

MY SWAN SONG

by W.D. Cummings

I retired four years ago after 50 years specialising in the breeding and the public display of birds and animals in zoological and botanical gardens. The public display of birds and animals with compatible plant displays has always appealed to me, as not only is it pleasing to the eye but stimulates the interest and health of the inmates. Each display has its own problems though for some inmates can be very destructive.

I have specialised with both temperate and sub-tropical displays both in the UK and overseas. In the early pioneering days of Keston Foreign Bird Farm we concentrated on adapting and breeding rare parrots, parrakeets, pheasants, softbills and a wide variety of seed-eaters, to introduce and supply for aviculture in the British climate. Mutations cropped-up and Keston was the first to start colour breeding the wild Budgerigar *Melopsittacus undulatus* from a blue Budgerigar taken from the wild in Australia, also the blue Ring-neck *Psittacula krameri* from single specimens taken from the wild in India, and the yellow Red-rump *Psephotus haematonotus* and yellow Plum-head *P. cyanocephala*, to name a few.

From these my interest continued after many years of line-breeding the more popular varieties of parrakeets and pheasants, etc., to investigate the fertility and development of other colour varieties. Even before I joined Keston I had in my youth investigated the possible fertility between different species of doves and pigeons. I paired a female Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus* (reared under domestic pigeons) with a tame male pigeon and produced two hybrid males. Their display when adult was a bow with their smaller tails raised on completion of the display, but both males were infertile. I paired one hybrid to a Stock Dove *C. oenas* and though happily paired it proved infertile. Next I tried pairing a female Stock Dove with a domestic Ice Toy pigeon and the hybrid males were fertile with domestic pigeons but not with the females. My aim was to produce a small Toy pigeon that was not flock imprinted and would adapt to garden conditions. I even brought in wild Rock Dove *C. livia* blood but unfortunately the experiments were halted when I left Keston after one of my partners died.

Also at this time I was experimenting with the fertility of Budgerigars. When doubts were still being expressed about them being a distinctly different species, I paired a big male cobalt budgie to a female Bourke's Parrakeet *Neophema bourkii* and these were isolated together in a small aviary for the winter. When a nest-box was introduced in the spring immediate interest was shown in it and with each other, mating was frequent and several clutches of eggs were laid but all were infertile. I then tried a

female Elegant Grass Parrakeet *N. elegans* with a large male green budgie and the result was the same. At the time it was suggested that the Budgerigar might have been closely related to the lovebirds, so I placed some Peach-faced Lovebird's *Agapornis roseicollis* eggs under budgies with the idea of making it easier for the budgie-reared lovebirds to harmonize and breed back to budgies.

There was a small problem in that lovebird chicks are born with fluff while budgie chicks are naked and several female budgies refused to feed these fluffy youngsters, however, some were reared successfully. One budgie-reared female Peach-faced Lovebird was then paired to its foster-father and although they mated all the eggs were infertile. Although we did contemplate using two of the South American parrotlets *Forpus* spp. with budgies, the parrotlets were hard to come by at the time and the experiments came to an end.

While I was still at Keston a member of the public brought me a small white bird, with a pink bill and eyes, which she had found in her garden. We thought it was a canary which had escaped from somewhere, but it was a little smaller than a Roller Canary and was the wrong shape. Instead of the canary's arched back it had an undulating back with its tail held up. I felt it must be an baby albino House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, so after caging it for a while and making sure it could feed itself, I released it into a large planted aviary with a variety of other seed-eaters and an immature male sparrow which I had trapped. The albino had to be a female, for to produce a male, a wild female albino sparrow would have to survive to breed and pair to a male either to which she was related or was carrying the albino factor, which is a remote possibility.

The following year the albino female was observed coming from a budgie's wooden nest-box hung right out in the open, a most unlikely place for a timid House Sparrow to breed in. She laid five eggs and hatched and reared all five young, helped by a liberal supply of livefood - but to my horror they proved to be four females and only one male. Females cannot carry the albino factor, as it is sex-linked. Therefore, it could be carried only by her male offspring. Eventually I removed the original male and all the normal females and just left the albino female with her son in a smaller secluded aviary.

