

Why Be Involved in a Bird Club?

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I have been actively involved in avian medicine since 1980, when I began at Niles Animal Hospital as a summer veterinary extern under the tutelage of the noted avian veterinarian Dr. T. J. Lafeber. Through the years I became very active in the avicultural community at several levels. As I began my career as a veterinarian in 1983, I witnessed an explosion of knowledge pertaining to pet birds, their breeding, care and medical treatment, so much so that with birds were referred to as the "Pet of the 90's." Through the combined efforts of many diverse groups of individuals including bird breeders, veterinarians, aviculturists and bird club members we had seen great advancements in the field of aviculture.

With the rising interest in pet birds in the mid-1980's there was an increase in the number of bird clubs and large numbers of bird fanciers became members of old established clubs or the newly formed clubs. These clubs aimed to meet the needs of bird fanciers, be they serious breeders, individuals who competed in bird show competitions or the owner of a single budgie, well run clubs could appeal to them all.

The bird clubs worked on several levels. Members would be able to meet fellow bird fanciers and make contacts with people of similar interests. They could enhance their knowledge about their favorite type of birds, pick up tips on breeding, behavior, showing birds, but also learn about other varieties of birds and the experiences that other club members have with their birds. But even more than the social aspects, the clubs would provide knowledgeable speakers at the monthly meetings, discussing varied aspects of aviculture such as breeding, nutrition, disease conditions, behavior and so forth, that would be of great interest to any bird owner.

Many clubs also sponsored bird fairs which were a source of fund raising and a means of increasing awareness to aviculture. The fairs attracted the bird owning public, breeders, vendors of bird products and also people who did not own birds but were curious about them. Quite often because of this exposure to birds at the fair it stimulated these individuals to obtain a bird and hence become involved in aviculture. These fairs were quite a large undertaking but very rewarding. They provided exposure to many new avian products and bird varieties expanding the attendees own horizons. Quite often lectures or educational presentations would be part of the bird fair. They were also the big fund raising event for the clubs, with the funds being used to support the clubs and their activities but even more importantly the proceeds from these fairs were sent to an individual or organization engaged in some aspect of aviculture or avian research that the club deemed worthy of financial support.

Some clubs further enhanced their activities by sponsoring avicultural seminars with nationally renowned bird experts as speakers which might be a daylong or two day weekend program. Sometimes the club would sponsor a noted speaker for an evening seminar, such as Dr. Irene Pepperberg. The admission fee covered the expenses of the speaker, fees, club costs for the logistics of the seminar and any additional funds raised were donated to a worthwhile cause in aviculture. Needless to say, a great deal of work was

involved, but the benefits made it worthwhile. The knowledge gleaned from such experiences was very useful for people with all levels of experience with birds. As the club and the associated activities succeeded, bird fanciers were provided excellent educational opportunities, ability to network and also to become actively involved in aviculture as fund raising by the club would make money available to be provided to avicultural research from which we would all benefit.

However, in recent years, some of this enthusiasm pertaining to pet birds and bird clubs themselves, has tailed off. With the advent of the internet, big box stores and national pet store chains, many "Ma and Pa" pet stores could not keep the sustained business to survive which unfortunately led to their closures. During the 90's there were numerous pet stores in the Chicagoland area that dealt mainly with pet birds, some that had been in business for many years. Unfortunately, few exist at this time. Many of the noted bird breeders in our area have either retired or stopped breeding. So where we used to have an abundance of options for obtaining a bird, the choices have become limited. This is not to say there are still not wonderful stores or breeders out there, there most certainly are, but the "bird boom of the 90's" has definitely cooled off.

In another alarming trend there has been drop off in bird club membership in the Chicagoland area with the unfortunate disbanding of some formerly solid clubs. I feel there are a few reasons why this has occurred.

One of the big reasons is the change in our society itself. People seem less likely to be involved in clubs or activities outside their homes anymore as we have almost become a reclusive society. People would rather socialize on the internet with chat lines and blogs. People get information from the internet as well. In the past, people would go to bird clubs to learn about various aspects of aviculture as the club was one of the few sources of good information. Now, however, you can become involved with a group on the internet that is focused on particular species or topics which interest you, so the monthly trek to the bird club is less appealing when you have ready access available in your own home. You have the ability to converse with people all over the world who share your interests and you can benefit from their knowledge/experiences as well. I am not saying this is a bad thing as the technology is wonderful, but we as a society are losing something because we are becoming less social in general, rather socializing in a detached sort of way over the internet.

