



Figure 1: Romantic couple with a song bird engraving from 1779.

PREFACE

This book discusses the history of aviculture across the cultural spectrum of keeping and raising birds in captivity: For pleasure; companionship; as ornaments; religious purposes; or various economic or practical reasons. Since the dawn of mankind, humans have kept birds in captivity. Several species are truly domesticated, such as the Red Junglefowl (Poultry), Turkey, Mallard (Eurasian Domestic Duck), Muscovy Duck, Greylag (European Domestic) Goose, Swan (“Chinese”) Goose, Helmeted Guineafowl, Blue Peafowl, Japanese Quail, Rock (Domestic) Pigeon, Barbary Dove, Canary, Bengalese (Society) Finch, Java Sparrow, and more recently, the Zebra Finch, Budgerigar, and Cockatiel. Others have been bred in captivity for many generations, for instance Estrildid finches, Fringillid finches, doves, quail, pheasants, and parrots. Today bird-keeping for pleasure appears to be declining in the West, mostly due to bird protection laws and growing awareness about conservation issues. The importation of wild-caught birds into the European Union has been very restricted since 2005, but in many other parts of the world, capturing and trading birds is still a thriving business. Although aviculture has had and still has a deep impact on human beings, it remains a neglected field within humanities and social sciences. Relatively little is published about the cultural and historical aspects of aviculture. This anthology is intended for a general audience of readers and it shows various aspects of keeping birds in captivity for pleasure, ornamental reasons or practical purposes around the world. It also deals with the great variety and complexity of the practice of keeping birds, and the specific cultures

which have developed around it.

The first chapter gives a brief introduction to the questions we focus on in the book, together with a historic overview from prehistory to the early twenty-first century, including pet birds among natives in South America, Southeast Asia and Africa, sailors and their parrots, birds in religious rituals, primitive domesticates in various peasant societies, etc. The other chapters offer descriptive case studies in pre-modern and early modern ways of bird-keeping in various historical contexts. Also modern aviculture in zoological gardens is discussed, and specific bird categories within twentieth-century aviculture are described in some chapters. We encounter sophisticated bird-keeping in pre-Columbian societies, Norse trade with falcons, the European craze for songbirds, practices with captive birds used in human habitations to keep vermin under control, and we see how avicultural expertise is used for trying to save vanishing species by breeding them in captivity. Together these topics illustrate the great variety and complexities of bird-keeping practice.

The authors are specialists in aviculture and most of them hail from the countries about which they write. This book bridges the disciplines of cultural anthropology, ethnobiology, history, natural history and ornithology and is intended to benchmark the development of the subject for a broader audience, which until now has had few possibilities to become acquainted with it. The completion of this book was made possible by a grant from Stiftelsen Olle Engkvist Byggmästare and Traditionsvetenskapliga nämnden at the The Society of Swedish Literature in Finland.

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INGVAR SVANBERG AND DANIEL MÖLLER

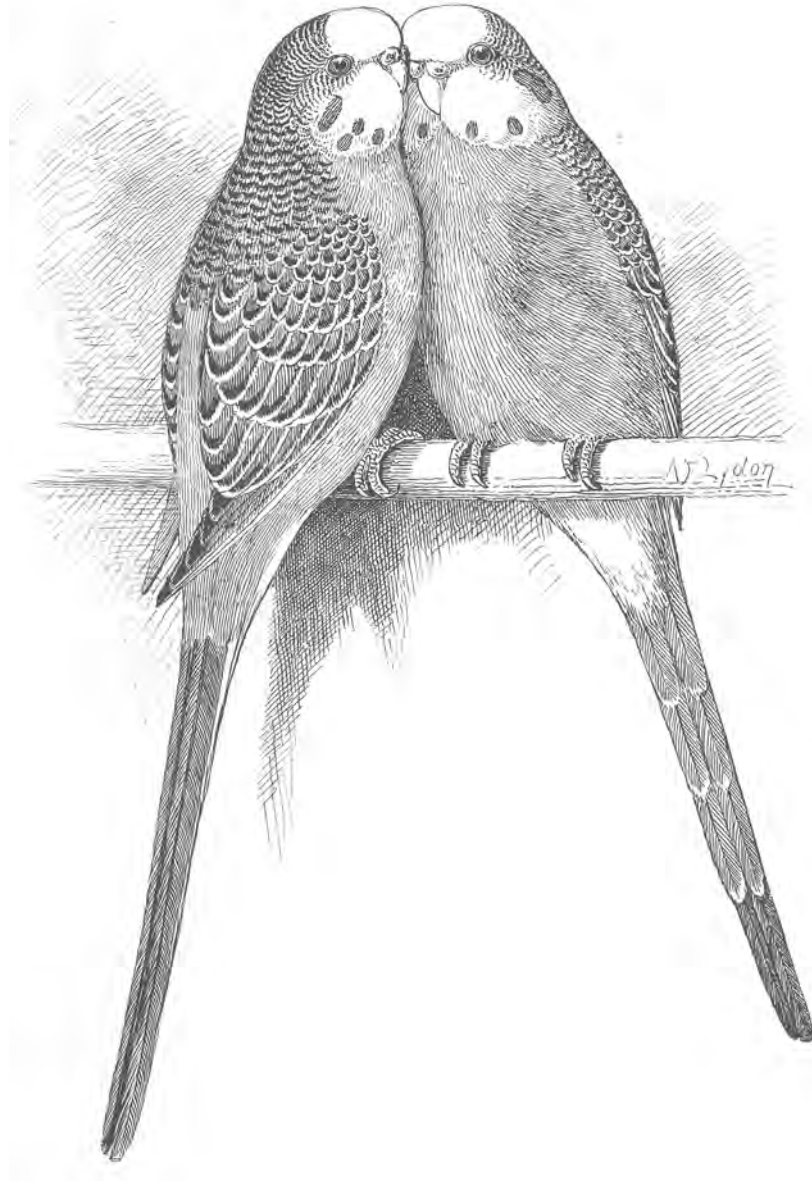


Figure 2: Budgerigars (*Melopsittacus undulatus*), also known as pet parakeets, originally imported from Australia, are globally among the most popular birds in captivity.

CHAPTER 1. HISTORY OF AVICULTURE

INGVAR SVANBERG AND DANIEL MÖLLER

There is a distinctive charm in aviculture. It can be carried on anywhere: In a rude slum in St. Giles, in a Belgravian mansion, in a country Vicarage, in a suburban villa, and you will always enjoy yourself. What is more important, this enjoyment will not embitter your present, nor endanger your future, by getting you into a bad temper, whether you are successful or not; provided also you are a true bird lover. This is not the case with other sports.

Reverend C. D. Farrar, Birdroom and Aviary (London 1910), p. 9.

