

Habitat Immersion - The New Wave

by Bob and Liz Johnson

Fifty years ago it was considered standard for zoos to confine animals to small cages, but as people have become enlightened to the psychological needs and feelings of animals, zoos have responded by providing spacious natural habitats. Today, the sight of a lion pacing back and forth in his cubicle or a dolphin swimming in circles in a small tank is looked upon by the viewing public as cruel and inhumane.

Parrots, naturally creatures of the air and boundless space, seem to be the last captive animals for whom a natural life-style is being considered. Many are still living in the small sterile environment of a cage, unable to embrace in any way the unique and wondrous lifestyle for which they were created.

Habitat immersion is the trend in the zoo world now and, happily, there is a growing trend among aviculturists to respond to the same (if not greater) psychological needs and feelings of these free-flying spirits of the rainforest by providing large natural habitats where the birds can live, at least to some degree, in the way nature intended...really flying, interacting with trees, the ground, the rain, and even selecting their own mates.

Dr. Theodore Barber's book, *The Human Nature of Birds* (page 167) tells us, "Birds not only use flight as a natural means of locomotion, but in beautiful forms as a means of expression... Many species spend hours of the day in the recreation of flight as others spend hours in song. Flight is an art akin to music, with rhythm and feeling of movement as its foundation, a glorious means of expression that birds know well how to use". Birds were designed to fly and flight muscles, like all other muscles, tend to atrophy when not used for long periods.

A bird sitting alone, or even with a mate he did not choose, in a cubicle barely large enough to spread his wings, even though he may be fed a nutritious diet, given quality veterinary care, and kept immaculately clean, is both physically and psychologically a far cry from the bird flying free among the trees and interacting with his environment. Additionally, the exercise plus the psychological benefits of the exhilaration of freedom are strong immune system enhancers.

Concern for conservation should

include preserving the spirit of the bird as well as merely the physical form. Many avicultural articles are replete with advice about the importance of keeping the gene pool intact by not hybridising, thus retaining the physical form as nature designed, should reintroduction become feasible. According to these same publications, however, it seems perfectly acceptable to alter all other aspects of the bird. We are inundated with advice on how to edit them to our standards and teach them not to behave like a bird - how to stop chewing, biting, screaming, making a mess, and flying. Then we wonder why birds pluck their feathers, mutilate themselves, or become aggressive. Seldom addressed is how to maintain and enjoy them as a bird. Observing their social interactions and seeing how much fun they have in a natural setting, flying freely, functioning as a part of nature while still enjoying interacting with people is truly a learning experience and gives one an insight into the true marvels and capacities of these incredible beings.

As one spends more time with the birds in their habitat, they begin to see you as a co-inhabitant who can share in their games and play and participate in their various social interactions, rather than as a captor who restricts their activities. Thus a level of love, understanding and interaction rarely experienced by any pet owner is often attained.

In free-flight habitat birds change "buddies" frequently before deciding on a mate, much as

humans do. Few species breed in a communal situation, however, so in most cases true pairs should be given their own quarters. But even then, true romance doesn't deserve a prison sentence. They can be given slightly smaller habitats and still be permitted to commune with nature. We have found that birds who select their own mates are more prolific breeders (wouldn't you be?) than those who have one forced upon them.

Charles Munn tells us ("New Yorker", July 30, 1990) that captive birds forget how to live; all of their cultural transmission is lost. They lose what he calls their parrotness and therefore most captive bred birds are not suitable for reintroduction.

Survival skills are not transmitted by osmosis but through experience. Even parent birds who are allowed to raise their offspring in a cage have no way of teaching them how to survive in the wild.

No social, curious, active, and intelligent being can remain happy or physiologically and psychologically stable when permanently restricted to a small sterile environment.

Someday, in a more enlightened age, the practice of confining any bird to a life limited to the synthetic environment of a cage will be viewed as morally and ethically unthinkable, much as slavery is looked back on today. Zoo animals had the voice of the viewing public to speak out for them. The fate of these birds, breeders as well as pets, rests with the conscience of the

individual who has them in his care.

Clipped wings or confining cages are not the only alternative to extinction. Habitat immersion is becoming the wave of the future. Those who have economic interests as their primary concern will argue that this is not the most economically efficient use of space, but even they would have to agree that it is the most compassionate. It is also the most pragmatic and realistic way to assure survival, should reintroduction into the wild become an actuality.

Without exception, every bird lover who has seen our habitat has said that they would love to have something like it but that they: 1) don't have the money or 2) don't have the space or 3) both of the above. There are various designs and construction methods for habitats and mini habitats to fit almost any space or budget. With imagination and initiative, plus a large helping of commitment, captive birds can be living life to the fullest in a mini or micro rainforest setting and would be a lot happier for it.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Bob and Liz Johnson both have Masters Degrees in Psychology and have been working with parrots for over twenty years. They maintain a quarter-acre free-flight habitat that is sixteen feet high, with trees and plants, which houses one hundred birds, including 11 Hyacinths.



Free flight habitat maintained by Bob & Liz Johnson in Florida

Photo: Liz Johnson