

## **KEEP YOUR PARROTS SAFE FROM ACCIDENTS**

**By Rosemary Low**

There is an invariable maxim that can be applied in cage or aviary: if an accident *can* happen, it *will* happen. As bird keepers, it is our responsibility to *prevent* accidents. So often they are fatal – and then it is too late to be sorry that our carelessness caused it. Accidents are rarely due to bad luck, they are the result of not thinking ahead.

A little more thought and developing higher standards of care can reduce losses. For the sake of our birds, nothing should be left to chance. Search for trouble spots where your birds are kept and correct them before it is too late. Cultivate the habit of looking carefully, not merely glancing around. That loop of wire that used to hold a perch or a piece of cuttlefish bone could become a noose that will strangle one of your parrots. A loose end of wire that you forgot to snip off could trap one of your birds by its ring – breaking its leg or causing its death if it is not found quickly. In this article I will describe events that lead to needless deaths and accidents to make you more conscious of what can go wrong.

### **Shut the door!**

This might seem too obvious to mention, but countless birds escape from houses, birdrooms, aviaries and aviary service passages because someone could not be bothered to shut a door, even when double doors are fitted. Shutting doors should be a habit that is ingrained into every bird keeper. When building your aviary and/or birdroom, ensure that all the doors in aviaries open onto a service passage and that there is a double door at the entrance to the birdroom. The double door or safety porch should be about 2ft 6in (76cm) square because if you are carrying something you will need to put it down in order to close the door behind you and open the one in front. Aviary doors do not normally need to be wider than 2ft 6in than or higher than 5ft 6in (1.65m); smaller doors reduce the chance of escape. If there is no space for a double door inside your birdroom, make a frame of wood and welded mesh to fit onto the door frame from the outside so that you can leave the door open in warm weather. The same applies to the windows.

If you place your parrot outside in his cage on a nice day, either padlock the door or place the cage with the door against a solid surface such as a wall. If you don't, this might be the time when your bird discovers how to open the door or, if it is a small bird like a lovebird, when a cat knocks over the cage. When you place your parrot outside, never leave it unattended. It could be at risk from cats, Sparrowhawks – or even theft.

### **Essential catching net**

A parrot could die if you cannot remove it quickly from danger. Whether you keep parrots in aviaries or in the house, you should have a good quality catching net with a padded rim. (Accidentally hitting a bird on the head with the rim of an unpadded net could kill it.) A bird's life might depend on the speed with which you can locate the net. If you have several blocks of aviaries, there should be a net within each block. Always keep the net in the same place and ensure that it is in good condition. A small hole in the seam means that a bird could escape the net.

Good nets are not cheap. Do not economise with a cheap one or even with a fish net. The net should not have open mesh in which a bird could become entangled. It should be plain cloth, preferably of a dark colour, and of strong material that does not rip easily. Remember that being caught is a stressful experience so catch the bird quickly and keep it in the net for the minimum time possible.

When catching parrots I always have with me a net and a towel as the latter is useful for picking up birds that are clinging to the wire. You must know how to hold a medium or large parrot correctly within the net. Locate the head (with caution!) with your hand outside the net and place thumb and forefinger on either side of the parrot's head. If the parrot is large and therefore strong-beaked, use a towel over the top of the net so that it has less chance of biting you. Hold the parrot firmly but do not squeeze it tightly as you could constrict its breathing.

### **Toys**

Examine toys carefully before buying. An example of a carelessly presented toy was a small wooden construction for climbing or swinging, it could be attached to the cage or aviary by a key ring and D-clip. The D-clip was too large for the key ring and had forced the key ring open permanently. The resulting gap could have trapped a bird by its claw, beak or nail, and the open end of the key ring could have trapped it by its ring. I cut off the key ring and attached the toy to the aviary roof using a plastic cable tie. *All toys should be carefully examined for hazards – first by the seller, then by the buyer.*

A friend recently showed me a toy that nearly killed one of her Black-capped Lories. It consisted of some wooden shapes, including two rings, threaded on to a length of chain. The lory's head was stuck in one of the rings. The bird would have died if she had not been present. This toy was doubly dangerous because the two wooden rings differed in size, providing the potential for killing a wider range of species. If you do use such toys, make sure that the rings are much larger than the bird's head. Anyone can make safe toys by drilling a hole in the centre of a number of small blocks of wood and threading the blocks on to a chain. This is hung by a D-clip or a dog clip from the roof of the cage or aviary.

