

A Week in the Tropics
By Michelle Quinn

You might be asking yourself, "why in the world is this person writing about her vacation in the Bermuda, Bahamas, or Key West in this newsletter??" Well, that's because I didn't spend a week there, I spent a week with Mary and John Bradford at The Tropics Exotic Bird Refuge, from April 21st through April 29, 2002.

I wanted to try to give each of you reading this newsletter a feeling for what goes on at The Tropics. I have known Mary for four years, ever since she came to visit my bird club in Michigan. We had corresponded with and phoned each other for over a year, and had become close friends.

Not being rich, I didn't have thousands of dollars to contribute, but thought I could go down and volunteer for a week to help Mary and John get some of the tough work done, such as moving cages out of the small aviary into the dome, releasing the birds, cleaning the aviaries, and moving birds out of their home into new space in the small aviary.

I thought I had prepared myself for what I would find at The Tropics. What I found would shock, surprise, sadden and yet uplift me in totally unexpected ways.

My first impression upon viewing the aviaries, dome and the house was...NOISE. Screaming birds in the dome, screaming birds in the aviaries, screaming birds in the house's kitchen, living room, back room, and sunroom.

I thought to myself, "how can they stand it??" There wasn't anywhere to go in the home for a little peace and quiet. To me, it helped explained the worn out looks on John and Mary's faces.

But I hadn't gotten the whole picture of the amount of work involved in The Tropics, but that would soon be remedied.

The day after I arrived we started work. Mary explained the feeding and watering schedules and we got going. Each cage had to be opened, each water dish taken out, scrubbed, fresh water put in, and the cage door shut. Same with the food dishes. Any "C" links or locks on the cages had to be carefully placed back in the same spot to prevent escapes.

My first time out, I was going down the left side of the small aviary. I got down to cockatoo row, and fed

them. I turned the corner to go to the next row of cages, and glanced back. There was a cockatoo sitting proudly on top of her cage door.

"Get back in there, you little stinker!" She climbed back in, and I screwed the "C" link back on. I went back to feeding, got halfway up the next aisle, and heard a commotion on the other side. I slogged back to the other aisle, and there she was, in full cockatoo display on top of her cage. ..sigh..

"Get in there, you little stinker!" In she goes. This time I get smart and get the pliers out and screw the "C" clamp tight as can be. "So there!" I think to myself.

I walk past the macaw row, just a teeeensy bit too close to a cage. Snatch! A macaw has my shirt in his claw. I set down the pliers and reach for my shirt, too late! He has pulled my shirt in through the bars and torn a hole in my sleeve with a very massive beak. ..sigh..

So I think to myself, "okay, watch for escaping cockatoos, and watch for clothes rippers. I think I got it now." Oh sure, I was going to "get it" all right.

I finish the small aviary, and Mary says, "can you do the large aviary?" I think to myself, "hey, cool! The BIG birds!"

I open the door to the big aviary. Cage upon cage, row upon row, of amazons, macaws, cockatoos...I was stunned. And then a feeling began creeping into my heart, a feeling that was not to fully blossom until four days later.

"Where did all these birds come from!???" I asked myself. "Why in the world are they here??" I closely observed each bird's body language as I began feeding them. Some were friendly, many aggressive, some standoffish. I saw the look in their eyes: some friendly, some warning me off, some wary of a new face, some seemingly begging for attention. Some were plucked, some were perfectly feathered, some alone in their cage, some with mates.

By the time I had finished the large aviary, I began to have an inkling of what it would be like to feed these birds, day after day, week after week, month after month, every single day. My feet ached from standing on a cement floor for five hours. My fingers hurt from unscrewing and re-screwing "C" clamps, my hair was sweaty from the humidity in the aviaries. Sweat ran down my face. And I hadn't even done the dome or the house!

After I finish, Mary tells me one of her volunteers is coming the next day, so we'll start moving birds into the dome while the volunteer feeds the birds.

