

Lawyer one with toucans

He has been breeder of the birds for more than two decades

By Nick Thomas
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FALLBROOK – What does a fruity breakfast cereal have in common with a North County lawyer? The answer lies in the sultry jungles of Central and South America.

When Kellogg created the Froot Loops breakfast cereal in the 1960s, its advertising agency searched the animal kingdom for a suitable commercial representative.



CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune

Two toco toucans sat on a branch in their enclosure at Emerald Forest Bird Gardens, a huge aviary in the hills north of Fallbrook. The aviary is home to about 130 breeding pairs and may be the largest collection of toucans in the world. Tocos are intelligent but, like all toucans, don't talk. And they can cost \$9,000 each.

"A tropical bird like the toucan was a logical choice to represent the fruit-flavored product," said Jennifer Mejia from Kellogg's Consumer Affairs Department.

Logical perhaps, but not entirely accurate.

"The Froot Loops bird is an imaginary cartoon character that does not reflect an actual toucan species," said Jerry Jennings, who is still licensed but quit practicing personal injury and wildlife law about two years ago. "But it was probably inspired by the keel bill toucan."

Jennings knows toucans.

As a breeder of the exotic birds for more than two decades, he owns and manages Emerald Forest Bird Gardens, a huge aviary in the rolling hills north of Fallbrook. The 40-acre property is home to some 130 breeding pairs, perhaps the largest collection of toucans in the world.

The keel bill is one of approximately 40 species of toucans, birds that are instantly recognizable by their disproportionately large beaks.

While some are rare, and only about half have been bred in captivity, none is endangered. Several, however, are listed for protection because of loss of habitat and hunting.

Toucans are renowned for their striking coloration, including the larger ones, such as the keel bill



CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune

Aviary owner and manager Jerry Jennings tried to coax one of his toco toucans to perch on a finger inside its enclosure. Jerry Jennings checked on some of his toucans. The food in the bowl is a mixture of papaya, bananas and pellets with low iron

with its rainbow beak, and the toco toucan, with its stunning orange bill with black highlights, sky-blue eye rings and brilliant red rump feathers.

content. Too much iron can be lethal to toucans.

A toco was featured in the 1997 motion picture, "George of the Jungle" and its 2003 sequel.

Because they enjoy socializing and interacting with people, Jennings said, tocos are popular with bird enthusiasts. They are intelligent and have a sweet nature but, like all toucans, don't talk.

And they are definitely not cheap, costing as much as \$9,000 each. Smaller species, such as the toucanets and aracarís, may cost one-tenth of that.

Jennings, 59, is one of the few commercial breeders of toucans in the U.S. Like all responsible breeders of tropical birds, he makes sure his toucans are close-banded.

It means that a continuous metal band is slipped on the leg of a bird as a nestling, and kept there as the bird grows. The bands, too small to fit over the foot of a full-sized bird, are considered proof that the birds wearing them were not captured as adults in the wild.

There are probably several thousand privately owned toucans in the country, Jennings said, but the number is difficult to estimate because many have been imported illegally.

A permit is not required to own toucans that have been raised in the U.S., said Steve Martarano, a spokesman for the California Department of Fish and Game.

Jennings' interest in toucans dates to 1976, when he purchased what he thought were a breeding pair from a pet store in the San Fernando Valley.

He later learned they were a similar but different species. After he acquired a mate for each, it took two years of fine-tuning their environment before Jennings achieved a world first.

"One pair bred, and that was the first breeding for the ariel toucan in captivity," he said.

Within days the other pair, emerald toucanets, also laid eggs.

He was hooked

Art Risser, then curator of birds at the San Diego Zoo, told Jennings of the need to further develop techniques for breeding toucans in captivity.

But by then, Jennings was hooked and took little convincing to take up the challenge. In 1990, he began building a \$1 million Fallbrook aviary while practicing law.

Some 2,000 successful hatchings later, Jennings has established himself as a world expert in the breeding and raising of toucans.

Although he was not the first to breed toucans in the United States – the Los Angeles Zoo bred three species in the late 1960s and early 1970s – he has now raised nine species in captivity for the first time.

"Jerry is a founding member and former president of the American Federation of Aviculture," said Risser, now director of collections for

the San Diego Zoological Society. "His interest in both wild and captive toucans and his research into the husbandry and captive breeding of this family has made valuable contributions to aviculture."

Jennings' research showed that toucans were much more likely to breed in a natural nest rather than an artificial box, routinely used for parrots and other birds.

By providing his toucans with palm tree logs, the pairs were able to dig out a deep nest chamber and develop a stronger bond.

Like humans, toucans can be rather fussy when it comes to choosing a mate. Put a male and female together, and one of three things will happen.

"They may ignore each other, take to each other immediately, or fight like great warriors," Jennings said.

But once a pair have bonded, they will generally remain together for life.

The birds are also more likely to breed if they cannot see their neighbors.

In the wild, the dense rain forest prevents visual contact. Jennings has used shade cloth overlapping reed fencing to provide privacy for his birds.

He has also played a crucial role in studying toucan nutrition. In the wild, birds have the luxury of choosing from as many as 100 varieties of tropical fruits.

Must have fruit

"So in captivity, fruit is a must," said Jennings, who feeds his birds 25 gallons of diced fresh fruit each day.

In addition to locally grown blueberries and grapes, the birds feast on 50 cases of fresh papaya and three cases of bananas that Jennings buys each week.

In captivity, toucans also need a dietary supplement to provide protein, fat and minerals. But one mineral needs to be closely monitored, said Judy St. Leger, a SeaWorld veterinarian.

"A toucan's major problem in captivity is hemochromatosis, or iron-storage disease," St. Leger said. "Wild toucans eat food that is naturally low in iron. Since they concentrate iron in the liver, a diet that is too high in iron can be lethal to birds in captivity."

For this reason, supplements must have an iron content less than 100 parts per million.

"The only pelleted diet on the market today meeting that requirement is the Mazuri Low Iron Diet sold by Purina Mills," Jennings said. "It has virtually eliminated the problem of hemochromatosis."

Jennings helped develop the product, working closely with Dr. Mark Griffin, director of zoo and aqua diets for Purina Mills in St. Louis.

"Jerry has allowed us to do a full-scale nutritional study with his toucans," Griffin said. "We have fed his birds long-term with our products, then measured their iron levels."

With the introduction of the Mazuri Diet, now sold around the world, captive toucans are healthier and should live for 20 years on average.

Griffin also emphasized that Jennings's work has implications for wild toucans, too.

"The work may help preserve some of the rarer species of wild toucan if they can be bred in captivity and released," he said.

Jennings has been studying the rarer toucans in their natural habitats for many years. In 1996, he acquired 8 acres in Peru and was issued a license to breed and export captive-bred birds into the U.S.

Jennings eventually hopes to establish self-sustaining populations for all toucan species.

"Toucans are goodwill ambassadors for the rain forests," he said. "They are birds with which most people readily identify, thanks in part to the Froot Loops bird of breakfast cereal fame.

"And they inspire people to learn about the rain forest, its inhabitants and the conservation issues they represent."

More information about toucans can be found at www.emeraldforestbirds.com. The aviary is not open to the public, except by appointment.

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