For thousands of years, Human beings keep birds for economic, ornamental and entertainment reasons since several thousands of years. We do not know when the first humans began to hold birds in captivity and we can only speculate about the reasons behind this. Possibly Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers tamed birds and we can assume that some kind of symbiosis developed between them and various bird species during the common hunt for food. This phenomenon has been described in more recent cultures, e.g. with the indigenous Khoekhoe in southern Africa and the Greater Honeyguide (*Indicator indicator*). The cooperation probably developed at an early stage of evolution during the joint search for wild beehives, due to the birds guiding ability observed by humans. While the Khoekhoe gatherers harvested honey from the hives, the bird preferred the larvae.¹

Scavengers like ravens and vultures had their own reasons for following groups of hunters and gatherers, when they roamed hunting territories. The possibilities for the birds to become at least semi-tame in these relationships were not scarce. Old World Vultures are very easy to tame and so are ravens, and both adapt easily to human habitats. Keeping captured birds as live decoys may also have occurred among early hunters. The use of live owls to attract other

birds was known until quite recently.

The First Agricultural Revolution, which began around 10,000 BCE, provided new opportunities for keeping birds in captivity. Most certainly, Neolithic peasants, who lived a rather sedentary life, kept birds in their settlements. Similar to peasants in Europe, Asia, and South America until only recently, these Neolithic farmers probably brought nestlings of the family Anatidae, other water fowl, auks, and various gallinaceous birds to



Figure 3: Fishing with trained Cormorants in the Great Canal, Suzhou, China in 1901

their dwellings, fed them with available food, and fattened the birds before slaughtering them. The consumption of seafoal fledglings, intensively fattened at the end of their nesting period, was also practiced much later in many coastal areas and island societies.² Most probably, the Neolithic farmers also brought into their homes young birds of various species, in the same way as some indigenous jungle people still do, for amusement and “toys” for their children. Children in different cultures still do this. Many birds are easily tamed if taken as nestlings, and they will be affectionate toward their masters or human households. Parrots, toucans and other species are today kept among aboriginal tribes in the Amazon region.³ Collecting eggs was of immense significance for coastal dwellers and islanders in many parts of the world. By creating various kinds of artificial nests, for centuries humans have been able to gather eggs for food, using a kind of intensive egg-harvesting. Sea birds become used to this arrangement and continue to produce new eggs for the owners of the nesting-boxes. The Common Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*), which often inhabited these artificial nesting-boxes along the Swedish Baltic coast, was called “the poor man’s chicken”. A nineteenth century Norwegian author, Jens Andreas Friis, when writing about Lapland (Sápmi), notes that the nesting box “is the bee-hive” of the fishing Saami, “which in due time will be robbed”. Such egg-collecting boxes are known from Scandinavia, Sápmi, Russian Karelia, northern Russia and Estonia.⁴

Humans and aviculture

The purpose of this book is to place the tradition of taming and keeping birds in captivity into an historical perspective and social context. The history of aviculture is little known and many aspects are seldom discussed. Aviculture is here defined as the practice of keeping birds in captivity,

where humans are using some kind of controlled conditions, for various reasons, and including a variety of ways related to keeping birds in human dwellings. Some are kept for pure economic causes, providing meat, fat, feathers and eggs. This is especially true about the early domesticated birds such as poultry, ducks and geese. Others are kept for amusement and to entertain their owners; for instance fortune telling parrots or pigeons are an old diversion during fairs and in pleasure gardens. Some are trained to perform tricks: “I have recently seen a troop of trained cockatoos that were absolutely marvellous”, wrote the famous American author Alpheus Hyatt Verrill in a charming book from 1915 on keeping animals as pets. He continues: “One of these birds played ‘Home Sweet Home’ by pulling strings attached to bells; another danced to music, and one rang any number which was called to it on a bell”. Competition between owners through fighting birds or exhibitions are other important reasons for keeping birds.⁵

Using birds for hunting (falconry) is an ancient practice, known as a royal sport already among the Assyrians. Central Asian nomads, especially Kazakh and Kyrgyz, still hunt with Golden Eagles (*Aquila chrysaethus*). This is an old tradition, often described by travelers and ethnographers. In the eighteenth century, Bashkirs in the Ural region in Russia fed eagle nestlings until they were grown, and then sold them to Russian and Tatar merchants, who transported them down to the Kazakh border markets. The Kazakh elite was said to prefer these eagles for hunting and training, and they paid large sums for such birds. Also, commoners kept eagles and other raptors for hunting foxes, marmots and even young wolves. An already trained eagle was worth the equivalent of several horses. In his chapter on Icelandic trade with Gyrfalcons (*Falco rusticolus*), Sigurður

7Ægisson analyses the globalization of the trade with raptors, extending from the far north to the Mediterranean region and the Middle East in the south.⁶

The use of captive birds that help fishermen to catch fish is another ancient activity, described first in Chinese sources from the Sui Dynasty (589–618 CE). Local fisherman among the Bai people in Unan use trained Great Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax carbo*), as do fisherman on the Li river near Guilin City in Southern China. On the Nagara River in Japan, fishermen use the native species (*Phalacrocorax capillatus*). Tamed Indian Snakebirds (*Anhinga melanogaster*) were employed for the same purpose by communities in the northeastern Indian state of Assam. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, peasants in various parts of Europe used fish-eating ducks like the Common Merganser (*Mergus merganser*) to drive fish shoals into nets.⁷

The motives for keeping and taming birds are manifold, and they also include using them as “watch birds”, controlling venomous snakes in the vicinity, or for religious rituals. The use of birds to get rid of slugs, fleas and other pests in yards and dwellings is described in a chapter by Sabira Ståhlberg and Ingvar Svanberg. Ostriches



Figure 4: Swans upping on the Thames in 1875.

(*Struthio camelus*) and ostrich races exist in some parts of the world, including the United States. Carrier pigeons are used widely for communication, a practice which goes back at least to Antiquity. The Pima people of southern Arizona kept captive Golden Eagles and Red-tailed Hawks (*Buteo jamaicensis*) for their feathers. The raptors were released after a couple of years. Canaries were used in coal-mines as a kind of early warning system. When the bird showed signs of distress, conditions were also unsafe for the miners.⁸

Well-trained or rare exotic birds provide a higher status to their owners and therefore rare and unusual birds are much sought after. Whereas “parrots are so common as to attract no interest or curiosity in the beholder, yet the toucans always attract attention and interest visitors”, wrote Verrill in 1915. Exotic birds are often kept tame in ponds or yards, sometimes wing-clipped, while others are confined to cages and aviaries (“flying-cages”). Some are used for laboratory research and others, such as the Zebra Finch (*Taeniopygia guttata*), for genetic studies. During our modern and post-modern times an increasing number of taxa are becoming domesticated, but today mostly for display and companions.