### **Ropes**

A dangling length of rope in a cage can be a lethal object. Alas! More than one parrot has hanged itself. Soft cotton rope is the worst kind. The harder, more fibrous type is safer. All rope should be knotted every few inches, thus preventing strangulation. If there is a mass of frayed ends, cut them short, because these frayed ends could also prove hazardous. If you keep lories, do not give them hemp rope as they have the bad habit of licking at the rope and swallowing the small fibres. This can cause a fatal compaction of the crop.

### **Rings**

Under normal circumstances, rings of the correct size and strength for the species pose no hazard. When something goes wrong they can result in terrible pain and even loss of the leg. First of all, the ring should be of the correct size. If it is too large, some thin object such as wire or a piece of the branch could become trapped in the gap between the ring and the leg. If it is too small the leg could become swollen and this could go unnoticed, especially in a large collection of parrots. If you see a ringed bird limping catch it up at once and examine the leg. If it is necessary to remove a closed ring, this will probably need to be carried out by a veterinarian as it is a very delicate and difficult procedure when the leg is swollen. There is a special ring-cutting tool used by jewellers. Split rings can usually be prised apart.

A bizarre accident occurred to one of my birds fitted with a sexing ring. These rings are closed by means of a small pin. The pin had somehow been removed and the bird caught its upper mandible in the small hole made for the pin. I found him on the aviary floor going round and round in circles. I could not free his beak and rushed him to a vet. The vet told me she would have to "sedate" the bird and I was to come back later. I said the bird should not be anaesthetised for such a simple procedure and showed her how to remove the ring with the help of the veterinary nurse. It was not a job that one person could perform while holding the bird as you need both hands to remove the ring.

## **Aggressive birds**

If you keep several parrots in your home you need to be aware of one very important point. Most parrots are highly territorial in the vicinity of their cage. Some inexperienced parrot keepers are unaware of the dangers posed by a parrot landing on the top of another cage when the occupant is inside. No matter how amicable the two birds might be away from their cages, most parrots will nip or bite hard at the toes of another who lands on the cage. Some birds, such as Amazons, will immediately go into full aggressive mode, screaming, lunging and biting. Serious injury can result, especially to a smaller bird.

Many aviary birds are equally territorial. Two parrots should therefore be introduced on neutral territory – a cage or aviary that neither has previously occupied. The introduction should occur when someone will be present all day and is able to check the compatibility of the birds. However, problems could occur two or three days later, so do not introduce birds just before you will be absent for a few days unless the person looking after your birds is competent and has hours to spare.

With some parrots, the few minutes after introduction are the most dangerous. A potentially troublesome situation can sometimes be defused by offering the likely aggressor a favourite food item, so that it is temporarily distracted. A confident bird is rarely attacked, unlike one that acts in a nervous or uncertain manner. If you have two adjoining empty aviaries or cages, it is wise to put one parrot in each. When they are showing an interest in each other, take the *dominant* bird and place it in the aviary of the subservient one. Being moved puts the dominant bird at a temporary disadvantage.

Remember, too, that a parrot that has been removed from the aviary for several days might not be accepted when reintroduced. If aggressive behaviour occurs, either remove the dominant bird and put it in a cage within the aviary or remove it to another aviary for a few days.

If the bird was a member of a small colony, perhaps conures or lovebirds, there is a real danger that it will be attacked. If this happens you must quickly remove the bird. Do not walk away thinking "they will settle down" because on your return you might find a dead body. Remove the bird and another one as a companion and house them elsewhere. Never introduce a stranger if you have a colony of parrots of one species, such as lovebirds, conures or Quaker Parakeets. There is a strong risk that it will be killed instantly.

If you maintain a mixed aviary of various species, observation is very important. Subtle factors can alter the once harmonious balance of a group. When unsuitable species are housed together, it is only a matter of time before a tragedy occurs. You might see an apparently successful mixed aviary in a zoo and be tempted to duplicate the idea in your garden. What you do not see is the mistakes that have cost some of the inhabitants their lives. The golden rule with a mixed aviary is to place all the birds inside at the same time, remove any that are too quarrelsome, and *never* add any more.

Mixed aviaries might look wonderful, but they should be only for those who can devote hours of daily observation to their birds. The survival rate and reproduction success is higher when birds are housed one pair per aviary.

In this article it was not my intention to mention obvious dangers in the home, such as non-stick pans, products that give off strong fumes such as carpet cleaners, poisonous house plants or items that can cause lead poisoning. We all know about these. It is the hidden dangers of which we need to be more aware.