

THE 2005 UBSSA SEMINAR

By Ian McArthur

On Saturday 28th May about 40 bird enthusiasts gathered at the Welland Shopping Centre car park for the start of a most enjoyable and informative weekend with others of a like mind. We were met by UBSSA Councillor David J., who handed out maps and gave us detailed instructions of the six aviary visits which were to be undertaken for the rest of the day.

Our first two visits took us to the outskirts of the Morphetville Racecourse where we inspected the aviaries of Jim and Pat W. and Daryl B. At Jim and Pat's we were greeted by a high hedge shielding the front yard. Behind the hedge were a group of aviaries containing many mutations of Indian Ringnecks and other parrots. When we walked around to the back yard, the reason for the expansion of aviaries to the front yard became clear since the birds were sharing the space with horse stables and yards. Jim was not actually at home, since he had already left to take two runners to the day's race meeting at Cheltenham, but Pat was only too willing to show us around. A short walk around the corner found us in Daryl's yard where there was also a large collection of Indian Ringnecks. Daryl told us that at one stage he had "...about 400 Indians but I've sold a few and only have about 240 now"!!!

Our third visit was to Roger and Ashlyn R. collection of finches and parrots. Most of the Roger's back yard is taken up with aviaries and they had a really varied collection.

Moving further south we spent time at the well built aviaries of Kerry H. Most of Kerry's aviaries have been able to take advantage of being built fairly recently. A bank of several aviaries contained parrots – Sun Conures and Blue Quakers – as well as finches – Tri-Coloured Parrot Finches, Pictorellas and several mutations of Gouldians. The main bank had a walkway at the back but another feature was the moveable panels at the front of the aviaries. Metal channels had been fixed to the top and bottom, into which could be placed sheets of laserlite which could be moved along or removed altogether as required to provide both light and shelter from the wind for the birds inside.

Still further south, we went to the aviary of John W. where parrot enclosures had been converted into two or three large planted walk through aviaries containing finches. We were able to walk through these spaces, two or three

at a time which enabled us to get up close and personal with John's extensive collection of finches.

Our final aviary visit, and afternoon tea, was to David and Heather J's home where we were able to see a collection of parrots including a pair of not often seen Gang Gangs. What a pleasant way to finish off our day!!!

And so to the Sunday where about 80 people met at the Enfield Community Centre for a day of guest speakers, unlimited bird talk, catching up with old friends and making new ones. Five speakers had been organised who gave us a varied programme of information on parrots, pigeons and doves and finches. These are reported in more detail elsewhere. However, what I am capable of writing cannot match the presentation of any of the speakers who had the advantage of excellent visual presentations to accompany their talks.

During the day food abounded – morning, tea lunch and afternoon tea –and a raffle with many prizes was held. Prizes for the raffle were provided by sponsors and arranged from seed, vouchers to spend with the **Australian Birdkeeper**, bird sculptures and a host of wooden bird accessories made and donated by Robert Smith from Laura.

And the cost for this weekend of birds, birds and more birds???? Just \$20 with under 16's being free!!! You can't get better value than that. My congratulations to all involved in the running of the weekend.

KEEPING AND BREEDING CONURES

By way of introduction, the first speaker at the 2005 UBSSA Seminar, Mike Steinert, told us that he had been keeping and observing birds in the wild since he was about 7 or 8 years of age. After he had persuaded his father to build him his first aviary when he was about 12, he obtained a pair of Princess Parrots which cost about \$60. One died shortly afterwards of galvanised poisoning. The understanding aviculturist from whom he had purchased the birds helped him through his disappointment, and replaced the bird at no cost to Mike which has led him to the position he is in today where he is able to run his own aviary on a full time basis.

Somewhere along the line, Mike realised that if he was to provide properly for his birds and breed them successfully, he would have to specialise and once this decision was reached settled on Conures.

There are 43-49 species of Conures with 110-112 sub-species which are spread across the continent of South America.

ARATINGA – This species includes the colourful Sun Conure, which are always in demand and the Janday which are becoming more popular. Another Aratinga, the Peach Fronted, were in danger of being lost about 15 years ago but numbers are now increasing. Golden Capped Conures are not as noisy as the other Aratingas but are rare in Australia. Another rare sub-species is the Blue Crown but their numbers are increasing. The Dusky Headed is even more rare than the previous two sub-species while the Golden Conure is a bird which stresses easily and tends to feather pluck.