Some recently domesticated species, such as various ratites (ostrich, emu, and rhea), have provided new economic species which are farmed for egg, oil, meat and leather.⁹

Early domestic birds

Poultry belong probably to the oldest domesticated birds. Their ancestor, Red Junglefowl (*Gallus gallus*), still occurs in South and Southeast Asia from Pakistan to Indonesia. This is the sole ancestor of domestic fowl and its domestication probably took place in the Indus Valley around 3000 BCE. Due to seaborne trade, fowl spread east- and westwards and are known

from Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt in the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries BCE. During the first millennium BCE, fowl-keeping spread rapidly and it also reached the South American continent long before the arrival of Europeans. Many chicken breeds are now kept as hobby animals for exhibitions and there are miniaturized breeds (Bantams) especially suitable for hobby aviculture. The popular Silkies originate from Asia, but have long been appreciated as pet birds in Europe as well. In Japan the extremely long-tailed and magnificent Onagadori has been bred to perfection among hobby enthusiasts. The old Araucanian breed, kept by aboriginal peoples in South America for centuries, is another interesting chicken; it is famous for its green or light blue eggs. Pure-bred Red Jungle Fowl are easy to raise in captivity and therefore popular among aviculturists.¹⁰

With increasing industrialization of poultry and egg production, many former economic breeds have become rare, being replaced by more highly productive breeds. They are therefore of interest to hobbyists. Many care especially for the original local breeds that existed among the peasantry before industrialization affected animal production in the countryside. These rather uncultivated old breeds are of special interest not only as a kind of “historical document”, but also as a resource for the future, when alternative genetic material is sought after. Local breeds are therefore a treasure for times to come. Some of these old and natural breeds are also popular outside their traditional regions.¹¹

The Guinea fowl is the African contribution to domestic birds used for economic purposes. The domesticated populations originate from various subspecies of Helmeted Guinea fowl (*Numida meleagris*), found in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. The northwest African subspecies *N. m. sabyi* was probably domesticated by the Egyptians and

reached the Mediterranean region during Antiquity. Romans regarded it as holy and it was used for religious sacrifices. The Guinea fowl was popular as a household pet among the Romans, but a few centuries later it had disappeared in Europe, only to be reintroduced at the end of the Middle Ages. The West African subspecies *N. m. galeata* had been long domesticated in Africa, when the Portuguese brought it to Europe in 1455. It spread fast in southwestern Europe and was observed in England in 1550.¹²

The third gallinaceous species with a long history is the Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*). The wild species lives today along the eastern coast of North America down to Mexico. It was domesticated by native inhabitants in Central America and bones were found in the Tehuacán Valley and dated to 200 BCE; we know also that the Aztecs kept turkeys. When Conquistador Hernán Cortés arrived in Mexico, turkeys could be found in every town, and the Aztecs offered them to him as presents. This shows that the bird probably was domesticated much earlier. The Incas in Peru also kept turkeys, long before the arrival of the Spaniards. The turkey was eventually brought to Spain in the early sixteenth century and spread quickly throughout Europe, even as far north as Denmark. Interestingly enough, domesticated turkeys were brought back to North America with settlers from Europe. As with other domesticated birds, it is not only kept as a production animal – in the United States the turkey has a high cultural significance for the Thanksgiving celebration – but also as an ornamental bird. In Europe, various color mutations were already known in Europe already a century after its first appearance on that continent. Several breeds have been developed in North America, e.g. the old breed Kentucky Red, now known throughout Central and Western Europe as the Bourbon Red.¹³

Another early domesticated bird is the goose. The domestic goose of Europe descends from the Greylag Goose (*Anser anser*). Domestication took place in Ancient Egypt and probably also in Europe at least 2000 BCE. Some of our ancient local breeds survive. The *Ölandsgås* from the Baltic Island Öland is known to have lived there for several hundred years. The *Twentse landgans*, from the Dutch Twente region, goes back to at least the eighteenth century, while the *Føroyisk gås* from the Faroe Islands is said to have descended from the birds brought to the islands by Vikings a thousand years ago. It is now kept both for meat production and by hobbyists. These breeds are all critically endangered, as is the Sebastopol Goose with its long curling feathers, and the small Shetland Goose.¹⁴ In eastern Asia, the Swan Goose (*Anser cygnoides*) is a common domesticated production animal. It is appreciated for its feathers, meat, fat and eggs. It reached Europe with Portuguese sailors and the East India trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the “Chinese Goose” became popular beyond the countries to which it had been thus imported. The

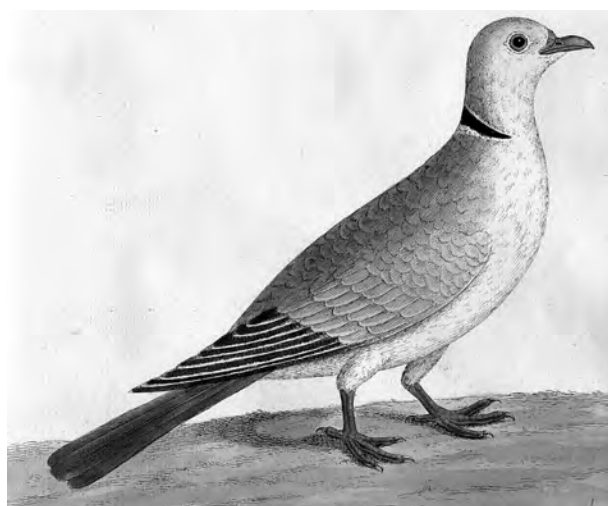


Figure 5: Barbary dove (*Streptopelia risoria*), 1700s

species has now spread to farms for goose production in many parts of the world and it is also kept in zoological gardens and park collections for ornamental reasons.¹⁵

The Egyptian Goose (*Alopochen aegyptiacus*), native to the Nile River, is little known as a domesticated bird. It was featured in art already during the Old Kingdom of Egypt (third millennium BCE). This bird is probably, after the pigeon, the oldest domesticated bird in Africa and was kept for religious reasons and food by the Egyptians. Domesticated Egyptian Goose was brought to the island of Crete, but to what extent they were kept as ornamental birds by Greeks and Romans is not clear, although a mosaic from Pompeii possibly shows this goose. It was for some reason not spread as a domestic animal to other parts of Africa and remained forgotten for many centuries, being introduced again as an ornamental bird to Central Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The goose was bred in great numbers in Paris by 1839. Feral populations exist today in several countries and it is actually regarded as a pest in Great Britain.¹⁶

As with the domestic goose, we do not know when and where the Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) was domesticated. Domesticated ducks were and are still common in Asia and continental Europe. Lots of local breeds exist and many old breeds survive thanks to hobby enthusiasts. Indian Runner Duck (*Anas platyrhynchos domesticus*) is a strange breed probably from Southeast Asia. Unlike other breeds this duck stands up like a penguin. Ducks are kept for meat, fat, eggs and feathers, but domesticated ducks can also be kept as pets, in gardens or backyards and some even inside houses. Attractive duck breeds have great potential as ornamental birds and are therefore often kept in ponds and canals in estates and city parks. Bantam ducks are available

for aviculturists who possess limited space. Old breeds like Ancona Duck, Aylesbury Duck, Cayuga Duck, Shetland Duck, Welsh Harlequin and Swedish Yellow Duck (*svensk gul anka*) are now critically endangered and therefore of increasing interest for small zoological gardens, 4-H-farms, educational centers, public parks and hobby enthusiasts.¹⁷

