

Challenges in Aviculture

by Lee Phillips
Harwood, Maryland

Keynote address presented by Lee Phillips, President of the American Federation of Aviculture at the 11th annual national convention August 7-11, 1985 at the Cathedral Hill Hotel, San Francisco, California.

On occasion I have spoken with pride of the progress aviculture has made within the past decade. It is true that we have come a long way in many areas but only because we had so far to come. When we assess the science of aviculture we realize that we are just in

the fledgling stage, the very beginning. There are great areas of knowledge largely untapped and untold plateaus for us to reach.

We like to think of ourselves as aviculturists but are we really? Among our bird keepers, we have the collectors, the exhibitors and the breeders. I will say little about the collectors who have a pair of this and a pair of that for their own pleasure and pride; although they contribute little to the pool of captive bred birds, their collections can have a public relations value in sparking the interest of potential aviculturists. Conscientious exhibitors are concerned with maintaining certain standards in their birds and they serve a useful purpose in preventing the decline of the species. It is the breeders among you whom I hope to reach this morning. My purpose is to shake your complacency a bit, to nudge you into examining your purposes and goals and, hopefully, to encourage you to improve your breeding program a step or two and in so doing to benefit aviculture. It's almost too bad that we don't have a designation of "Master Aviculturist" so that we could all aspire to this higher level and continue to improve our skills.

There are so many challenges in aviculture and I will present only a few. Certainly the major challenge is the establishment of a viable captive breeding population. Experience has shown that this is best done by private aviculturists—many zoos are doing an excellent job in captive breeding but they are primarily for exhibition purposes.

But before we acquire birds there is a need for us to be responsible aviculturists and the idea of a planned

breeding program is a basic requirement. How many of us have acquired birds simply because they appealed to us with no thought given to the special needs of the birds or their suitability to our particular environment? We need to take the time to study the species and its requirements before we add these birds to our breeding programs. As an example, we cannot expect birds from an arid, desert environment to flourish in a climate of high humidity.

It seems also that the most successful aviculturists are those who focus on a particular species or family of birds, avoiding the Noah's Ark syndrome. I would like to see more breeders accept the challenge of breeding some of the smaller birds: the finches, the softbills, the smaller parrots. If we are to have representative breeding populations, we need to breed these small birds as well as their more glamorous relatives. From a breeder's point of view, I have never been able to understand the status connected with the large birds. Certainly some of the smaller ones are far more difficult to bring into breeding condition.

After we have established our long-range breeding program we need to find good, healthy, compatible birds and to give them the time to settle in and become acclimatized. It is unfortunate that people become impatient with their birds and they are subsequently passed around from breeder to breeder without giving them the time they need to settle down and become productive.

A conscientious effort should be made by each and every breeder to maintain accurate pedigree and identification information so that the best possible breeding regime can be deter-

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Lee Phillips presents the President's Award to Gary Lienthal for his outstanding service to A.F.A.

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mined and followed. We cannot regard too lightly the ramifications of mating close relatives, either deliberately or inadvertently due to poor record keeping.

We need to think long-term in establishing our captive populations and this means we have to maintain genetically sound stock from the onset. We may not have the luxury of obtaining new blood from the wild when our captive stocks are weakened from poor breeding. We should try to get a self-sustaining colony—an absolute minimum of three pairs although 30 would be more desirable.

An important adjunct to this is the use of a clearing-house such as the A.F.A. bird census for breeding stock so that we have a mechanism to avoid inbreeding and its associated problems. There is a great challenge to specialty groups to form stud books, possibly even consortiums, to encourage their members to keep accurate records, to exchange birds and to breed to multiple generations. One aspect of aviculture which has received little consideration is the source of our birds 20 years hence. We should urge breeders not to sell all their offspring but to retain some for second and third generation breeding. There is a need for a softbill society so that information may be exchanged about this beautiful and little known segment of the bird world.