GYANOLISEUS – In the wild this species nests in cliff faces but is rare in Australia and is the largest Conure kept in this country. It can also be a noisy bird.

PYRRHURA – This species tends to be quieter birds than other Conures and can be kept in small backyards without causing problems for neighbours. This group has several sub-species held in Australian aviaries. The Green Cheeked is well established in this country and has several mutations although the cock bird can be aggressive in the breeding season. As well as normals, there are cinnamon and blue mutations held of the Maroon bellied Conure which has reasonable numbers in Australia. Like many other birds, the Blue Throated Conure is vulnerable in the wild, while breeding results in Australia have been poor. By contrast there are reasonable numbers of Crimson Bellied in Australia. Held in reasonable numbers, the Black-Capped is a quiet and inquisitive bird. While the Fiery Shouldered can be aggressive to other birds, they are quiet birds but only held in low numbers in this country as are the White-Eared and Maroon Tailed.

The Quaker Parrot is considered by some to be in the Conure group and is the only parrot which builds a nest and can be kept in a colony. The normal and blue mutation are reasonably common in Australia. On the other hand, the Nanday Conure is not strictly a conure, but is well established here and gaining in numbers with a cinnamon mutation also available.

HOUSING – All of Mike's aviaries are suspendeds measuring 700x900x1200 and give better breeding results because the bird keeper does not have to enter the bird's space and are also better for hygiene. Two-thirds of the wall is metal panel with the remaining third being double wire. The aviaries are fully roofed which protects the birds from the weather, prevents direct contact with wild birds and provides the darker environment

which the birds seem to prefer. The floor is 20mmx20mm mesh, but if built again, Mike would use 25mmx25mm mesh so that droppings and waste could fall through to the concrete floor underneath. The floor is easily cleaned thus preventing the spread of any bacteria. Walkways are provided down the back of the enclosures for feeding. Nest boxes are on the outside of each aviary and can be inspected from the walkway. Sprinklers on the roof are used to lower the temperature by about 15 degrees on hot days. An automatic watering system flushes out water bowls daily.

DIET – Mike has stopped feeding his birds sunflower seed but uses a mixture of white millet and canary as a dry mix. A container of dry seed about the size of a ‘dip’ container will last about a week. Sprouted seed is provided and is basically a pigeon mix with sunflower added. In the soaked form the sunflower does not fatten the birds in the same way as dry seed does. Fruit and vegetables, increased during the breeding season, and a multi-vitamin in breeding season, are all fed to the birds as are seeding grasses when they are available. The birds are good eaters and are also provided with a calcium/mineral block. The amount provided to the birds is arrived at by trial and error and they tend to eat less when it is raining.

BREEDING – Depending on the species, the birds will mature and can breed at about 12 months, earlier for some. The breeding season may commence from April through August, again depending on the species. L-shaped nest boxes are provided, measuring 120cmx120cm and 30cm high. 50mm of wood compost is provided in the bottom of the box and a couple of Oregon blocks placed inside for the birds to chew. 4-6 eggs are laid 2 days apart which the hen incubates for about 23 days. Fledging occurs in 6-8 weeks.

All in all, Conures have a bright personality and are suitable for a small backyard.

Based on a talk given by Mike Steinert
at the UBSSA Seminar held at the Enfield Community Centre on May 29th 2005.

KEEPING AUSTRALIAN NATIVE PIGEONS AND DOVES

Dan Hassell commenced his presentation by posing the question, ‘What is the difference between a dove and a pigeon?’ And the answer?There is

no difference really since they come from the same family, but as a rule of thumb, we tend to call the smaller birds doves and the larger ones pigeons.

HOUSING – Pigeons and doves can be kept in a variety of aviaries from parrot style to planted habitat. While some pigeons can be aggressive, many species can be kept with finches and the smaller grass parrot type birds. Again, many of the pigeon and dove species can be flighty and because of their size can cause problems for some finch species. While pigeons and doves can be kept in parrot type aviaries, most species tend to do best in a planted environment where they have some cover. Ground dwelling species need regular worming.

CATCHING AND HANDLING – Pigeons and doves need to be caught in flight using a net with soft fine mesh. The feathers of some species can come out easily, so they need to be handled with care. Transport boxes need to be of a size which will prevent upward flight and have a soft lining on the top of the box to prevent damage to the bird while in transit.

