

TAILOR MAKE YOUR AVIARY

by Linda Greeson

Each aviary is planned and built to meet a combination of highly individual requirements. Available space, possible locations, financial limitations, the numbers and varieties of birds to be housed, whether facilities for breeding are required, and local climate are only some of the special requirements of each owner. If standard sizes and plans could be devised, some enterprising manufacturer would long ago have offered pre-constructed aviaries to be purchased like cages. The endless variations make each aviary as unique to you as your fingerprints.

Detailed planning is then of primary importance. Before putting a pencil to paper as definite a decision as possible must be made as to how many and what varieties of birds are to be housed. As it is a rare bird lover who does not add to his collection quite regularly it is wise to plan more space than seems needed, or at least plan for possible additions in the future. Many have started out modestly with a small, cramped aviary only to realize in a short time that it is completely inadequate for a growing collection. Since providing facilities for the health and welfare of our birds is our chief objective, overcrowding and inadequate space negates the entire purpose of the project.

Before becoming too involved in the details of your plan it is wise to investigate the zoning regulations in your community and other local laws that may limit the number of birds you are allowed to house.

It is also well to consider the tolerance your neighbors may have for noise. Even a group of Budgies can create quite a racket at times. When choosing a location a partially shaded area is most desirable, preferably facing the south or east for morning sun and protection from cold north west winds in the winter. It is also preferable not to have your birds visible from the street, not only to discourage thievery and vandalism but to avoid the bright lights of passing cars disturbing the birds at night. If your family's tolerance for noise permits, having your birds close enough to the house for observation from your patio or a window is enjoyable.

Rain and sun are blessings, but just as we do, birds need the opportunity to get out of both when they so desire. In northern climates secure shelter houses are a must. These are usually used as feeding stations to protect the food and water from the rain as well as to encourage the birds to enter.

We have found that the most practical plan is to place shrubs and trees around the outside perimeters of our aviaries, thus providing shade and privacy but avoiding their being chewed, eaten, and soiled by droppings and dust. Although the vast majority of birds destroy vegetation within the flight quite rapidly Finches and other soft bills enjoy having access to grass and shrubbery without being at all destructive. A solution to keeping both the shrubbery and the area beneath clean may be the use of large potted plants set on platforms on casters for ease in moving about.

A wide range of plants are suitable for the aviary, the choice influenced by the climate and the need to avoid any that are known to be poisonous. In the south we favor flowering hibiscus, our pruned branches being given to the birds for chewing. Climbing vines rapidly take over, providing not only beauty but dappled shade in the summer months.

The choice of the type of flooring to use in the aviary is a major consideration. A dirt floor is of course the least expensive, but since droppings and uneaten food collect with amazing speed, sanitation becomes a problem. A covering of sand or pebbles helps, but frequent raking out is a constant chore.

A concrete floor is the easiest to keep clean, requiring only frequent hosing and an occasional wash with a mild bleach solution. Care must be taken to provide adequate drainage when electing for concrete. The floor may be poured with high outer edges sloping toward a center drain, preferable of good size with a removable wire basket to aide in cleaning.

A high center sloping to the outside on two sides may be used. Another solution is to have the entire floor slope toward one side with a trough carrying the water to a drain. Good provision for drainage requires

careful planning if a very messy situation of soggy ground and unsightly collection of debris is not to result.

Providing electricity for both heating and light is advisable. Electric heating is really the only safe method. We have found that providing a dim light at night protects the birds from injury if they are startled. Having a supply of clean, running water is another convenience. If the only source of water is a garden hose during the warm weather an excellent medium for growing bacteria is provided. The hose must be changed at frequent intervals for a new one, and the water allowed to run through before each use for sufficient time to thoroughly flush the interior. Many outbreaks of disease in aviaries have been traced back to a contaminated garden hose.