Due to some disturbance they missed breeding the following year and in the third year the female was getting a bit old for breeding. She went to nest again and laid only one to two eggs. The first time she reared one male bird (split/albino) and then two albinos (both males). So I thought if I could bring her through another breeding season I could pair her to an albino male and get albinos of both sexes. This was not to be though, for I left Keston soon afterwards. The males moulted out into beautiful little

birds. They were creamy white, with the rufous mantle of the adult male House Sparrow, over the white body - they really were attractive.

I continued with other experiments during my years in South Africa, in zoos, at my own bird farm at Barberton and finally at the Mitchell Park Zoo in Durban, Natal. A friend and colleague had hybridized the African Red-eyed Rock Pigeon (better known outside southern Africa as the Speckled or Triangular-spotted Pigeon) *C. guinea* with domesticated Tiplers in an attempt to discover their relationship to domestic pigeons. He found that some male hybrids were fertile and proceeded to produce very attractive pied Red-eyed Rock Pigeons.

He continually paired the hybrids back to pure Rock Pigeons and found that the pied factor was not lost in pairing back again and again to pure wild stock of the Red-eyed Rock Pigeon and finally he had very attractive pied Red-eyed Rock Pigeons. Eventually whites were produced, they were pure white with the red area surrounding the eyes - they were most attractive. I thought about eventually having a flock of white Red-eyed Rock Pigeons at controlled liberty but we never bred enough of them.

The same colleague in South Africa also bred colour varieties of the Senegal or Laughing Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis* - piers and whites and cinnamons, pied cinnamons, chocolate and white piers and many other very attractive colours - from wild produced mutations. Unfortunately not many aviculturists kept them and they were maintained in only a few collections, because of the high food bills and the fact that they were not highly saleable. Aviculturists preferred instead the more exotic Australian doves and pigeons.

I recollect how years ago, while a pupil at Appleyard Duck and Goose Farm in Suffolk, I was instrumental in initiating the colour varieties of the decoy or bantam duck. In those days there was only the white miniature decoy duck and the black (bottle green) East Indian duck. Among a collection of ducks brought in was a little Khaki Campbell-type cross-bred duck. It was obviously an egg layer and so the idea was conceived of an egg laying bantam duck - a prolific layer of bantam sized eggs. The following year this miniature duck was crossed with a very small white decoy drake and the resultant silver Mallard-type progeny were selectively bred for the small size, decoy boat shape and egg laying qualities, and the silver Mallard colour. Now there are very many beautiful colours available to duck fanciers.

I believe in seeking to expand the variety and quality of life as the aim of the true aviculturist and, I think, that in this respect I have done my bit.

EARLY BREEDINGS AND NEW ARRIVALS AT BIRDWORLD

by Kerry Banks

The year at Birdworld started off on an unusually hectic note, for due to the recent take-over it was a time of major improvements and building work, with plans for extensive refurbishments both in the park and in the shop/restaurant starting almost immediately. Though this was good news for all concerned on the staff, it meant major disruptions for the birds at the start of the breeding season. This combined with some very indecisive weather meant a rather slow start to the season compared with other years, and also the realisation that some of our previously consistent breeding pairs are not going to lay this year. However, we feel that what we are missing in quantity we are making up for in quality, including a couple of first breedings at Birdworld.