Pigeons and doves belong to three broad groups – fruit eaters, grain eaters and insect eaters, but no species live exclusively on their main source of diet. When feeding a fruit diet any fruit in season can be fed -- apple, pears, figs melons corn and peas can all be fed with the larger fruits diced up before being placed in the aviary. Those birds which eat seeds swallow the grain whole without dehusking. Once hatched, pigeons tend to grow quickly since in the wild they are food for a number of predators.

FRUIT EATERS – The main birds in this group are the Purple Crowned Pigeon, the Rose Crowned Fruit Dove and the Wompoo Pigeon. While the Purple Crowned Pigeon is becoming more common they are expensive. They can also be aggressive and should be kept one pair per aviary. The Rose Crowned Fruit Dove is quite common in Australian aviaries and are easy to sex. As the cocks can be aggressive they should be kept one pair per aviary. Their nests tend to be fairly flimsy affairs and better breeding results are generally obtained if wire mesh trays are provided so that the chicks are less likely to fall out of the nest. The Wompoo Pigeon is not widely kept in private aviaries but are found in many zoos and fauna parks around the country. The Topknot Pigeon is quite a large bird but is not common in aviaries. One species which can be kept in colonies is the Torres Strait Pigeon. It is reasonably common and should be kept in large planted aviaries since it does not do well in parrot type enclosures. This bird is too large for the normal backyard aviary. Another bird which requires a large aviary is the White Headed Pigeon which, while easy to sex, is not commonly held. They have been known to nest on the ground as well as in

bushes and will do best where their natural habitat of rainforest is replicated. The final bird in this group is the Wonga Pigeon which is a placid bird which can be kept in colonies but is not common in Australian aviaries.

GRAIN EATERS – Amongst the most common in this group are Diamond Doves. This species is regarded as being a good beginners bird since they are easy to keep, are available in a few mutations and are an inexpensive bird which can be kept in a colony. Another reasonably common dove is the Peaceful Dove which, unlike it's name suggests, can be aggressive particularly towards its own species. They are not easy to sex but the male has a larger blue area around the eye and can be further sexed by observing their display. The Bar Shouldered Dove can be aggressive to others of the species and other birds. There are two sub-species of the Spinifex Pigeon – the white bellied and the red bellied. They are regarded as free breeders but can be flighty and may need to have their wings clipped. While they are not rare in aviaries, they are not common. They have a tendency to be aggressive to other ground birds and should be kept one pair per aviary. The cock birds can also be a bit nasty towards the hens. The Partridge Pigeon is available in the red eyed and the yellow eyed subspecies.

While they a peaceful bird to keep they are not common, and do best in a planted aviary. It is best not to keep them with other ground dwelling birds. Squatter Pigeons are reasonably free breeders, not aggressive to other birds but can be difficult to sex. They are usually compatible with other birds but not to their own kind. With the Flock Pigeon, you need to ensure that they are not placed in crowded conditions. Other than that, they are a peaceful bird, compatible with other species, easily sexed and spend most of their time on the ground. The Green Winged Pigeon is noted as a flighty bird but can be kept with finches and is easy to sex. They will eat dry and soaked seed and a little fruit. As pigeons and doves go, they make a reasonably substantial nest. The Common Bronzewing is easy to sex and common in aviaries where it is not overly aggressive although the cocks can be a bit nasty to each other. The Crested Pigeon is often erroneously called the Top Knot and while it is a good aviary bird is not widely held probably because they are so common in the wild. While they are available, the Brown Pigeon and the Rock Pigeon are not common in aviaries.

Dan had intended to spend some time talking about hand raising pigeons, but the clock beat him and this aspect of keeping these birds was not covered in any detail.

Based on a talk given by Dan Hassell
at the UBSSA Seminar held at the Enfield Community Centre on Sunday 29th May
2005.

FINCH MANAGEMENT

Russell Kingston was the only interstate speaker at the 2005 UBSSA Seminar. Russell is well known in avicultural circles as a finch breeder and author of many bird books and articles in a variety of magazines. A focus at this year's seminar was free attendance to those under 16 years of age. Many of Russell's remarks were directed to this group.

