

SOME THOUGHTS ON MINIMIZING THE DAMAGE SUSTAINED TO YOUR BIRDS THROUGH UNEXPECTED DISTURBANCES

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Unexpected disturbances to aviary birds can be of great concern to an aviculturist, annually causing the death or injury to large numbers of birds in collections around the world; it's not just the, obvious/more visible damage like trauma to a bird's body. What about that nest full of chicks that has been abandoned in the middle of the night because the neighbour's cat decided to take a "short cut" over your aviaries! It also accounts for a large number of deaths of seemingly healthy birds, inter-cranial haemorrhage can cause the death of a bird many day's after it sustained that fatal impact with the end of the aviary at 2am when the cat took that short cut!

We all know that some species are prone to disturbance more than others, Red-capped Parrots *P. spurious* for example are noted for their flighty behaviour, even some hand reared birds are quite nervous . Many pigeon species are noted for their skittish temperaments, often resulting in them living their lives with "scalped" heads (at Adelaide Zoo we now maintain all terrestrial pigeon species with "clipped" wings, greatly improved results).

Of most concern to the aviculturist is "night fright" - this is perhaps the most feared by all aviculturists, and rightly so as "night fright" causes a great deal of damage. This is when the birds are frightened at night and collide with the aviary/furniture often sustaining life threatening trauma injuries or, alternatively, once taken fright and being unable to find a suitable roosting site in the dark they are forced to settle for a less than ideal site perhaps in, an open and exposed site.

Some birds (often passerine species) will quite simply object to nest inspection; even an indication by the keeper that they are aware of the nest may result in desertion.

A change in routine can disturb some species and often the results of that 'change in routine' can go unnoticed. For example, Eclectus Parrots *E. roratus* are a species that like routine and can stress if changes are made. Even a simple modification to the diet can result in Eclectus Parrots "stressing out".

I am aware that some aviculturists go as far as to not allow visitors to their aviaries at certain times of the year, especially during the breeding season for fear of disturbing their birds.

Whilst there is certainly merit to this theory public institutions need to deal with constant disturbance to their birds on a daily/year round basis. For some institutions, with many hundreds of thousands of visitors per year and often coupled with after hour's functions, disturbance is a constant issue.

Along with this the constant commitment borne by other departments such as marketing for example offering "behind the scenes" tours, volunteers and staff from other departments going about their work leaves the animals in these collections constantly exposed to strangers in the immediate vicinity. And this is just the off display areas, what about the display aviaries! Screaming kids (and parents), contractors/vehicles, etc, all day, every day. Perhaps the very nature of the constant disturbance to animals in public collections is what makes it not such an issue to birds housed in them, in essence, disturbance is the routine.

There are however some common sense (and some not so common sense) ways around some of these disturbance issues, the first one is as follows. I once knew of an Aviculturist who when catching-up his birds or work in his aviaries he would wear certain clothing i.e.; a full-length coat and a hat. This person claimed that all of the birds in his collection were extremely calm and he could enter and exit aviaries and the birds would hardly pay attention. However, when it was his intention to capture birds (not only did he carry a net) he adorned the coat and hat; the birds knew what he was doing and behaved quite differently.

Don't walk around your aviaries being completely silent, as you come around the corner or from behind the shelter you could easily startle birds into a "panic flight", these flights can often result in trauma injuries to the

head and wings. Whistle as you walk or lay a path of pebbles/rubble that generates noise as you walk over it, the birds will always be aware of your presence.

Not all disturbances are people related, other animals are quite capable of causing your birds to panic and take flight, possums, dogs, birds of prey (diurnal and nocturnal) and cats are among the most common causes. Electric wires, double barriers (false roofs), building aviaries within a larger external enclosure or shed are all ways of eliminating disturbances to your flock by the above-mentioned animals.

In years past certain foreign zoos would maintain a population of domestic cats within the grounds, the animals in the collection (including birds) would get used to the cat's routine (and vice versa) and thus not be concerned about the presence of a cat.

Additionally cats are territorial animals and the “resident” felines would not allow strange cats to enter the grounds (not without a fight anyway), therefore effectively eliminating this issue. I have personally tried this and it does work.

Ultimately some disturbances to your birds are inevitable and ultimately every aviculturist will experience losses to this problem, some more than others. Some of the thoughts above may not suit everyone's current situation, how about your next aviary?

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