The first to make a showing in February were Indian Ring-necked Parrakeets *Psittacula krameri manillensis*, Red-fronted Kakarikis *Cyanoramphus novaeseelandiae*, African Greys *Psittacus erithacus* and Roulroul Partridges *Rollulus roulroul*; all of which have produced successful clutches, with five chicks hand-reared already from the roulrouls. In March, two separate pairs of Waldrapp Ibis *Geronticus eremita* - one of our two Red Data endangered species - went down to nest and now have three almost fully-fledged chicks between them. Our second endangered species, the Bali Starlings *Leucopsar rothschildi*, were also observed treading and though very secretive about nest building, the collection of twigs, feathers and leaves in one of the nest-boxes made us collectively cross our fingers. A clutch of three eggs was laid and we decided to leave them with the parents, and from this point on the nest-box was not approached again until the chicks were due to hatch, as the parents were very nervous sitters, which came off the nest at the slightest disturbance. All three eggs hatched, which was quite an achievement considering it was this pairs' first attempt at breeding. Very infrequent checks were made and the chicks seemed to be doing well, with their parents waiting anxiously every day for their second and third feeds of creepy-crawlies to ply the chicks with. Unfortunately, however, two chicks were thrown out of the box within the space of a couple of days. We do not know why this happened, it may just have been inexperience on the part of the parents. The third chick continued to prosper and, at the time of writing, has fledged and is now a very handsome miniature of its parents, which look as though they are about to nest for a second time.

By now other birds around the park were starting to breed and the first

chicks were beginning to arrive in the rearing room. These included Spree Starlings *Spreo superbus*, Nene Geese *Branta sandvicensis*, Ostrich *Struthio camelus*, Rheas *Rhea americana*, Swinhoe's Pheasants *Lophura swinhoii*, Golden Pheasants *Chrysolophus pictus*, Grey Peacock Pheasants *Polyplectron bicalcaratum*, Rothschild's Peacock Pheasants *P. inopinatum*, White-cheeked Touraco *Tauraco leucotis*, Barn Owls *Tyto alba*, European Eagle Owls *Bubo bubo*, Fulvous-breasted Woodpeckers *Picoides macei*, Demoiselle Cranes *Anthropoides virgo*, Kookaburras *Dacelo novaeguineae* and Humboldt Penguins *Spheniscus humboldti*. Other birds starting to lay included Eider Ducks *Somateria mollissima*, Purple Glossy Starlings *Lamprolornis purpureus*, Amethyst or Violet-backed Starlings *Cinnyricinclus leucogaster*, Wandering Treepies *Dendrocitta vagabunda*, Red-billed Blue Magpies *Urocissa erythrorhyncha*, Shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*, Masked or Yellow-wattled Plovers *Vanellus miles*, Spoonbills *Platalea alba*, Lemon-breasted Ground Doves *Gallicolumba tristigmata*, Violet-naped Lories *Eos squamata*, Hoopoe *Upupa epops*, Greater Necklaced Laughing Thrush *Garrulax pectoralis*, Hill Mynahs *Gracula religiosa*, Common Hill Partridge *Arborophila torqueola*, Cheer Pheasants *Catreus wallichii*, Satyr Tragopans *Tragopan satyra*, Blyth's Tragopans *T. blythii*, Temminck's Tragopans *T. temminckii* and Night Herons *Nycticorax nycticorax*.

We also had some disappointments; both Lappet-faced Vulture *Torgos tracheliotus* eggs proved to be infertile and the two Raven *Corvus corax* chicks that we were hand-rearing died of yolk sac infections. Many of our usually reliable pairs of breeding macaws have yet to do anything, due to the fact that they have been shifted around. This, along with elaborate feeding techniques, seems to have helped the Keas *Nestor notabilis* to start breeding again and we are currently hand-rearing a very healthy chick. The Cassowaries *Casuarus casuarus* have also laid again this year. Three eggs have been removed for incubation and two have been left with the parents. We are also very pleased that our pair of Red-crowned Cranes *Grus japonensis* on loan from Moscow Zoo are doing well; one chick is currently being hand-reared, while the parents are on a second clutch of two eggs. Another first for Birdworld is the arrival of two Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura* chicks which are being hand-reared. After initial panic on our part, these chicks are so far proving to be exceptionally easy to feed, if we can keep them still for long enough. The Turkey Vulture was not in Dave Coles' list of breeding records (*Avicultural Magazine*, 102, 4: 166-168), so it would seem to be the first UK breeding of this species.