STARTING IN THE HOBBY – Russell suggested that the first step was to decide which species you are going to keep and investigate them before you buy. There is a tendency for beginners to aim high, to buy something which is unusual; BUT when starting out it is best to gain experience with species which are easy to keep. The first thing to do is to spend as much money as you can on building your aviary. As stated above, research the species you want to keep, then build an aviary which recreates some of the of the bird's natural environment. As well as being friendly to the species being kept, the aviary needs to be friendly to the bird keeper. A bird keeper needs to remember that their birds will be dependent on the decisions that they make. Consequently, you need to research both the housing and dietary requirements. And another thing Leave time to enjoy and observe your birds. After a little time spent with your birds you should be able to pick up on any change in behaviour so that you will know that a bird is sick before they become puffed up.

BUYING YOUR BIRDS – Russell's first tip was DON'T IMPULSE BUY your birds. Research, planning and building your aviary all come before you buy your birds. When you go to buy a bird ask your self, 'What is wrong with this bird?' The best one's to buy are birds which are partly coloured. Why? Because with partly coloured birds you know that they are young. However, with all 'rules of thumb' there are some exceptions. Gouldians should never be purchased uncoloured and are best bought around Christmas time after they have moulted. If buying from a breeder ask them how the bird has been raised. It is important that any change of diet is done gradually, so you need to know what the breeder has been feeding them. Some breeders are now providing data sheets with the birds that they sell which sets out the normal and breeding diet of the birds you have purchased. New birds need to be quarantined for 45 to 60 days.

LOOKING AFTER YOUR BIRDS – As a bird keeper you need to know how much time you will need to spend looking after any particular species you keep so that you know that you have that time available. Lighting, and in particular, sunlight is important for your birds so that vitamin D is absorbed. Twenty to thirty minutes sunlight each day is needed for this purpose. Finches also need to be wormed regularly. It is impractical to do this individually with most finch collections so flock worm treatment is undertaken with most finches, even though it is little hit and miss. Russell suggests that worm treatment is added to the water. To be most effective, remove the water at around 3.00 in the afternoon. Let the birds get really thirsty by leaving them without water until 10.00am the next morning. Leave the treated water in the aviary until 12.00 noon when it is replaced with fresh water. The birds only need one drink for effective treatment. After the initial treatment, the birds are treated twice more at two week intervals to break the cycle of worm infestation. While on the subject of water, Russell puts apple cider vinegar in the water at the rate of 10ml per litre one day each week. It is believed that this is a good preventive for mild gut problems. Also once per week, a multi-vitamin treatment is added to the water. One day per fortnight hydrated lime is placed in the water as a source of calcium for the birds. A clove of garlic is in the water at all times as this is also said to prevent disease. The garlic is left in the water until it starts to go soft. The time for this to happen will vary depending. On the time of year but does not last longer than two weeks. Rainwater is best for your birds.

FEEDING YOUR BIRDS – A dry finch mix is fed but only as a convenience for the bird keeper since in the wild birds eat very little of this type of food. It is, therefore, important to feed other than dry seed. Finches like soaked seed which is at its most nutritious just as it sprouts. Vitamin powder, a little niger and rape seed is added together with some finch soft food just before it is fed. Cucumber is a favourite with finches, either continental or Lebanese. Live foods are also necessary for some species. Because they are easy to breed and maintain, maggots are the main form of live food, but they must be kept in clear bran for 24 hours before being placed in the aviary. Termites are also good but more difficult to obtain. While Russell feeds a few mealworms for variety they need to be fed sparingly since they contain too much fat for most birds resulting in a build up of fat around the liver and they are not nutritious enough. Mealworms can cause most problems for birds which take large amounts of live food.

BREEDING – Birds will not breed in unsuitable housing. Aviaries need to face north or north-east and be governed by the climate. Russell told us that

he would shortly be moving house and when he did would be taking down his current aviaries and building banks of smaller aviaries. He claims that single pairs housed in small aviaries measuring 900mm x 2m x 2.5m improves productivity when compared with birds kept in mixed collections and as colonies, although there may be exceptions for some species. The aviaries will have concrete floors covered with a thick layer of straw and be fully roofed. Divisions between the aviaries will be solid. If you breed birds you also need to have a market for those that you breed otherwise problems may arise.

A few other points made by Russell include :

- There is room for all kinds of bird keepers in the hobby – pet bird keepers, novice keepers/breeders, serious hobbyists and commercial breeders. All are important.
- It has been shown that productivity drops in mixed collections and birds kept in colonies. Birds kept as single pairs improve productivity.
- A service lane attached to an aviary is important.

Based on a talk given by Russell Kingston
at the UBSSA Seminar held at the Enfield Community Centre on 29th May 2005.