So we get up early the next day and start moving birds into the dome. I thought it would be fairly easy, yes? ..sigh..

We began by toweling and transferring each bird to a carrier. I get a few bites, and Mary gets some truly nasty bites. We carry loaded pet carriers down to the dome to release those who can fly. Back and forth, back and forth, from the small aviary to the dome, for hours. Sun conures, mitreds, green cheeks, cockatiels. Those we think can get along with other birds and can fly well, all will get a chance in the dome.

We begin releasing new birds to the dome. A very aggressive lesser sulfur crested cockatoo takes umbrage at our nerve, and swoops our heads. We yell at her, and she flies to a rope and glares down at us.

I take my eye off her for a second to release a conure, and BAM! She lands on my shoulder, jumps to my arm, grabs my wrist and bites down. YEEEEOWW!

..sigh..

"Okay," I tell myself, "I got it now. Watch for escaping cockatoos, grabbing macaws, swooping lesser sulfur crested Toos." Well, I didn't know that I still didn't "get it" yet.

The next day Mary, John and I fed and watered the birds. After 4 hours we took a break to eat a light lunch. After lunch, Mary and I begin pressure washing the small aviary to prepare it for moving birds in from the house.

If you're like me, you have maybe one, two, three, four birds? You think you deal with a lot of bird doo-doo, eh? Oh, suuuuure! Mary tells me there is a garden hoe sitting with the broom that I should use to scrap beneath the cages, and she would sweep.

I think to myself, in my best Tim Allen imitation voice, "Garden hoe? AawwwOOOO???"

I begin scraping beneath the bird cages that have no bottoms, just cedar shavings on the floor to catch droppings. Ah yes, the little birds aren't too bad!!!

Then I get to what I called cockatoo row. Holy cow. I seriously consider the possibility that Mary and

John are working on secret formulas for pepper gas using bird droppings. I scramble out the door of the aviary, coughing. I say to Mary, "uh, I think I'll go get a surgical mask. Do you want one?" She answers, "yes, bring me one too."

Okay, deep breath. Put on the mask and jump back in. We finish sweeping and move cages in order to pressure wash the front of the aviary. Mary begins washing the walls, cage bottoms, stands and floor, while I push the machine behind her. Droppings, old food, miscellaneous shed feathers, all start flowing toward the back of the aviary.

We finish the first half of the aviary, and Mary says to me, "will you go to the back of the aviary and make sure the drain isn't clogged?"

Okay, no problem. I take the hoe and go to the back and find sure enough, the drain is clogged, but, oh jiminy cricket, there's a huge puddle, and WHAT IN THE WORLD IS IN THAT SLUDGE? Yes, take two guesses.

It's at this point I begin to appreciate what it's REALLY like for Mary and John to run The Tropics. I'm hot, sweaty, my legs and back ache, my surgical mask is sweaty, it smells in the aviary, my head aches from being deafened by bird screeches, and here I am, scraping sludge off the drain.

We continue to push so we can complete cleaning this day. We clean the middle part of the aviary, lifting cages off tables and cleaning the tables. We move more cages away from the walls. It's at this point I see my first tiny miracle at The Tropics.

I'm moving the machine, Mary turns to me and yells over the buzz of the machine and screech of the birds, "look, look!!" and points to the cockatiel cage. All the small aviary free-flying cockatiels had congregated on top of the caged cockatiels, and everybody was having a communal orgy of bathing and flapping in the clean mist that was coming off the pressure washer. Big smile!!

We finish another third. Mary turns off the pressure washer and yells, "we have to go to the back and scoop up the solids that won't go down the drain!! Go get the dust pan and big tub!"

I trundle down the aviary aisle with the equipment. Mary pushes the sludge into a pile and starts brooming it onto the dust pan while I hold it and dump it in the tub.

At this point I reconsider the pepper gas theory. Pepper gas would be glade air freshener next to this stuff. After about four piles of scoopings, I begin retching, and we go out for some fresh air and a water break.