As well as some pleasing breeding results, we have also been fortunate to get some interesting new birds. One of our most important projects during the winter was to get the new 'Parrots in Flight' aviary up and

running in time for the arrival of 'Bluebeard', our Hyacinth Macaw *Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus* back from breeding loan at London Zoo, and also to get the various other macaws, amazons, cockatoos and conures installed so that there may be a chance that they will breed there this year. This has been achieved to some extent, as the Scarlet Macaws *Ara macao* and the Patagonian Conures *Cyanoliseus patagonus* are already laying, though the Scarlet Macaws have chosen to lay in an amazon-size nest-box which they can hardly fit in to. The hunt was on to find a mate for 'Bluebeard', when out of the blue some members of the public asked if they could donate their egg-laying female to us? We jumped at the chance and are very, very grateful to them for their kindness.

Other arrivals have included two pairs of Smew *Mergus albellus*, three pairs each of Nene and Red-breasted Geese *B. ruficollis*, three pairs of Blue-bellied Rollers *Coracias cyanogaster* which are already showing signs of wanting to breed, Rufous-crowned Rollers *C. naevia*, Blue-breasted Kingfishers *Halcyon malimbica*, Hardwick's Fruitsuckers *Chloropsis hardwickii*, Long-tailed Broadbills *Psarisomus dalhousiae*, Fairy Bluebirds *Irena puella*, Blue-faced Honeyeaters *Entomyzon cyanotis*, Fire-tufted Barbets *Psilopogon pyrolophus*, Great Barbets *Megalaima virens*, Blue-throated Barbets *M. asiatica*, Bearded Barbets *Lybius dubius*, Royal or Golden-breasted Starlings *Cosmopsarus regius*, Black-naped Orioles *Oriolus chinensis*, Black-capped Lories *Lorius lory* and Stella's Lories *Charmosyna papou goliathina*.

We have also devoted a lot of time and attention to overhauling the birds' diets. Many have been upgraded and changed so that we are sure each species has the correct diet. We hope to make Birdworld one of the premier collections in Europe and, hopefully, with one of the best breeding records.

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LORO PARQUE FOUNDATION TO RETURN ILLIGER'S MACAWS TO BRAZIL

by David Waugh

In a Project for the Reintroduction of the Illiger's Macaw *Ara maracana*, the Loro Parque Foundation (Loro Parque Fundación) is sending 20 Illiger's Macaws to Brazil to be released there later this year in the State of Bahia.

These macaws were bred in captivity in the world's largest parrot collection, which is owned by the foundation and located at Loro Parque in Tenerife, Canary Islands. This important conservation action has several objectives, the most immediate being to determine the effectiveness of this technique to restore viable populations of endangered parrot species to the wild state. The results of such a carefully controlled project will help to determine the best ways to supplement reduced wild populations of parrots, as well as to re-establish populations of parrot species which have disappeared locally or have become extinct in the wild. In regard to the latter, this experimental release of Illiger's Macaws will provide valuable information about how to restore the wild population of the world's rarest parrot species, the Spix's Macaw *Cyanopsitta spixii*.

The Spix's Macaw has only one known individual, a male, remaining in the wild state, although there are 39 registered in the globally managed captive population, two pairs of which are in the Loro Parque Foundation collection. As a founder member of the International Committee for the Recovery of the Spix's Macaw, the foundation collaborates with IBAMA the wildlife agency of the Brazilian Government, and indeed is the principal financial supporter of a recovery programme which involves protection of the wild male bird, protection and restoration of its natural habitat, as well as working closely with the local community for awareness and education about the environment.

Thus, the captive-bred Illiger's Macaws will be released in the native region of the Spix's Macaw, where also exists a wild population of Illiger's, reduced by the effects of the earlier removal of young birds from their nests for illegal trade. The entire process for the eventual release of these birds is being carried out with reference to the guidelines of the Reintroduction Specialist group of the IUCN - the world conservation union. Thus, every individual has undergone the most advanced testing possible for communicable diseases, and has shown negative for all tests. Even so, the birds will have a four month quarantine when they arrive in Brazil, followed by a further six months of acclimatisation at the release site, in a huge aviary specially built and funded by the Loro Parque Foundation. The release protocol also includes genetic and disease testing of the captive-bred birds, as well as individuals of the same species in the recipient wild



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