Another reason for the failure of bird clubs is the primary cause of their disbanding and I have seen this occur numerous times. Initially the clubs do wonderfully. There is a concerted team effort, involvement by many people on several levels, committees populated by many different club members and people are making the effort to be at the meetings, where there is good turnout and the club thrives. But over time there is a decline in the involvement by the members in the various committees or the organization of club activities. Eventually what occurs is the same few individuals in the club are the ones who end up running everything to keep the club functioning. The board remains the same, the same person may remain president for a prolonged period of time, the same person does the newsletters and the same people run the bird fair or a club activity. It gets to the point where these individuals get burned out, ask for help or involvement from the other club members, who have benefited from their hard work but that aid is not forthcoming. It is then decided that they can no longer function like this and the club disbands, which in my opinion, is tragic.

As you all know, I am a huge supporter of our local bird clubs (and clubs throughout the country for that matter) as I have contributed articles and lectured at numerous clubs nationwide throughout the years. I am always very disappointed when I hear that one disbands. I am dedicated to the support of aviculture and the bird clubs and always willing to speak at the monthly meetings or contribute educational articles for the newsletters. I believe involvement in a bird club can be very satisfying educationally but also a great opportunity to share experiences with others and to socialize. It is also emotionally satisfying knowing that the efforts of the club/club members by sponsoring seminars or fund raising projects lead to the support and hence advancement of aviculture. However, it is ultimately the support of the individual members that are their lifeblood of these bird clubs and hence aviculture.

That is why it is important that current bird club members and especially former bird club members take a good hard introspective look at themselves. If you are in a club are you doing all you can to make your club the best club it can be? Are you taking an active role in the organization or running of club activities? Have you held a position of responsibility in the club on the board or chaired a committee? If you dropped out was it a truly wise decision? Get involved in the club once again! You need to look beyond selfish reasons for not being involved and look at the greater good that the bird clubs offer. I walk the walk and talk the talk being an avid supporter because I recognize bird clubs and the individual members are a key element of aviculture. We all need to work together to keep the level of interest high in aviculture, but also promote the educational aspects of the clubs so that the level of care for our avian companions can be maintained at a high level.

In these difficult times, involvement in the clubs is more important than ever. For example, research grants and funds are less available to researchers involved in projects that directly influence you and the well-being of your avian companions. The money that is generated by the club fundraisers can be directed to a particular researcher or group conducting studies on diseases or some aspect of aviculture that the members would like to support. Personally knowing many of these researchers I know how much this funding is sorely needed and sincerely appreciated. Bird club members can take pride in their support of such worthwhile projects which will benefit everyone.

Additionally, aviculturists must be on the look out for legislation that could be detrimental to pet bird ownership, as quite often there are efforts to slide in restrictive legislation. National organizations, such as AFA, are very involved at monitoring this activity on national level, however, it is your local bird clubs that keep you informed of such activity, but also keeping an eye out for legislation at the local or state level. It is an important additional benefit of the bird clubs. Remember, there is strength in numbers.

It is now time to volunteer your time and efforts to enable your bird club to continue to benefit bird fanciers in your area. If not, this wonderful resource will be lost and aviculture on a local and national level (due to the contributions to avian research provided by the club) will suffer. Pull yourselves away from the computer screens and speak face to face with real live people. It is time to become social once again. Share knowledge and experiences with fellow bird fanciers as well as soaking up knowledge from the educational programs. Take the time to hold leadership positions in the clubs. Do not always allow others to do it, or the same people to do it...they will eventually burn out and the club may become a thing of the past. To me the disbanding of a bird club is tragic and with determined, dedicated membership should not be allowed to happen.

Get involved in a bird club in your area! You and your birds will be glad you did.

Clubs in the Chicagoland Area - Check them out!

Greater Chicago Cage Bird Club

www.GCCBC.org

The Avicultural Society of Chicago

www.TASC-Chicago.org