

Jason Crean and a Curl-crested Aracari interacting with eager young participants



AFA's **IDEA** Program: **I**NTERACTIVE **D**ISPLAY & **E**ducational **A**NIMAL PROGRAM

By Jason Crean, MA, MS & Susan van den Broek

As active aviculturists, we should all consider educating people about avian life incredibly important. To sustain the AFA's educational mission, we encourage our members to share their love of birds with others in order to increase the exposure of aviculture. This can be done in a myriad of ways and some have already been engaged in this for some time. It is no secret that other organizations with missions of stopping the use of all animals in education have made their way into today's classrooms and communities so it is imperative that we have a positive presence and are part of the debate. But we have an edge over these organizations: we have live animal ambassadors that engage people of all ages and increase their appreciation of nature and of aviculture.

Offering an educational program with your own birds can be either interactive or just display. Many programs held throughout the country involve conservation messaging where all participants can learn about the fascinating aspects of the many different species with which we share our lives. Many other organizations use outreach programs in order to spread their messaging and we should, too. Including our birds, however, allows people to make a personal and long-lasting connection with birds and it is a great way to educate while having fun along the way!

Program Purpose

The purpose of this program is simple: we want to provide some ideas to those who provide educational programs to the public. How any individual, affiliate, or other entity runs their

educational program is completely at their own discretion. These are just some ideas as to what to include in a program that could involve live birds and how to include positive messaging about aviculture. It is easy to get mired in the history of an individual bird but, if we truly want to educate the masses, comparing different species and what science has discovered about them is definitely helpful. Remember that the educational program should always be about the birds, not the people. Keeping birds as the focus encourages participants to appreciate each species involved and increase their respect for nature.

Arranging a Venue

Some organizations including schools, 4H groups, scout troops and others may contact you for a program. You may also want to increase exposure for your own club, society or business by arranging your own. Holding outreach events for your club can be fantastic and effective exposure and a great membership recruitment tool. Contacting local schools, libraries, 4H groups, boy scout and girl scout posts, universities, bird clubs, senior centers and youth centers are good places to start. Businesses like pet shops and veterinary clinics can also be beneficial as they could not only benefit from learning, but these "special events" can also increase their customer base. Always remember to have a very clear reason as to how it will benefit your host to have your outreach program visit. Schools, for example, will want to know how it can fit into their already busy schedule. Having an information sheet about your messaging that includes some

of the program content recommendations that follow will help to show how your program will mesh with the existing curriculum. Adding a literacy piece where students will engage in reading is also another appropriate learning opportunity.

Also, you must always be aware that there may be charges for your program if you are expected to rent a space. Do your homework regarding the space you plan to use. Visit it in advance to ensure it is appropriate for your birds and the needs of your program. If you are presenting for your local club or non-profit, you may ask for donations. If you plan to ask for donations to help fund your club or program, be sure to check that it's acceptable with your hosting organization. If you plan to sell items, you must also check your host's rules and guidelines to be sure sales of any kind are permitted on site. And while looking into your host's requirements, always ask about liability insurance to be sure you are either covered by theirs or need to submit your own proof of insurance.

Program Content Recommendations

The best thing you can do is anticipate questions to help shape the content of your program. Think about your audience and consider what they would want to know. Young students, boy and girl scout troops, and other groups of children may have different questions than older students or adults. Remember that questions are often posed based on the individual's past experience and this experience can differ greatly from person to person. We recommend focusing on positive messaging, especially when it comes to younger children. Even when talking about the plight of endangered species, we tend to recommend the *"no bad news before fourth grade"* mentality. With these younger children, keep the focus on living species and not so much about the dangers they may face in the wild; they will learn about these soon enough. Older age groups could be taught about what it is like in the wild versus managed environments like our homes, zoos, and other institutions.

Here are some ideas for content that may require research on your part:

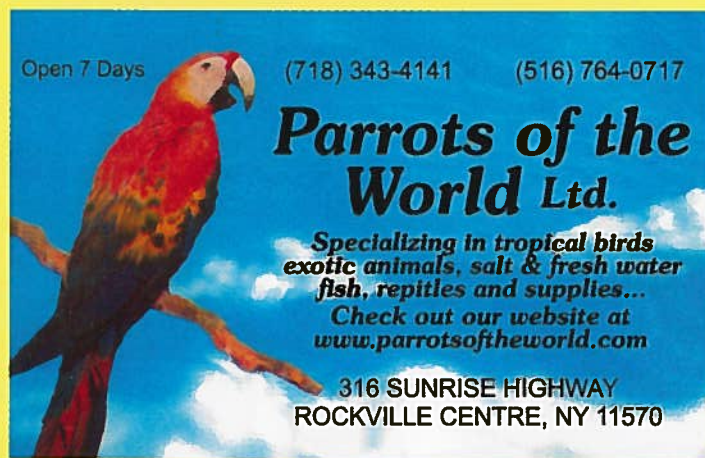
Content	Potential question(s)
Species' common and scientific name	What does the scientific name mean? Why do animals have scientific names?
Geographic distribution in the wild	Where do they live? What other species live there?
Type of ecosystem	Are all birds from the rainforest? Where do birds live on Earth? What do birds have that help them survive in different places?
Niche (the role they play in their ecosystem)	Why are they important to other animals and plants? What do birds eat (wild vs managed environments)? How do birds find food?
Adaptations (anatomy)	Why do birds have feathers? Why are they so colorful? Why are their feet shaped the way they are? How do they use their beak? How far can they fly? How can you tell male from female? Can they see well?
Adaptations (behavior)	Why do birds vocalize? Do they talk? Why do birds move their heads like that? When do birds sleep? Do birds play? How do birds find food? Why do they poop so much? Do they live with other birds? How do birds mate? Where do they build nests?
Conservation efforts	Why are they endangered/ threatened/vulnerable in the wild? How does keeping birds help conservation? Why do birds make good pets? What do birds need if you keep them at home?

