view of the aviary area housing mainly small Poicephalus. Two cages out of 20 remained upright.
Clean-up and recovery has not been pleasant, has been expensive, and is still ongoing. It has been complicated by having to fire the primary person who was repairing the cages, placing the full burden on me. To further complicate repairs, our cages require interior access to replace legs, something I see now as a design flaw. Replacing a bent leg requires netting and moving birds.

In addition to cage repair, shade replacement is problematic. The live oak provided shade for about 20 cages, all of which were 4 x 6 or 4 x 8, which comes out to quite a bit of square footage. Shade could be built with lathing but would be a significant undertaking complicated by being needed in a fairly complex shape instead of a simple rectangle. Misting systems are messy and require replumbing any time a cage is moved. In addition, I have not been able to find a combination thermostat/timer to provide automatic control. Fortunately, this last summer was a fairly mild one for Austin, so a few portable misters sufficed. But, this is not a permanent solution.

A couple of days after the storm, the local weather authorities announced that we had been victim to an EF1 tornado, the weakest on the Enhanced Fujita Scale, not just a heavy thunderstorm. Tornadoes are strange beasts. This one took the oak tree due west. North, and the tree would have landed on our house; east, on the aviary building. It did not damage the aviary building save a few shingles or significantly damage the house, both of which are in spitting distance of the live oak. It left a large, deciduous, burr oak that is about 40 feet from the live oak completely undamaged. It left the live oaks and pecans in our front yard undamaged. So, although the damage was certainly bad enough, it could have been much worse. (As an ironic aside, years back I refused an opportunity to move to a beautiful facility about 70 miles north of our current location because the risk of severe weather including tornadoes was so much greater.)

I wish I could conclude with a long list of lessons learned and advice for our AFA members, but I really cannot beyond advising general disaster preparedness, such as having on hand avian first-aid supplies, live traps, nets, carriers, cage repair materials, and the number for an emergency veterinarian. These are things I’m sure most of our members already have. I’m not sure specific preparedness for something as potentially sudden and severe as a tornado is possible.

Note: Linda and I would like to express our sincere thanks to the AFA Disaster Relief Fund for providing some of the materials needed for cage repair.