Muscovy Duck (*Cairina moschata*) is an American contribution to the domesticated duck species. Its native distribution as a wild species stretches from Mexico in the north to eastern Peru and northern Paraguay in the south. When and where the indigenous peoples domesticated it is not known. One theory is that the domestication took place in coastal Ecuador. It was brought to Spain in the 1530s and soon spread throughout southern Europe and northern and western Africa. According to Pierre Belon's *L'Histoire de la nature des oyseaux* from 1555, it had "recently" reached France. White and pied mutations are featured in early seventeenth century book illustrations. This bird was known as Indian duck or Turkish duck in Germany in 1603, where it was commonly kept in manor parks; in Sweden it could be found in a royal park in 1654 and Carl Linnaeus kept Muscovy Ducks in his garden menagerie in the 1750s



Figure 6: Golden pheasant (*Chrysolophus pictus*), 1746

in Uppsala. It is today a common economic bird in certain parts of Africa, East Asia, North America and Europe, but elsewhere kept for ornamental purposes and because of its reputation for eating slugs.¹⁸

A very early domesticated bird is the Pigeon (*Columba livia*), known already in Antiquity. Roman authors describe how to breed and keep pigeons. Pigeons have spread widely and many various breeds exist; some are kept for food, but most as hobby animals. Messenger pigeons possess a long tradition, but have no practical purpose any more. Old dove cots in various forms and shapes are still part of the local architecture in many parts of the world. No other domestic animals, with the exception of the dog, exist in so many different variations and breeds as the pigeon. Natural historian Charles Darwin as well as champion-boxer Mike Tyson have kept pigeons. "I have kept every breed which I could purchase or obtain", wrote Charles Darwin in Chapter 1 of his famous *On the Origin of Species* (1859). It is an ancient hobby which still thrives in different environments, from villages in the Iraqi countryside to skyscrapers of downtown New York, and it is still gaining in popularity in many parts of the world.¹⁹

Further species are today under domestication for economic reasons and especially ratites seem to have some potential. The Ostrich (*Struthio camelus*) was kept and bred in captivity already by ancient Egyptians, and Romans kept them for fighting in the Coliseum. During the Byzantine period the bird was farmed in Egypt. Pierre Belon reported in 1553 that both Libyans and Numidians were raising ostriches in order to sell their feathers. Somali nomads have kept semi-tamed herds of ostriches, which they tended in the same way as cattle and dromedaries.

More than a century ago there was a renewed

interest in farming ostriches for feather production, starting in Algeria about 1860, developing in South Africa and spreading to widely different places like southern California and central Sweden in the early twentieth century. Carl Hagenbeck, a famous German animal dealer, opened an ostrich farm in 1909 at Stellingen near Hamburg, in order to improve the domestication of the species, but the market collapsed in the wake of World War I. Ostrich farms are again rapidly spreading in many parts of the world. Meat and eggs are the most important products.

Emu (*Dromaius novaehollandiae*) farming is also becoming popular for similar reasons and also for oil. Emu farming started only in 1976 and the species is in addition used as ornamental birds, especially in zoological gardens.²⁰

Ornamental birds in an expanding world

One important reason for keeping birds is their ornamental value, which can be combined with culinary interests. Rulers have kept menageries with exotic birds for status; often different animals were given to them as gifts. As Vernon N. Kisling shows in his chapter on aviculture in Ancient Old World societies, such animal and bird collections are known already from Mesopotamia, the Old Kingdom of Egypt, Ancient India, Shang Dynasty China, Ancient Persia as well as the Graeco-Roman world. The tradition of royal menageries prevailed also in medieval Europe and Asia. Marco Polo reported in the late thirteenth century that Kublai Khan kept gyrfalcons and hawks for pleasure in his royal park at Shangdu.

Royalty in South Asia have kept Indian Peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*) for probably more than 3,000 years. King Salomon is said to have had a fleet of ships that once in three years brought back “gold, and silver, ivory, and apes, and peacocks” (1 Kings 10:22). The species reached Europe as

a domestic animal already during Antiquity and Peafowl were widely kept as ornamental birds by the Romans, also being mentioned as a garden bird in Charlemagne’s *Capitulare de villis vel curtis imperii* (802 CE) and in Scandinavia during late Medieval times. Peafowl is one of the most popular ornamental birds globally in zoological gardens, private collections, city parks and farms. A white mutation has been known for centuries. The Peafowl is also often used for symbolic purposes, for instance as logo for Sri Lankan Airlines and as coat of arms for the German city of Neuwied.²¹

Another ornamental bird with a long tradition is the Barbary or Ringneck Dove (*Streptopelia risoria*), which is a fully domesticated bird. Its wild ancestor is most likely the African Collared Dove (*Streptopelia roseogrisea*), at home in arid African and Arabian regions. The domestication seems to have occurred some 2,500 years ago, probably somewhere in Nubia or Abyssinia, and the bird reached Europe through Egypt. White Barbary Doves are popular among magicians. During the last century the number of color variations has increased; a recent hand-book mentions over forty recognized color mutations.²²

Early menageries in England, France and the Netherlands showed African Ostriches, Pelicans, Crowned Cranes (*Balearica pavonina*), Demoiselle Cranes (*Anthropoides virgo*) and Sarus Cranes (*Grus antigone*) as exotics. Cassowaries (*Casuaris casuaris*) were imported to Europe from the sixteenth century. They were important as gifts and trade products in Southeast Asia and several Cassowaries reached the Netherlands with Dutch vessels, when others were brought to Japan. The island of Seram seems to have been a main exporter of Cassowaries for countries overseas.²³ An interesting example is also the Mute Swan (*Cygnus olor*), originally from the Caspian

Sea region, now part of the local fauna in most parts of Europe and elsewhere. Since medieval times until the twentieth century it was widely kept in moats, ponds and channels in parks and cities, although it has since become naturalized in some parts of Europe. It was used as food and in some areas it was regarded as a royal privilege to utilize its meat. In England the Act of Swans from 1482 formalised the ownership of the swans in the country.²⁴

Other important ornamental birds in ponds are the waterfowl, mostly domestic geese and ducks, sometimes also captured native species from the wild, but with increasing trade also foreign ducks and geese. Mandarin Duck (*Aix galericulata*) has vast symbolic value in China and is well-known in Japanese folklore. Couples are often kept in temple ponds and villages in the Far East. The duck had reached Europe by the 1740s, when George Edwards observed a couple in the garden of Matthew Decker in Richmond, Surrey, England. There is no record that the species bred in Europe until 1858 in France. Today it is easy to care for and a very popular bird.²⁵

Other swans, geese and ducks used in park and garden ponds are e.g. the Black Swan (*Cygnus atratus*), introduced to England in 1791 and somewhat later to France; Black-Necked Swan (*Cygnus melanocorypha*), introduced in 1846 to Europe and bred in the Netherlands in 1865; Barheaded Goose (*Anser indicus*), kept in Indian temples for centuries before it reached Europe; Redbreasted Goose (*Branta ruficollis*); Carolina Duck (*Aix sponsa*); Ruddy Shelduck (*Tadorna ferruginea*); Magellan Goose (*Chloephaga picta*), which bred at London Zoo in 1852, and many other species. Ornamental waterfowl remain continuously popular until today. The reason for this is probably the same as a century ago, when an author concluded: "Waterfowl invariably

improve the appearance of any piece of water, even if they are only considered for artistic effect. They are inexpensive to feed and keep in health and always make beautiful and interesting pets if they can so be called", wrote C. Laidlay in 1914.²⁶

