

An Indoor Miniature Rainforest

by Yvonne Patterson
Kansas City, Missouri

Cool Crest® in Kansas City, Missouri, was the setting of the first AFA Red Siskin Summit. Cool Crest is operated by my mother and has thousands of locals and tourists who visit it each summer. One day I realized a great potential for an additional attraction that would fulfill a life-long dream of mine to help wildlife. I envisioned an educational exotic bird exhibit that



A fiberglass pool, native rocks and Portland cement created this waterfall. It promotes bathing and humidity, which increases hatching.



This pair of Cordon Bleus are dutiful parents. Here, the male contemplates the second clutch of the season.

Large plants are very important in an aviary. These have grown to twice the size in this photo.

They are, counterclockwise: Ponytail Palm, Weeping Fig, Schefflera, Monstera, Ponytail Palm. The Caladium (pink and green plant) is a silk plant because the real ones are toxic.



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would enable me to capture people's attention with the "rainforest jewels" (parrots) I dearly love and tell of their plight. Yearly, hundreds of school-children and various groups visit the bird exhibit called Wings of Love®. Through this exhibit, the public becomes aware of the destruction of the birds' natural habitat and the smuggling that occurs. It includes many parrots, toucans and finches. People have been awed by the beauty and intelligence of a Moluccan Cockatoo and a Blue and Gold Macaw at this location since the '70s.

The viewing area of Wings of Love incorporates framed educational displays in full color. These include egg displays showing embryonic development to the hatch; species signs with classification, habitat and distribution; personality profiles on the birds and some things they say/sing; a developmental chart of Moluccan Cockatoo chicks to adulthood; and an informative collage of rainforest photos and rainforest derivatives (drugs, food and other materials). The exhibit area has parrots and toucans perched on elaborate branching systems inside a large solarium. These birds have their own territories among the branching systems but are also accustomed to co-habiting with other species. We believe a lot of our "non-compatible" species get along well due to the fact we give them all equal attention. The exhibit itself contains trees native to the areas of rainforest in which the birds originated. This tropical setting adds to the educational concept and enlightens individuals' perception of the true colors of nature.

It seemed imperative that we should highlight small species by including them in a natural setting also. On the east end of the glass solarium, we

installed a double door and partitioned the large bird area from the small bird area by using half inch wire. This way, the viewers can easily see through the entire exhibit area. It was quite comical at first watching the toucans, whose branches were next to this wire, try to snatch a small bird on the other side of the wire as it flew by. They soon realized the reason for the wire.

For the public who views this mini rainforest exhibit, it is aesthetically relaxing to observe a waterfall from the outside, while inside it encourages birds to bathe. This waterfall also creates a higher humidity which aids in the hatching of eggs. A kidney-shaped fiberglass pool partially filled with Portland cement to provide gripping ability and shallow water has a rock waterfall on each end. It has been plumbed into an underground drain pipe for easy cleaning. When the birds are bathing on the rocks, they are very charming to watch.

Throughout the year we maintain temperatures between 68° and 78° F with a relative humidity varying around 60 percent. It is essential to have a good humidity level, as the hatching of fertile eggs decreases tremendously when it's under 50 percent relative humidity.

This article will deal with fairly common, compatible species of small birds in a planted aviary which is 10' high x 12' long x 8' wide. Within this group are two pairs of Pekin Robins, three pairs of canaries, a pair of Pintailed Nonpareil Parrot Finches, two pairs of Red-headed Parrot Finches, two pairs of Bicheno's Owl Finches, two pairs of Green Singing Finches, two pairs of Golden-breasted Waxbills, a pair of Cordon Bleu Finches, two pairs of Gouldians, two male

Weavers (Red Bishop and Atlas), two male Philippine Button Quail, and one young African Ringneck Dove. All these birds live very harmoniously and allow each other the freedom to fledge and raise young undisturbed.

The reason we have male Weavers is not only for their striking colors during their breeding season (yellow/black and orange/black), but also the difficulty in finding adequate homes for their young. People in the Midwest are not able to keep birds outdoors through the winter and are limited on



Photo by Yvonne Patterson

This Gouldian was handfed from two weeks of age. She became a magnificent pet and flew onto anyone's shoulder who entered the aviary.

space, so not many have planted aviaries. Weavers and Pekin Robins do not fare well in cages unless the cages are of great length. Although Button Quail could do well in a cage, they breed so profusely we chose not to raise them, therefore we got a more attractive pair of males.

The birds all reside together throughout the year, with the exception of the Green Singing Finches and the canaries, which are removed during their breeding seasons. The Green Singers are too aggressive while raising young and canaries need supplemental lighting. The young dove will be moved to a new home very soon. He fans his tail and bows his head below his chest while cooing to entice various finches to breed. When the dove was first placed in the flight, the finches were intimidated the first couple days by its wingbeat and size. When the dove would fly off, the smaller birds would scatter. The amorous dove is now accepted but his sweet antics are to no avail.

Plants are extremely important in a flight for protection and nest building. Red-headed Parrot Finches can be seen hovering above the ponytail palms with a 20" long leaf blade in their beak, trying to pull it off the trunk. African weavers, who taught

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man to weave by weaving their nests, strip a lot of the foliage from the red-margined dracaena and the ponytail palm. Because there are no female weavers to occupy the woven nests, a somewhat symbiotic relationship occurs. The finches laboriously tug at the narrow leaves of the weaver nests and proudly fly off with their newly gathered nesting material.