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, never be afraid to say “I don’t know.” No one has all the answers and it is guaranteed that someone will ask a question to which you don’t readily know the answer. Replying in a way such as “That’s a great question and one I want to answer myself” models to the audience that we are all continuing to learn and that this journey never ends. **It is better to say you don’t know than to perpetuate bad information.**

Sample Messaging

First and foremost, we want to celebrate birds. Stay positive and talk about what it takes to keep a bird in the home. It is important to stress responsibility when bringing any pet into the home. Staying positive should include avoiding topics of abuse and neglect; you can get the information regarding proper care to your audience without highlighting poor conditions and welfare. Focus less on “tricks” and more on the natural behaviors they would see. Depending on the audience, comparing the keeping of birds to that of dogs and cats can help put things into perspective. Discussing the great diversity in bird diets, for example, illustrate the difference between herbivores, omnivores and carnivores. It is important to discuss their wild habitats and possibly even the threats they face. Do your research prior to any event so as to not offer any incorrect information. Stress the keeping of birds as a conservation effort, preserving more individuals in the US population will guarantee some will survive if their wild counterparts are threatened. Aviculture has, as one its goals, the ability to preserve a gene pool for every species bred.

Always remember to be self-aware. Every word and action is being watched by the participants so it is key you are constantly aware of not only how you are reacting to the audience participants, but also the birds in your program. Though most of us are aware how not to reinforce an undesirable behavior, at more stressful times, such as during one of these programs, can alter how we would normally react. And during one of these programs is when we need to be modeling the correct reinforcing and non-reinforcing behaviors. Make use of these teachable moments during your presentations so audience members can view appropriate ways to modify behaviors when necessary. Using many of the content recommendations above can help shape a very interesting and engaging program.



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Some important things to keep in mind

- A program doesn't have to be formal or fancy.
- Don't make it too long. Tailor the program for the age group.
- The younger the group, the more apt they may be to touch.
- If you present at a business or other organization, make sure you know their mission and product offerings to be sure you don't offend when making recommendations in your presentation.
- Be prepared to talk about what you like best and what is most fascinating to you about the bird(s) you are showing.
- Schools are trying to promote reading. Recommend books to student groups to increase literacy. This may increase your chances at being invited to do school programs.
- Make sure that you can legally own the bird in the state in which you live and/or speak. Review State laws before bringing any bird across state lines.

Cleanliness: Always be very clear that those attending your program may not be bird lovers and fully understand what it is like to live with a bird. With this in mind, keeping everything clean and above standard is absolutely vital. You should dress comfortably but nicely out of respect for your audience. There is no need to highlight the bird droppings or chewed holes in our clothing. Any perching, feed bowls, cage or table liners should all be maintained throughout the program to ensure a clean environment. Appearance can mean everything to those making observations. You may want to bring a change of clothes, baby wipes for quick clean-ups, a receptacle for discarded trash, and anything else that may help maintain a good first impression.

Biosecurity & Safety: It is no secret that our birds should be protected against disease and other hazards. Things to keep in mind whenever planning an outreach program should include:

- Will other birds be present at the event?
 - › Be sure to consider whether aggression will be an issue between birds and with people with whom your bird(s) are not familiar. It is not recommended that a bird be brought to an outreach event if it does not have experience in social situations. Not all birds are meant for these programs.



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- Have other birds been present at this specific locale? If so, how recently?
 - › If birds have been in the area, checking to be sure the area in which your program will take place has been cleaned recently is important.
- Will the birds be on display? Will they be touched and/or handled?
 - › Most programs do not allow birds to be handled. If any contact is part of the program, it is highly recommended to use an antimicrobial hand gel prior to contact. Check your labels as it should be a minimum of 70% alcohol to be effective. Many of these sanitizers are 62% - 64% alcohol and not effective. Be sure to read your labels when purchasing these sanitizers and always be aware that nothing will replace the thorough washing of hands with soap and water.
- What precautions can be taken to ensure the environment is safe and clean?
 - › If birds are flighted, do not trust that they won't fly if frightened. Take whatever precautions with which you are comfortable that ensure the safety of your birds (e.g. feather clipping, harness training, etc). Wiping down surfaces and floors for the event location also help to reduce any risks of exposure to potential harmful pathogens.
- Will the venue be outdoors?
 - › This could be potentially hazardous if the bird is not harness-trained as even clipped birds have been known to fly. Make good choices when it comes to deciding which birds to include in an outdoor program. Always err on the side of caution. If you are including birds that have been trained in free-flight, it is important to explain how the birds have been trained to engage in this activity and the steps you took to get them there.

If you ever have questions and think we can help, please email Jason Crean, Education Committee Chair, at education@afabirds.org. We are all in this together!

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