The Ringneck or Common Pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*), found in Inner Asia and westwards to the Black Sea coast and the Bosphorus, is mentioned as an ornamental bird in early Medieval times. It was kept in pheasantries in monastic and royal settings. Charlemagne mentions keeping pheasants in 802 CE. A pheasant guard is mentioned from Prague castle in 1625 and another one was employed by the Swedish royal court in 1638. The pheasant had both culinary and ornamental functions. In the nineteenth century, its value as a bird to be hunted increased and it was released into the fields in many parts of the northern hemisphere. Although commercial large-scale farms for release-and-hunt purposes are probably the most important for this species today, it is still kept as an ornamental bird as well. Especially Asian pure-bred subspecies are popular.²⁷

The trade with the Far East in early modern times brought also other pheasants to Europe. The introduction of the Golden Pheasant (*Chrysolophus pictus*) from China could serve as an interesting example. Although one Golden Pheasant may have been brought to Rome in the reign of Claudius and presented as a Phoenix bird, this was probably an isolated case, as new specimens were not brought to Europe until modern times. The earliest record of pheasant presence in Europe dates to the 1730s, when a picture of a "red Pheasant from China" was published by English illustrator and naturalist Eleazar Albin in 1740. He wrote in a commentary to his painting: "I do not find this beautiful Bird

described by any Author; it was in the Possession of the Honourable John Spencer Esquire, at his House in Windsor Park, where I went by his Order to draw it". According information on the illustration, it was drawn on 21 July 1735, so the bird obviously was present by then. Around ten years later the species was already common in England:

"These birds of late Years are frequently brought from China: I have seen several of them in the Possessions of our Nobility, and some curious Gentlemen", wrote George Edwards in 1747. The Duchess of Portland kept Golden Pheasants in her aviaries at Bulstrode Park in the mid-eighteenth century, and one cock and two hens are recorded from Ashby Castle in the 1770s. In the 1760s, Madame de Pompadour, mistress of Louis XV, kept these pheasants in her Hermitage near Trianon at Versailles. Buffon gives a rather detailed description of the Golden Pheasant in his *Histoire naturelle des oiseaux* (1771). Probably George Washington kept pheasants from Europe, gifts from General Lafayette around 1787, in his estate at Mount Vernon. The popularity of the Golden Pheasant increased during the nineteenth century, when it became more common in the bird trade and thus available for aviculturists and zoological gardens in Europe.²⁸

Along with the Golden Pheasant, other Asian species also entered European aviculture during the eighteenth century. Many were certainly kept in China long before, like Reeves's Pheasant (*Syrnaticus reevesii*), which was not introduced to Europe until 1831. The Silver Pheasant (*Lophura nycthemera*) arrived about the same time as the Golden Pheasant and is mentioned by Eleazar Albin in 1737, but the Golden Pheasant remains one of the most popular ornamental aviary birds. It is now a thoroughly domesticated bird, available



Figure 7: A cat sneaking upon a pet bird. Print from 1771

not only in its original coloration, but also in various other color breeds. It is also often interbred with the closely related Lady Amherst's Pheasant (*Chrysolophus amherstiae*), which reached Europe in 1828. The hybrids are obviously fertile and concern has arisen about the genetical purity of the captive birds.²⁹

Watch birds

An interesting feature of aviculture is the use of captured birds as "guard" or "watch birds". This practice is described from Africa, Asia and Europe. Domestic geese in particular are well-known for protecting farms against intruders. The Chinese Goose is also regarded as an excellent watch-bird and some even claim that geese are better guards

than watchdogs. There is a legend about geese kept on the Capitol, which betrayed the Gaul invaders in 390 BCE by their cackling, and thus saved Rome. Also Indian Peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*) have long been acting as watch birds in parks and larger gardens. They also warn the poultry when birds-of-prey are approaching. Guineafowl are known for raising the alarm if anyone enters the yard or farm where they are kept. They protect both the farm animals and the owners from intruders and predators. In Central Asia tamed Chukar (*Alectoris chukar*) serve the same purpose.³⁰

Farmers have used also other non-domestic bird taxa for the same purpose. Captive Cranes (*Grus grus*) were kept in castles in Central Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as night guards. With their sharp call they alerted the inhabitants, if there were any movements in the vicinity. Also Hungarians employed cranes as guards. Cranes of various taxa have been used as guards also in other parts of Eurasia, e.g. ancient China and among the Moghuls of India.³¹

In the Amazon (Guyana and Brazil) the Grey-winged Trumpeter (*Psophia crepitans*) and related species with loud calls are often tamed because of their ability to guard settlements from dangerous animals and humans. The German explorer Robert Hermann Schomburgk found the bird in the mid-nineteenth century in all villages inhabited by indigenous peoples in Guyana. Northern Screamer (*Chauna chavaria*) is famous for its extremely loud cry and is therefore kept in a semi-tame state in the La Plata region. In Bolivia and Brazil the natives keep various species of Jakupempa (*Penelope superciliaris*), Chachalacas (*Ortalis*) and Curassows (*Crax* sp., *Mitu* sp.) for the same reason.³²

The custom is also known in the far north in Greenland. The Great Northern Loon (*Gavia immer*) was caught alive and tied with a rope around

its legs or neck and put somewhere high up on guard, for instance on a house-top or roof, as it made loud sounds when it saw someone approaching, and thus warned the inhabitants of coming visitors.³³

More recently parrots have been used as guarding birds in apartments and store premises. Some species are very protective in captivity and are thus helping their owners to scare away unwanted visitors.

Fighting birds

Bird fighting is considered to be one of the oldest spectator sports in the world, of course impossible to prove, but fights between roosters of gallinaceous birds is a widespread practice in Eurasia. Probably the first aviculturists who actually bred non-domesticated birds were the owners of birds used for fighting. Ancient sources describe the custom in China and Persia. Although many



Figure 8: Mr. John G. Stephenson's famous outdoor aviary at the Clevelands at Bishop's Cleeve in the 1880s.

species have been used, especially in Inner Asia, most famous are fights with roosters.

Cock-fights are still legal for instance in Japan, but banned in many other countries. The practice possibly originates in Asia and is today, despite being often illegal, still widely spread in South and Southeast Asia, parts of Europe and North and South America, especially Cuba and Mexico. Illegal cock fighting exists in the United States as well; the last state to ban this sport was Louisiana in 2007.