Ten minutes later we're back at it. Somehow after a couple more scoopings I really start coughing and retching, and run out to get air. John comes out to the aviary and takes over the pressure washing, for which I was extremely grateful, for then Mary does the scooping of sludge while I clear my lungs outside.

I bet you're thinking, "well, if it was so bad they should clean it more often!" Well, they do. And I had evidence of how often the aviaries and dome must be cleaned because three days later the aviary looked the same as it had before we cleaned it. ..sigh..

The next day Mary asks me to water the small aviary. I begin working, taking out each water dish, scrubbing it, and filling it with clean cool water from the faucet. My legs are really aching now, my feet are killing me, my back hurts, and my ears are ringing from three days of working with screeching birds.

As I go down the aisle, the feeling that had crept into my heart earlier began to blossom and tears came to my eyes. I looked with despair at so many birds in cages, wondering once again how they came to be here. Unwanted because they were noisy, messy, too much bother. I began to wonder whether these birds would be better off put to sleep rather than living this way. I wondered how I would feel caged like this, day after day.

But as I continued down the aisle, opening cages, scrubbing and rinsing water dishes, fighting a feeling of hopelessness welling up inside, I witnessed my second miracle.

I began to hear sounds. Ting! Bong! Plunk! Tink tink tink!! I looked back at the cages I had watered. Birds of every color and specie were splashing in their water dishes, delighting in as simple a pleasure as a water dish bath. I realized then that with all their heart these birds wanted to live. While they waited for their turn to try the dome, or while they waited for another aviary built for their species only, they held on and took delight in life. Who, then, was I to judge whether these birds should live or die? They wanted to live, they desired life with all their might, and I finally understood what The Tropics was about.

The Tropics is about birds; about birds and their desire to live. Many overcame abuse, bad diet, neglect, to come here at last and be given a chance at a decent life.

I finish the watering, and go up to the house. Mary can see that I have tears in my eyes and we sit on the swing on the front porch for a break. She tells me, then, some of the stories of how some birds came to be at The Tropics.

The story of Moose, the blue and gold macaw, stuck in a dark closet for three years because he was too noisy. Of Loretta, the sweet african grey dropped off because she was unwanted. Of birds dropped off on the front porch without a word by their owners, and Mary and John having no name by which to address these abandoned birds. The story of Teij, the sweetest gentlest Muloccan who came to the Tropics after her elderly owners were in a tragic car accident. Otis the Patagonian conure, my favorite, dropped off because he was plucked and had cataracts. Birds with deformed feet, beaks, blind, all here to get a second chance at life; on and on the stories went.

I understood then why the Bradfords continue this work. The Tropics is the only refuge in the United States with a free flight dome. Here birds that can adjust to the dome get a chance at free flight at last. I witnessed the return of flocking behavior in the dome, of birds pairing up, feeding and grooming each other, natural territorial behavior. After being locked in cages for years, these birds had not lost their natural instincts.

I sat on the swing and thought about birds in the dome. Oscar, the pied cockatiel who won't allow you to pet him, but sits on your shoulder as you're cleaning and kisses you and sings to you. Of the pair of sun conures who sit on either side of your head, rubbing your cheek and making little talking sounds. Of the little round Quaker, who visits for a while on your shoulder, bobbing his head and making little sounds.

Are they grateful they can fly freely? Are they telling me they're grateful to play around the waterfall, bathing in the mist, splashing on the metal screening that sits just below the surface of the pool? Are they grateful that you put up with the screeching, the humidity, the dive-bombing lesser sulfur crested Too in order to feed and clean the dome? I don't know. But would an unhappy bird come to you? No.

That afternoon we start moving cages out of the house into the space in the small aviary we had made by moving birds into the dome. We worked for hours, pushing to finish the move because the next day I wanted to start

scrubbing walls and floors in the kitchen and sun room. I yell at Mary for picking up heavy cages with her right arm, putting stress on the shoulder that had been operated on earlier this year. She yells back at me. John shakes his head at both of us. We finish about 7 p.m., go to dinner and plan our strategy for the next day. That night I fall into bed at the hotel, grateful for a hot shower and the Cartoon Network.