Another challenge we should face is to preserve the wild form of our various species. It is unfortunate that it is almost impossible to mate a pair of normal colored zebra finches, budgies, cockatiels, lovebirds or canaries without anticipating at least some non-normal offspring. A similar state of affairs is developing with the Australian grass finches and parakeets. Although the new varieties may be challenging to establish as free-breeding strains, appealing to the eye and a lucrative breeding venture when they first appear, it is the original wild form that we must preserve if we are to regard ourselves as true conservationists of birdlife. In establishing some of these new varieties, the birds are often inbred for several generations and when a mutation finally becomes fairly common and widespread, the problems from the earlier inbreeding are proliferated.

The extreme in the pursuit of new color variations is the deliberate production of hybrids. This is a waste of valuable stock and it seems to occur with those species with which we can least afford to be so frivolous, that is, the



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My personal challenge in aviculture is to provide an environment where the birds will carry out the entire reproductive cycle by themselves. We've been told that pet birds make fine breeders. But what do we know about the potential breeding and parenting abilities of the artificially incubated, hand-fed birds? Is it need, or is it greed, that motivates the institution of artificial incubation and hand-feeding before the parents have had an opportunity to learn their capabilities. Will we, in the long run, develop "plastic" birds which will have lost their natural instincts for reproduction? Will it come to the point where breeders will pay premium prices for parent-reared birds?

I realize that for some species the only hope for reproduction in captivity is to resort to artificial incubation and hand-rearing techniques to establish sufficient numbers in and there are some for whom artificial insemination may be the only answer to achieve even a small number of birds in captivity. It would seem that research in artificial insemination is out of the scope of most individuals' capabilities and resources and these are challenges that should be met by commercial breeders and institutions.

Although large numbers of breeders are located in the southern, almost tropical climates, there are many breeders in our northern temperate climates who are achieving great success. There is a need for more data to be gathered and disseminated on methods of breeding in a totally controlled environment.

One of the greatest challenges in aviculture is the improvement of our knowledge of disease and medication. There is little or no knowledge about many of the diseases which affect birds and few funds are available for research projects. Such problems as consistent infertility and French moult have been with us for many years and no real progress has been made in achieving a cure. Probably our most pressing need in the medical area is the need for vaccines for the prevention of disease. When we realize what vaccines for measles and polio have accomplished for human beings, we can begin to realize the numbers of birds which would be saved by vaccination. The development of a vaccine for reo virus is near and also is one for parrot pox; a vaccine for Pachecho's is still a long way off. I am pleased that the American Federation of Aviculture has for several years funded research into a number of

medical problems and I look forward to the time when other groups will join our efforts at reducing this mortality in birds. Although it is encouraging to note the increase in the number of avian veterinarians, there is still a great need for such specialists in most areas of the country.

So many challenges remain in the field of nutrition. We are still looking for a complete diet. We need to know the relationship between diet and reproduction, between diet and stress. The debate over sunflower seed versus safflower seed is no nearer its resolution than it was years ago. Nutrition is an area that is wide-open for research and study.

And how little we know of the psychological make-up of birds. How little we know about the self-mutilators, the cocks which kill their mates, the hens which lay off the perch, destroy their eggs or their young. What are birds telling us that we're not listening to? What signs are they giving us that we're not observing? This is an area where individuals can contribute a valuable source of knowledge. Observe your birds and record their behavior.

Although there is relatively free importation of most species of birds not regulated by international law, I cannot help but wonder why there are trends and fashions in imported birds. A case in point is the violet-eared waxbill which was imported in large numbers as recently as four years ago and was relatively inexpensive. Aviculturists tell me it is almost impossible to find such imported birds now. Why? Another is the Brotogeris family which were imported in large numbers and sold for as little as \$20 in ten-cent stores all over the country. Where are they now? It is impossible to find them. Is their low price a factor?

While I do believe we should get as many species into this country legally as possible, there is a part of me that wonders if we are rescuing these birds one step ahead of the bulldozer or are we depleting native populations. There is a tremendous need for reliable field studies. We don't need jet-setting dogooders sitting in an air conditioned hotel speaking with a few local people and making pronouncements that affect aviculturists the world over. What we need are scientific studies undertaken by qualified people. Certainly that should be a challenge for conservation groups everywhere. Let's take the time and spend the money to do a serious study of native populations so that we really know which birds are a

renewable resource. The thick-billed parrot was not uncommon in Arizona as recently as 60 years ago; yet it is projected that it may well become extinct by the year 2000.