Cock-fighting has been appreciated not only by common people, but also by royalty and American presidents. In England it was once one of the most popular pub sports, but it became forbidden by law already in 1834. Not only poultry of various breeds have been used for bird fighting. Old breeds of fighting domestic geese exist in Germany (Steinbacher Kampfgans) and in Russia (Tula Goose).³⁴

Quail (*Coturnix coturnix*) fighting is probably as old as cock-fighting and the Romans were fond of this sport. Octavianus is said to have kept Quails, which always won over those of Anthony. It is described from southern Europe, Central Asia and China. In Southeast Asia (Java and Sumatra), Barred Buttonquail (*Turnix suscitator*) was used for the same purpose and Chukar (*Alectoris chukar*) or Rock Partridge is widely used in Afghanistan. The fighting partridge is gently taken care of and the Afghan villagers train them carefully, feeding and fattening them. Grey (*Francolinus pondicerianus*) and Black Francolins (*Francolinus francolinus*) have been used in bird fighting in India; this is still practiced in some rural areas.³⁵

Very competitive small finches can also be used for fighting rings, and in some Latin American countries especially the Saffron Finches (*Sicalis flaveola*), known for their aggressive nature, are



Figure 9: Crested Canary Bird

used in bird fights known as *rinhas* in Brazil. The fighting birds are placed in a large cage while the owners and the audience place bets on which bird will win the fight. When one bird gives up and tries to escape from its competitor, the fight is over. The small finches are often severely wounded and do not survive the fight.³⁶

Chinese used the Dayal Thrush (*Copsychus saularis*) for bird fighting, as described in an interesting note from Hong Kong in the early 1930s:

When a combat is to be staged, cages containing the two cock-birds are placed one against the other so that their open doors admit free passage from one cage to the other. The birds, if in a pugnacious mood, sing wildly the whole time with open wings and extended tail. But should one of the birds be fearful to challenge his rival he will not burst into a song of defiance but display considerable uneasiness at his proximity, and in this case, as the result of a contest is a foregone conclusion, the fight does not take place. The actual fight, if it occurs, does not last longer than a few minutes. One bird finds his way into his opponent's cage and a scuffle takes place on the floor,

in which both birds use their claws in a manner that suggests human wrestling.

Both combatants sing madly the whole time. A few feathers fly, but no blood is drawn. Soon one bird is chasing the other round the cage, and at this juncture the owner of the defeated bird intervenes. It is not considered advisable to fight a bird more than a few occasions each season. And after each fight, he will need a fortnight's rest. The Chinese say that some cock-birds if continually exhibited to each other but not allowed to fight will go blind with suppressed passion!³⁷

Songbirds and singing competitions

“What is most prized and admired in house birds is undoubtedly their songs”, wrote German

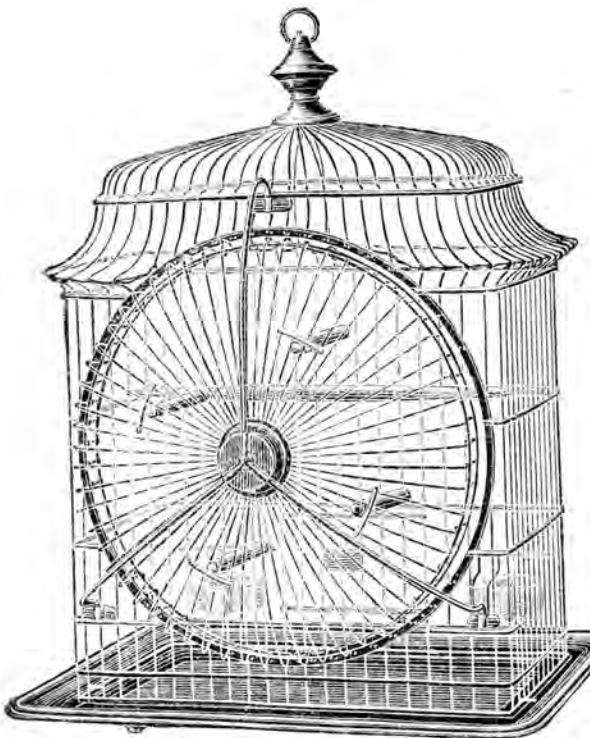


Figure 10: Nineteenth-century wheel cage for Canary Birds

aviculturist Johann Matthäus Bechstein in 1795. Keeping songbirds in cages for entertainment and pleasure has a long tradition in the Mediterranean region, Central Europe and East Asia.³⁸ Songbirds and pet birds were kept already during Antiquity; Greeks are said to have kept nightingales, while Blue Rock Thrushes (*Monticola solitarius*) are mentioned among Roman favorites. Pliny the Elderly describes the trade in trained nightingales. They “fetch the prices that are given for slaves and indeed larger prices than were paid for armour-bearers in old days”. He knew “of one bird, a white one it is true, which is nearly unprecedented, that was sold for 600,000 sesterces to be given as a present to the Emperor Claudius’s consort Agrippina”. Romans found their pet birds charming and amusing and when the pets died they mourned them, and sometimes they even wrote commemorating poems for them. Catullus’s poem over his beloved Lesbia’s dead sparrow, *Passer mortuusest*, belongs to the classical world literature.³⁹

Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*), Eurasian Siskin (*Carduelis spinus*) and Linnet (*Carduelis cannabina*) have been popular songbirds in Europe at least since Medieval times. Books on songbird-keeping were published in early seventeenth century, e.g. Antonia Valli da Todi, *Il Canto degl’ Augelli* (Rome 1601) and Giovanni Pietro Olina, *Uccelliera overo discorso della natura, e proprietà di diversi uccelli, e in particolare di que’ che cantano, con il modo di prendergli, conoscerli, allevargli* (Rome 1622).⁴⁰

Birds were sold for centuries by bird-catchers in street markets in Paris, Vienna, Nuremberg, Cologne, London, Stockholm etc., actually all over Europe. Moscow had a famous bird market which was visited by German and Swedish explorers in the eighteenth century. They could observe not only finches, but also Blue-throat (*Luscinia svecica*) and Orioles (*Oriolus oriolus*), which were sold

to city people interested in keeping songbirds for pleasure. Also the entertaining Common Crossbill (*Loxia curvirostra*) was cheap and popular. Nineteenth-century Russian author Anton Chekhov described in 1883 a visit to the Sunday bird market on Truba Square, obviously a popular pastime for Muscovites for centuries:

Along one side of the square there stands a string of waggons. The waggons are loaded, not with hay, not with cabbages, nor with beans, but with goldfinches, siskins, larks, blackbirds and thrushes, blue tits, bullfinches. All of them are hopping about in rough, homemade cages, twittering and looking with envy at the free sparrows. The goldfinches cost five kopecks; the siskins are rather more expensive, while the value of the other birds is quite indeterminate.⁴¹

From the late Middle Ages and in the early modern age, itinerant bird-sellers transported songbirds in small cages on their backs in Europe. Goldfinches (*Carduelis carduelis*) and Serins (*Serinus serinus*) were captured in Carinthia and South Tyrol and sold on the markets in northwestern Europe. Linnets (*Carduelis cannabina*) and Bullfinches (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*) were popular and sold everywhere.

Others were bred or trained in Tyrol and Thuringia. Carl Zeller's famous operetta *Der Vogelhändler* (The Bird Seller) is a romantic story about an eighteenth-century bird-seller arriving in Germany from Tyrol. Also in northern India there are ethnic communities specialised in bird-catching, such as the Baheliya in Uttar Pradesh and Mirshikar of Bihar.⁴² Local native birds have been appreciated and kept as songbirds everywhere.