A busy communal tree is the weeping fig. Biannual pruning is necessary in order to view babies being fed and different species perching. For different sized branches, we use rubber and schefflera trees. Believing the huge leaved *Monstera deliciosa* would add interest with its long roots growing above and along the soil line, we incorporated one. We envisioned its two and a half foot long stems and roots would give plenty of perching area. It does achieve this but also is suitable habitat for mice which dig through the root system very easily. Today, these plants have grown so large they fill the aviary to the top, allowing additional perching and foliage for the birds. This is an important factor for this number of birds to breed in an aviary of this size.

Like pairs generally nest on opposite ends of the aviary, i.e. the Golden-breasted Waxbills on the east and west sides. Both Lady Goulds and Golden-breasted Waxbills have actually constructed nests in the ponytail palms and raised young. The Golden-breasted Waxbills build a dome nest, while the Lady Goulds build an open nest.

We start endive and romaine lettuce outside the aviary and plant six inch high plants in the soil of the aviary for the birds to eat. Immediately after planting and watering, some finches will walk underneath the foliage and play in the water droplets. They seem to enjoy tugging and shredding the leaves opposed to a plant being strategically placed on a rock or elsewhere. During the summer months we raise hardy bamboo and pampas grass for nesting material. We grow marigold, heliotrope, amaranthus, cleome and celosia annually to provide a "seed treat."

Plenty of artificial nests and nest-boxes are provided, approximately three nest sites per pair. Only one time have we had a problem with any aggressiveness; a Pekin Robin pecked a fledged Golden-breasted Waxbill to

death. We believe the robin's aggressive behavior to be an isolated one, whereas many feel they can be merciless. A very good number of clutches are produced each year here, with no fostering. We do have one male pair of Societies but have never used them, as the parent birds assiduously care for their own young.

Babies are banded the day they fledge. We have found that most African finch species will not stay in the nest after banding. Therefore, we never band babies living in the nest prior to fledging. Even covering the nest and blocking their exit won't keep them in, as once it's removed they'll jump out. When this happens, too small a chick may land in the water and drown, or stay in a cool, damp corner overnight without adequate down to stay warm.

People become part of the environment and are readily accepted as quite a bit of time is spent daily in the aviary. We wipe droppings off foliage, clean ledges, whisk the soil of droppings and give fresh seed, mealworms, veggies and eggfood daily. Twice a day we clean the waterfall and disinfect it two times a week. A

phenolic disinfectant is applied four times a year to prevent klebsiella or other enteric bacteria from forming. We are cautious with the waterfall and desire clean drinking water, as the birds bathe and defecate in it. An average of two hours every day is spent in the songbird aviary, which accustoms the birds to us. Because this is a public display and the birds are used to people, finches will land on a window ledge to feed while the public attempts to touch them through the glass. The birds will even accept us occasionally feeling inside their nests for eggs or babies, although we are careful not to abuse this privilege.

We are extremely happy with the successful numbers of parent-reared birds and the compatibility in our aviary. This peaceful environment has sparked various viewers to include a planted aviary in their own homes. Many birdbaths are available with pumps to provide the sound of water falling. A birdbath is much easier to maintain and install than a waterfall. Be certain you buy non-toxic plants and learn organic methods of controlling pests on them, such as wiping off the leaves with a sponge and soapy

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water. We invite the readers to plan an indoor planted aviary in your own homes, for it will add enjoyment to your home *and* add a relaxing environment.

Table 1 Canary/Finch Bread Recipe

4 c. cornmeal
5 c. water
4 tsp. salt
3/4 c. wheat flour
2/3 c. sunflower oil
6 eggs with shells (washed)
4.3 oz. dry milk
1/4 c. baking powder

Mix in blender. Bake 20 minutes at 400° on a thin, greased cookie sheet.

We do not add vitamins to drinking water; instead, we supply them through breads we bake for the birds. We add these ingredients in minimal amounts, depending on how much total bread is baked:

Beta-carotene
Bee pollen
Cod liver oil
Calcium carbonate
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Suggestions for the Aviary



Photo by Jack Clinton-Eitnhear

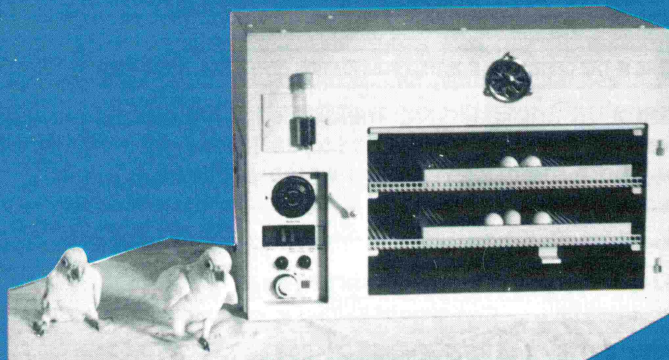
No aviary should be without one!

Even with double doors and extreme care, at some time you are apt to have a bird escape from your facility. While you've undoubtedly heard of a number of possible means of recovering your bird, here's one commonly available product that should be a part of all aviaries. The Stromberg's Starling and Sparrow Trap was obviously designed to capture these pesky exotic species that displace native species and can transmit avian diseases. The fact remains, however, that they do an outstanding job of capturing any bird from the size of a small canary to a medium sized dove. The trap can be baited with your birds' favorite food and/or a decoy bird.

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