Next day I begin work on the sun room, which had been stuffed full of large birds. After I finish one wall, Mary comes in the house and asks me if I'd switch and do the feeding in the aviaries. I say, "no, it's okay, Mary, I don't mind scrubbing the walls." It's a measure of how difficult it is to do the feeding every day that Mary insists she WANTS to scrub bird poop off the walls, floor and windows, "it's a change of pace for me!" So, out to the aviaries I go.

Knowing my week is winding down, I pay closer attention this day to each individual bird I feed. I pretty well know the routine, and since I feel it's impolite to enter somebody's cage without acknowledging them, I talk as I go along. "Ginger, how are you today!?" She answers by giving me her best Muloccan cockatoo dance, up and down, up and down, woo-woosing at me. "Loretta, you sweet thing, how are you?" She bends her head down for a pat, showing me the three little red feathers sticking out from her neck. "Sam, big guy, how's it going?" as I hand him his peanut. "Moose, how's your day going?" He answers, "blah blah, blah blah blah, BLAH BLAH!!" and takes his walnut from my fingers. Another blue and gold, severely plucked, says "Thank you!!" and gently takes a walnut. "Beauty, you're so pretty today" and she clucks and swells her cheek feathers to let me know she agrees with me. And you know, I didn't mind so much anymore the screeching, the humidity, the aching fingers.

That night I lay in my bed at the hotel, knowing I had to leave in a day and a half. I missed my own birds terribly, but felt conflicted about leaving The Tropics. I thought about Mary and I each morning going to the post office, hoping and praying there would be donations to be picked up. I remember her gratitude to receive a \$7.00 check that is sent every single month by a donor. I thought about her delight when she opened the envelope from a Parrothead Club, which contained a generous donation.

I thought about the Bradfords' home, the chewed windowsills and curtains, the noise they had lived with for years, making it difficult to watch TV or nap. The trips to the grocery store every other day to buy pasta and bags and bags of frozen veggies to feed the birds. I smiled as I

remembered Ricky, the little half moon conure, sitting on my shoulder as I prepared pasta and veggies, asking me "want some fish??" and when I gave him a pea, he told me, "it's good, it's good!!"

Many people believe that because the Bradfords have been featured on news and animal shows, they have all the money they need, which couldn't be further from the truth. Every day is a struggle to make ends meet. The Bradfords take no salary from the money they receive for The Tropics. Money donated for the building fund stays in the building fund. Money donated for the operational fund stays in the operational fund.

And so I come to the end of my story, although there are a hundred more things I could tell you, a hundred more stories of desperately needed supplies and repairs needed in the aviaries. A hundred stories of the calls that came in while I was there, of people wanting to send their birds to The Tropics, *because it is the ONLY refuge in the United States with a free flight dome/aviary.* Of Mary turning down request after request because they are stuffed to capacity. A hundred fears the Bradfords have of what they will do if they run out of money, if they retire, if their volunteers ever stop coming.

And so I ask if you won't join me in alleviating at least some money worries for the Bradfords. And you know, Mary told me the magic formula: if every person on her newsletter list would send \$10 *each time* they received a mailing, the Bradfords would have no money worries for The Tropics. That's what, \$40 per year? Per person. That's all. They could repair the aviaries, buy needed equipment, replace the oldest cages, feed the birds.

But let me go further than that, and ask of those of you who can, please send \$10 per month, only \$120 per year. \$10 per month. Or maybe \$7.00 per month, as does her elderly donor? The price of one movie per month. \$7.00. Because I saw how your money is spent, and believe me, it's all for the birds.

If you want to talk to me personally about my experiences at The Tropics, please email me at zephyrbird@yahoo.com, and I'll gladly answer any questions you might have about my stay or what I saw.

Thanks so much for your continued support of The Tropics. I assure you, your money is well spent.