The hill tribes of Himalaya kept the Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon (*Treron sphenurus*) in cages for their song, the Japanese Bush-Warbler (*Cettia diphone*) belonged to the favorites among the

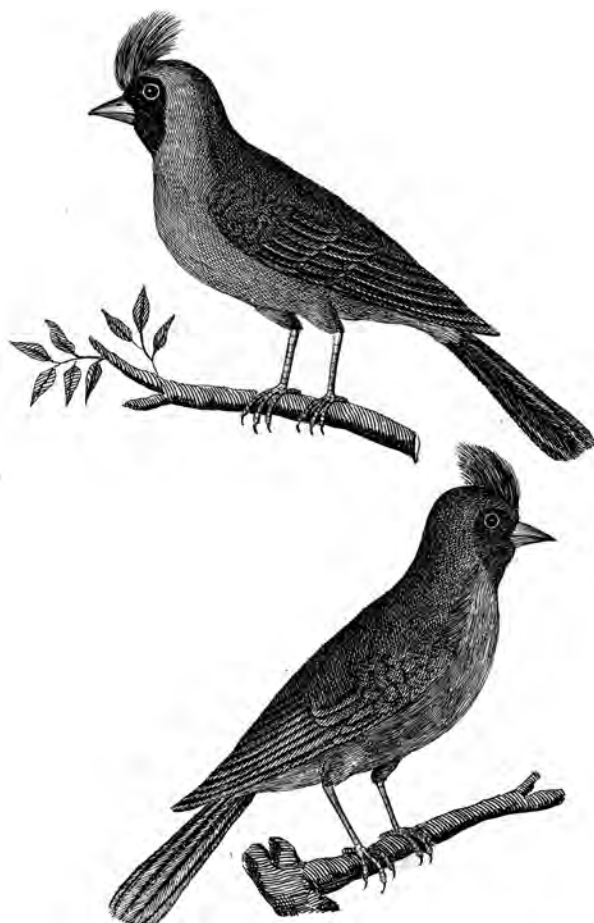


Figure 11: The Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) has a long history as a cage bird in Europe. Illustration from the mid-18th Century

Japanese, the Dayal Thrush (*Copsychus saularis*) could be found everywhere as a cage bird in southern China, Seedeaters (*Sporophila*) are popular in Costa Rica, the Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*) was kept as a pet among Pima, Yaqui, Mayo and various Yuma-speaking tribes in southwestern United States, native finches (*Carduelis cannabina*, *C. carduelis*) are still common cage birds in Spain and the Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*) was once very appreciated in Central Europe.⁴³

The Canary bird (*Serinus canaria*) was

brought to Europe in the late fifteenth century; British physician William Turner mentions it in 1544. Swiss zoologist Conrad Gessner writes in his *Historia Animalium* (1555) that canary birds were sold everywhere and were appreciated for their song. Cesare Mancini, who wrote the first book on keeping cage birds in 1575 (*Ammaestramenti per allevare, pascere, e curare gli uccelli*) has a few data on the canary bird, and Italian ornithologist Ulisse Aldrovandi gives in 1599 some interesting details about the import of canary birds from its native islands.⁴⁴ It was domesticated because of its song, but with selective breeding it turned part-yellow, yellow, white and other colors.

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries it seems to have been distributed in aristocratic circles, but in the seventeenth century it was readily available in bird markets and a breeding center was developed in Tyrol. A French book by Jean-Claude Hervieux de Chanteloup, *Nouveau traité des serins de Canarie* (1713), which gives many interesting details about the state of canary bird culture in the early eighteenth century, became a best-seller and was translated into many languages: Dutch, German, English, Spanish, Danish and Swedish.

Tom de Roo exemplifies how the interest for song-birds developed in Belgium during early modern times and shows how the canary bird gradually replaced native birds among urban people in Antwerp and other cities. Songbirds were popular all over the civilized world: "There are few persons who have not at some period or other of their lives, nourished and cherished a feathered pet", wrote Henry Gardiner Adams in 1854.⁴⁵ Good song canaries were exported from the islands and carried by pedlars throughout Central Europe. They probably reached Scandinavia in the early seventeenth century. Today

canaries are a popular songbird distributed all over the world and several song-breeds have developed.

The most famous is the German Roller, which developed in the Harz Mountains especially around Sankt Andreasberg. Other early song breeds are the Saxon Singer, the Belgium Malinois or Waterslager from the nineteenth century, the American Singer which traces its history to the Boston region in the 1940s, the Spanish Timbrado, which became a modern breed in the 1940s, and the Russian Song Canary. There is also a rather recent Irish Roller, which hardly exists outside Ireland.⁴⁶

Training singers was essential for canary breeders and this was a sport which developed into perfection in Germany. Certain districts were specialized in training songbirds, not only canaries, but also bullfinches and other species. Eleazar Albin writes in 1737 that trained Bullfinches were very much esteemed in England. American bird-dealer George H. Holden described in 1888 how Bullfinches were trained in Hesse in Germany:

The Bullfinch is taken from the nest in the early spring, when fourteen days old and thoroughly tamed before being given his elementary lessons in whistling. By regularly feeding from the hand, he becomes very tame and strongly attached to his master, whom he soon begins to regard as a substitute for his mother. When taken from the nest, he is allowed liberty for two or three days in order to accustom him to his new mode of life, and afterwards put in a small wicker cage, so commonly seen in the bird-shops. This cage is set into a box of dimensions just allowing its admission, and having a small swinging-door in front, which is kept closed, except during lesson-hours. A professional trainer's house has, as its chief furniture, probably fifty or 75 of these study-boxes, placed in rows around the wall, as far apart as the space will admit. As the houses



Figure 12: Two peafowl cocks and a hen. Note the parrot sitting on its cage to the left. Engraving from *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* 1555

are usually one room ensuite structures, the space separating the boxes is limited. When a trainer has two or more rooms, the number of airs taught accords with the number of rooms; for only one air can be taught in a room, as the birds would get two songs mixed. But a bird having learned thoroughly one air is taken to another room, and taught a second piece.⁴⁷

There are many ways to improve the perfection of a songbird. The cruel way of blinding birds, recommended by earlier birdsong trainers, was still practiced in some European countries in the early 20th century, is now banned everywhere. Many birds have a reputation of being excellent songbirds and especially in Asia many so-called softbills have been and are still used for that purpose. The Shama Thrush (*Copsychus malabaricus*) has been one of the most popular songbirds in India. In Calcutta (Kolkata) there was still in the early twentieth century a category of men, who made a regular business of feeding caged Shammas. For a small monthly sum they supplied a daily allowance of insects and other food.⁴⁸

Traditional songbird competitions still take place in many parts of the world, Surinam, Singapore, Malaysia, China, Belgium and elsewhere. Song contests with Zebra Doves (*Geopelia striata*)

have been popular in Indonesia. Their popularity among the Muslim Javanese is explained by the likening of its song to chants from the Koran. Filip Santens describes in his chapter the fascinating old tradition of keeping and training Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*) in Belgium, a sport especially thriving in Flanders, but rather recently also in the Netherlands and Germany.⁴⁹

