

Calendar

Let Babies Fledge

Exotic Birds of North County

Amy Runyon loves birds so much she thinks even chickens are smart, and she tries to convince a skeptical listener. "I have a pair of little bitty bantams, and it's the neatest thing to see them talk to their babies, teaching them what to eat. The rooster will even feed the hen. He'll find a nice morsel and drop it at her feet. We had a wonderful old rooster for a while. He was the sweetest thing with his hen."

"We" includes Runyon's husband, Terry, who used to raise white doves for his magic act. Then, 17 or 18 years ago, the Runyons bought their first parrot.

"We got into parrots because Terry had seen another magician use them instead of doves." Now she is president of North

LOCAL EVENTS

County Aviculturists, Inc., whose tenth-annual open-air bird mart will be held this weekend.

Their 200 members keep and breed exotic, nonnative birds. "That includes water fowl, like ducks; game birds, which could be pheasants; and softbills, which are toucans. I breed a kind of softbill called a mousebird. They're small, brown, hop around a lot, and have long skinny tails."

Costs range from \$5 to several hundred dollars. Large parrots can be thousands. A hyacinth macaw, says Runyon, goes for \$7000.

"A lot of the value is sentimental; they're family members. Breeding pairs have added value because they produce offspring that can be sold. But otherwise the value is determined by the market."

Some club members have only one or two birds; others — commercial breeders — have hundreds. "Many don't breed their birds; they're just pets. Or they're like me: they have some pets and one or two kinds of breeding birds."

Many members' birds live indoors, but often breeding pairs are kept outdoors. "That's why there are so many breeders in Southern California — because most exotic birds come from tropical or subtropical environments, and they can adapt to our relatively mild climate." The Runyons' mousebirds are native to sub-Saharan Africa.

Don't imagine that bird-breeding resembles, say, dog-breeding. Studs need not apply. "Some smaller birds, like canaries, will switch mates. But most birds, especially parrots, mate for life. They really have to like each other. Then they have to have a cage that's comfortable and a nest box they like.



North County Aviculturists and their birds (from left to right): blue and gold macaw, Mufasa; Alexandrine parakeet, Alex; Indian ringneck parakeet, Cisco; Moluccan cockatoo, Peaches

You can have a pair that will never make babies. One reason why parrots are more expensive than dogs is because they don't breed anywhere near the dogs' numbers."

Of talking birds, Runyon says, much of their uncanny ability is merely repetition of sounds. "We have a member who breeds mynas. In their case, they're saying something they've heard again and again in a certain situation. If my birds are being too noisy, and the [three] dogs are being noisy, too, my myna will say, 'Be quiet!'"

Parrots, by contrast, have the intelligence of a two- to three-year-old child, Runyon believes, depending on breed and individual bird. "They can problem-solve, to a certain extent. Parrots have been known to get out of their cages and to let everybody else out." Runyon herself owns such an escape artist. Louie, a sulfur-crested cockatoo, has been reformed by a more complicated lock. "When he wants to be picked up, he'll say, 'Step up.' I've never heard him make up words, but

greys [West African grey parrots] have been known to do that."

The Runyons have another cockatoo, a macaw, an Amazon parrot, as well as a yellow-billed hornbill. They devote one bedroom of their house in San Marcos to the cages. (The chickens stay outside.) Every evening the birds are allowed to perch in the living room. "But," says Runyon, "I know people who have birds all over."

Has any bird of theirs ever flown away?

"We've never lost a bird, because we do clip the wings. People can lose their birds if wings aren't clipped properly or some primary feathers grow back. Today I saw a parakeet in my backyard that got away from somebody. If a bird gets startled or a breeze catches it, they say, 'Oh, look at this, I have lift!' Often they can fly up but not down. They're afraid to land. There's a school of thought that says let babies fledge. A friend of mine has a cockatoo that she keeps fully flighted. It flies around the house."

The life spans of some exotic birds

can be problematically long. "Larger parrot species can live to 100 years — 80 years, easily." What happens when they outlive their owners is "a hard topic" for many. "Theoretically, you put them in your will."

But heirs must understand how time-consuming bird care can be. Runyon feeds hers three meals a day. She rarely travels. A professional clown, she works around their schedule. Other bird lovers of this caliber must seek sympathetic employers. Runyon says, "I had a friend whose baby birds had to be fed every hour. She brought them to work and kept them warm in her bra."

— Jeanne Schinto

Tenth Annual Open-Air Bird Mart of the North County Aviculturists
Sunday, September 24,
10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.
Bernardo Winery
13330 Paseo Del Verano Norte
Rancho Bernardo
Admission and parking: Free
Info: 760-765-1406

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