

Basement Aviaries

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Being a parrot breeder-hobbyist in the midlands, I am presented with a cold hard fact of life — winter in Iowa can be frigid! Iowa's weather has also solved my problem of where to house my African parrots. The majority of homes in the Midwest have a cellar to seek shelter in the event of a tornado. Many breeders have opted to turn their basement into an aviary.

As my collection of parrots grew, I realized I was going to have to enlarge my parrot room. Figuring the cost of an additional building (including heating, cooling, and a water supply) the thought of converting a recent addition to my basement became very appealing. My father and I came up with a working plan of action. The room to be converted measured 24 x 14 feet. Our first step was to cover the floor braces and electrical wiring. Chip board was used instead of plywood as a cost savings measure. Trap doors made electrical junction boxes accessible in case of rewiring needs or an emergency; also most building codes require an easy access to the junction boxes. The room was painted white to reflect light.

The next task was to design new cages to fit my needs as well as my feathered friends. I started from the bottom working up, utilizing as much space as possible, while minimizing clean up chores. Cage floor dimensions for the smaller *Poicephalus* are

the same as two double unfolded newspapers overlapped, 21" high x 21" wide x 36" long. Multiple layers of newspapers under each cage makes cleanup as easy as pulling off the top layer. A minimum amount of time is spent bothering nesting pairs. Three cages are stacked in a shelf designed to suspend each enclosure above the waste and debris.

The larger cages were designed around the width of a large roll of craft paper. The cages measure 3' wide x 3' high x 7' long, with the far end enlarged 4' to accommodate a nest box to provide privacy for nesting hens — in other words, a large L-shape. Metal conduit was adapted and fastened to each cage to support the large rolls of craft paper. The paper is then pulled along the bottom length of the cage and cut. It actually looks like a large paper towel dispenser. The large cages are hung two high by wire suspended from the floor joists above. Each cage is separated by sheet metal to prevent waste dropping to the lower cage. Food and water are easily accessible due to a flip-up design I copied thanks to the *Watchbird's* visit to Joe and Marge Longo in Washington. A large door is provided in case any bird needs to be caught for exams or other purposes.

Heating the basement has been a major advantage to underground breeding. All heat ducts have been closed off to the bird room. Temperatures outside have dipped well below zero with the aviary maintaining an average 60°F due to the heated rooms above. A major ice storm a few years back caused power outages for three days. The house temperature dropped to 20°F because outside it was 5° below zero! I stayed downstairs with the birds as the basement temperature leveled off at 50°F and maintained this temperature during the power failure. Low humidity in the winter months does not appear to affect egg hatchability, therefore, I have chosen not to use a humidifier. High humidity, on the other hand, did present some

problems. The summer months underground can be very muggy.

I do use a dehumidifier during this time. The humidity was causing dampness and mold buildup on the cage floors.

One advantage of basement breeding is the control of the lighting schedule to fit the keeper's need. I am working the graveyard shift so this means altering the lighting for the birds to give them the best care. When a change in the birds' light schedule is adjusted, I attempt to increase (or decrease) in a fifteen minute change per day. Night lights are very important during the birds' sleeping hours for obvious reasons. Lighting is controlled by an inexpensive computer hook up. The lights are an arrangement of rows of fluorescent lights. Night lights are low wattage incandescent light bulbs.

Disadvantages to basement bird keeping include poor air quality and the dust accumulation from the African parrots. Since my operation is a small business, I do not have the luxury of an elaborate air exchange system. I presently use an exhaust fan circulating continuously. I also use an ordinary room fan with a furnace filter over the intake. This traps a surprising amount of bird dust and small feathers. I have yet to find an air purifier that can handle bird dust. As of this writing, I have gone through three systems, the last one costing \$300.00 — the motor burnt up a couple of weeks ago. I am also concerned about the outbreak of an airborne disease in the basement bird room. A highly contagious incident would be very detrimental to the flock. An AAV veterinarian is a must to maintain contact concerning the prevention of such an outbreak and to keep your flock in the best condition.

Lack of sunshine seems to effect the African parrot's eye color. This has been an on-going discussion in The African Parrot Society and a firm answer has yet to be resolved. *Poicephalus* bred in outdoor aviaries appear to develop the colored eye ring in a shorter amount of time.

We have a lot to learn about the wants and needs of our feathered responsibilities. It is our duty to provide the best environment that we aviculturists can in the different climates and surroundings in which we force our birds to live. ●

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