Less well-known is the domestic Japanese Quail (*Coturnix japonica*), kept as a songbird by the Samurai in the pre-Meiji period. Such singing breeds existed until World War II.⁵⁰

Parrots in a global world

Parrots have probably been kept by humans for millennia in Africa, Asia and America; at least Indian rulers had them in royal palaces over 2,000 years ago and through trade with Southeast Asia parrots reached China. Vernon J. Kisling discusses in his chapter their presence as captive animals in American high cultures before the arrival of Europeans, thus giving us a rare insight into early American aviculture. Parrots have long been part of European cultural history as well, although they originally do not exist in the wild on the continent. Feral parrot populations exist today in some cities, for instance groups of Ring-necked Parakeets (*Psittacula krameri*) live in twelve European countries, originating from cage birds which escaped in the 1960s and 1970s.⁵¹

The oldest evidence for European encounters with parrots is from 398 BCE when Greek physician Ctesias of Cnidos described in his *Indica* a bird which could speak an “Indian” language. According to most commentators this must have been a Plum-headed Parakeet (*Psittacula cyanocephala*). During the Indian campaign of Alexander the Great in 326–327 BCE the soldiers also came in contact with parrots and a few were obviously brought back to Europe. Ornithologists discuss if

they were a kind of Ring-necked Parakeets (*Psittacula krameri manillensis*), still common in northern India, or the so-called Alexander Parakeet (*Psittacula eupatria nipalensis*). The parakeets were described by Aristotle, who never saw any live specimens and had to base his description on hearsay.⁵²

During Greek and Roman times a rather extensive trade with Ring-necked Parakeets developed. Most were imported from India, although wealthy Romans probably also imported the African subspecies (*Psittacula kramerii kramerii*) of the same parakeet. Pliny the Elder, Solinus, Apuleius and others mention parrots; Pliny describes it as follows: “its whole body is green, only varied by a red circlet at the neck”. The birds were kept in precious cages made of silver, ivory or tortoise-shell.⁵³ In his book *Amores* (20 BCE), Ovid includes one animal *epicedium*. This is a well-known poem lamenting the death of Corinna’s parrot. In *Silvae* (92–96 CE) by Statius we find two animal *epicedia* (II.4 and II.5). One is a poem on the parrot owned by Melior, the poet’s patron. Both poets have most likely read Catullus’s already mentioned grave poem on Lesbia’s sparrow. There are also a number of animal epitaphs in *The Greek Anthology* which probably were known to the Roman Golden and Silver Age poets.⁵⁴

During Late Antiquity, however, the import of parrots seems to have ceased and not until the Middle Ages parrots were again found in Europe. In bestiaries from Medieval England parrots are mentioned in the twelfth century and from the next few centuries some good illustrations exist, mostly of Ring-necked Parakeets. Further Asian species also began to be known. Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor, received a White Cockatoo (*Cacatua alba*) as a gift from the Sultan of Babylon in 1220.

At the end of the period the Southeast Asian Yellow-crested Cockatoo (*Cacatua sulphurea*) were present at Italian and Spanish royal courts and the earliest known illustration is found on Andrea

Mantegna’s painting “Madonna della Vittoria” from 1496. The first Senegal Parrot (*Poicephalus senegalus*) in Europe was reported in 1490.

Ring-necked Parakeets were still the most common species and are depicted for instance on Jan van Eyck’s painting “Virgin and Child with Canon van der Paele” from 1434. In *Dialogus creaturum* from 1483, the first book printed in Sweden, there is a simple illustration of a parrot.⁵⁵ In later centuries e.g. the famous fictional pirate Long John Silver was always depicted with a parrot on his shoulder. We do not know if pirates actually kept parrots as pets, but exotic birds were common as cargo and companions on ships. Sailors brought birds on board the vessels, especially parrots and other exotic species, as gifts for home and to trade with them. Also Japanese rulers appreciated the many exotic birds, brought by Dutch vessels from Southeast Asia.⁵⁶

Parrots came from Asia to Europe with the East Indian trade, but several also arrived from South America and West Africa. Blauw Jaan in Amsterdam, who opened a combined wine cellar and menagerie on the Kloveniersburgwal, was a famous trader in exotic animals. He bought birds and other animals from ships in the harbor. The inn, which operated for almost a hundred years, sold parrots and other exotic birds to royalties in Europe, including the Swedish royal family. Some of these parrots were given to Carl Linnaeus, who described them in his *Systema naturae* (1758). He had among other species also a “talking” Grey Parrot.

Bird traders (*oiseleurs*) in Paris, who were members of an official guild, also imported parrots from Africa, South America and the Caribbean.⁵⁷ From the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries parrots were popular pets amongst aristocratic and royal families in Europe. Exotic beasts such as lions, monkeys and other animals including birds were regarded as status symbols. Many important



Figure 13: King Conrad the Younger hunting with falcons, 14th century manuscript Codex Manesse

art works feature parrots. Lazarus Roting created a painting in the early seventeenth century with among other species a Chestnut-fronted Macaw (*Ara severa*), a Jamaican Amazon, (*Amazona collaria*), a Peach-fronted Conure (*Aratinga aurea*) and a St. Thomas Conure (*Aratinga pertinax aeruginosus*). A painting by David Klöcker Ehrentrahl from 1670, showing some of King Charles's XI exotic animals, has a Yellow-crested Cockatoo, Hawk-headed Parrot (*Deropterys accipitrinus*) and an *Aratinga*-species. Another painting by the same artist portrays macaws, including a Military Macaw (*Ara militaris*).⁵⁸

African Grey Parrots have been common on the

market for centuries, like macaws and Amazon parrots from South America. In the nineteenth century Australian parakeets and cockatoos became increasingly popular trade goods. Breeding parrots were, with a few exceptions, rather uncommon before the twentieth century.

French zoologist Buffon relates that a pair of Grey Parrots (*Psittacus erithacus*) bred successfully in the late eighteenth century for several years in Marmande in southern France. Blue and Yellow Macaw (*Ara ararauna*) is said to have bred in 1818 at Caen in France. Still one hundred years later the breeding records continue to be comparatively few and e.g. the Scarlet Macaw (*Ara macao*) did not breed until 1916. This changed after World War II and today most species can be bred in captivity. Only a few parrot species of the 348 known have never been successful, such as the New Guinean Pygmy Parrots (*Micropsitta spp.*), although some tried to breed them (e.g. Sten Bergman). Some very rare species are only kept within special breeding programs, such as the Kakapo (*Strigops habroptila*), Spix's Macaw (*Cyanopsitta spixii*) and the Orange-bellied Parrot (*Neophema chrysogaster*). The trade with captured parrots from the wild still continues outside Europe and North America. Researcher Rosie Low has given an excellent overview of the development of parrot-keeping during the 20th century in Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand and Japan, and we can only refer further interest to her work.⁵⁹

Imitators

The traditional habit of teaching birds to “talk”, that is to mimic human speech, is an ancient custom known already in Antiquity. Several authors provide accounts of talking birds and it is clear that people found parrots comical. In his *Naturalis*