A long range challenge for us should be to seek plans to license breeders to permit the propagation of endangered native species. It is too late for the dusky seaside sparrow but not for the grasshopper sparrow and others. Perhaps this is an area in which we can join with conservation groups in persuading the government that such a program is necessary.

How much longer are we as aviculturists going to pay lip service to conservation without having a definite program in mind other than captive breeding? The Venezuelan red skin project should become a major concern for us. Can you imagine the public relations value to us of an announcement to the world that we are restocking this bird in its protected native habitat? There are many challenges to be met in the area of conservation.

Another long range challenge for us is to persuade the government to make it easier for qualified individuals to import rare species. I know of a number of people who are battling the red tape to bring in rare species and I encourage them in their efforts.

In our relations with the federal government we should make every effort to see that aviculture becomes an agricultural industry. We will then merit the government's consideration and protection and I feel very strongly that the National Cage & Aviary Bird Improvement Plan is a big step in that direction.

A challenge for each of us is to encourage a young person to become involved with the breeding of birds. Efforts should be made by A.F.A., the specialty groups and by the local bird clubs to establish youth programs so that we may pass along to another generation our skills, our knowledge and our love of birds.

Probably one of the most damaging things to aviculture is the smuggled bird and I beg all of you to do what you can to bring such illegal trade to a close. In most cases, aviculturists know what they are buying. And if the price is too good to be true, it's probably an illegal bird. Is closed banding the only feasible method of identifying captive-bred birds? We need to look into foot-printing and implants. This is an area where much needs to be done.

There is a need for us to be responsible, to treat our interest with respect

and a willingness to sacrifice at times to advance aviculture. I have no problem with people making money from birds but I think we need to give something back. Our birds give us great pleasure and satisfaction and we owe them something. We should not treat our birds as if flocks of them can be dipped from a well that never runs dry. We have a moral obligation to establish captive, self-sustaining populations of every species within reason and to do it responsibly so that we don't need to continually obtain additional birds from the wild. If we don't meet this challenge we may find that we have cheated ourselves out of some species altogether and that a long, hard struggle is ahead for many others. In addition, a more responsible approach can only help our image with those who are critical of private aviculturists and view them strictly as consumers of wildlife.

In meeting these challenges, I feel there is a great need for all of us—individuals and organizations—to work together; we have many goals in common with conservation groups and there should be some dialogue between us. There needs to be communication between the international community of aviculturists, particularly in presenting a united viewpoint at the C.I.T.E.S. meetings. In this country the American Federation of Aviculture is the nucleus and I would like to see an exchange of ideas established with aviculturists in other countries.

We all came here to learn more about captive breeding and to share our achievements, to benefit from our experiences and to work together to save the wonderful birds which still exist on earth so that future generations may enjoy them.

You will have the opportunity during this convention to learn from and consult with some of the world's most knowledgeable aviculturists. Use the knowledge and experience they are sharing with us to improve your own avian husbandry. To sum up, let me urge each of you to advance a step or more in your application of avian knowledge. Our task becomes more important as the numbers of native populations decline.

Let us give lie to the words of Albert Schweitzer who said, "Man has lost the capacity to foresee and forestall. He will end by destroying the earth." Let's prove that otherwise. It is my hope that from this convention will come a deeper commitment to conservation of birdlife through captive breeding and I entrust this to each of you. ●

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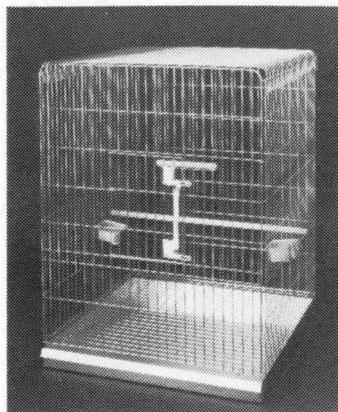
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