Vermin are naturally attracted to the food supply ever present in a aviary. They not only carry disease and enjoy eating eggs and small babies, but are natural enemies and their presence can startle and frighten a group of birds so badly that injury results. Flaring the cage wire outward while burying it to a depth of two feet stops burrowing under to gain access to the cage. The use of an additional eighteen inches of 1/4 inch wire around the bottom of the cages discourages the entrance of mice. The use of traps and poison is limited to areas where they are not accessible to the birds or family pets.

In planning your aviary the choice of wire suitable for your collection of birds is an important decision to make. For the smaller seed eaters 1/2 inch 19 gauge wire will suffice. For the larger soft bills 1 inch 16 gauge wire is preferable. 16 gauge is strong enough for most species of birds except the larger macaws and cockatoos who require 12 gauge wire.

In all gauges 1 x 1 1/2 inches provides the best protection against rodents. We use welded, galvanized wire exclusively. Wire mesh, commonly called "chicken wire" is not desirable as even small finches can become entangled in the irregular shaped openings. The square or rectangular openings in the welded wire make a clean cut possible without the numerous protruding ends present when working with mesh. It is wise to plan your structure in multiple of the width of the wire being used. Usually 2,3,4, and 6 foot widths are available.

Many of the larger species are adept at removing staples and "breaking out." If the wire is applied to the inner surface and then extended to the adjoining face at top and bottom of the frame the edges will be kept out of reach. Before putting birds in contact with new wire it should be thoroughly washed with warm soapy water and rinsed well to remove any acids or oil present. Spraying with a strong solution of vinegar and warm water helps to neutralize the materials used in galvanizing.

A safety porch at the entry to the aviary will prevent possible loss of your treasured birds. It consists of a small booth which makes possible the closing of the outer door before opening the inner door. As birds usually fly over the head of the person entering it is best to keep all doors low.

Indoor aviaries are in use all over the country. A basement, attic, garage, or extra bedroom can readily be converted for use as an aviary. The set up can be planned much the same as for an outdoor aviary with special attention being given to ventilation and lighting. For free flying birds wire screen must be fitted over all windows and an entrance vestibule provided. Plans for daily cleaning must be carefully worked out. This chore is usually a much greater burden in an inside aviary.

In designing our southern style outdoor aviaries, suited to our location in southern Florida, we departed from the standard two section aviary which usually consists of a wired in flight and a roofed over permanent structure. On a cement base we constructed framing to provide a peaked roof eight feet at the center. The roof was constructed of corrugated fiber glass sheets fastened to the 2 x 2's at three foot intervals. This material blocks out most of the sun's rays but allows for sufficient light. It is attractive and relatively easy to work with. The outer last twelve inches of the roof were left uncovered except by wire to allow the birds to enjoy the rain at the ends of their cages, or to retreat toward the center if they want to stay dry.

The sides were completely covered with 1/2 x 1 inch 16 gauge wire, framed simply by the 4 x 4 posts used to support the roof. The wire was fastened securely to the cement base to prevent the entrance of rodents.

Breeding cages were lined up on each side on racks 36 inches from the floor. All nest boxes and feeding doors face the center aisle, easily serviced and kept dry. We also have walk in flights for our maturing and resting birds within the structure.

A width of 18 feet provides adequate space between the cages for comfortable servicing and storage, and even for the addition of a few smaller cages in the center when even our 80 foot aviary rapidly became too small. The 16 x 18 foot aviary houses 14 breeding cages for cockatiels with two walk in flights. The 18 x 80 foot aviary houses most of our varied collection of approximately 400 birds, grouped by species. Finches and Bourkes fly free, and Button and Pharo quail scurry happily around the floor, growing fat on discarded food and whatever insects are foolish enough to enter.

To provide a windbreak during our few spells of cooler weather we use corrugated fiber glass panels attached to the outside wire with Bunje cords. Climbing vines and luxuriant shrubbery provide shade in summer and an attractive natural atmosphere. A shop light, the round metal type equipped with a clamp, placed over the cages, provided sufficient heat for even a really cold spell.

These aviaries, planned after ten years of trial and error, fit our needs very well. They would not be suitable in colder climates, or for those not interested in breeding. In designing aviaries it is definitely "to each his own".

Tailor make yours to fit your own needs.