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How I Became Interested in Aviculture

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By Norm Finlay-Jones

I once read the very first step towards success in any occupation is to become interested in it. I have always endeavoured to do just that.

My introduction to avian pleasures began when I was a lad of 16. I had read in the local newspaper that a clearance sale was to be held on a nearby farm. I had never been to a clearance sale before and I thought if I was to pop along I might discover something new.

On the specified day I arrived at the farm to witness the joy of an auction. I saw pieces of farm machinery change hands on the bash of a hammer being wielded by the auctioneer with increasing vigour, on a blacksmiths anvil, as the sale progressed. I saw a nod, a touch of a hat, a tilt of a head and other strange behaviour cause the auctioneer to point in the direction of the lucky person who had been the last bidder and they became the proud owner of whatever may have been bid upon on that occasion.

One batch under a lot number consisted of four [Bronzewing Turkey](#) hens and one gobbler. They were only young birds. I thought what a shame to sell them so young. I recognised a person at the auction who I knew was a wise old man and asked him how much he thought they would go for under the hammer. "Not much", he replied. "A few [quid](#) is all I reckon they'd bring here today. There are not many here at all". A few quid I thought! Here I am with 16 quid in my pocket - there would be heaps left over. I waited until the bidding for this lot began.

It seemed the auctioneer would never get around to them. Nobody wanted to bid. I thought "a few quid the expert reckons, they might go for nothing the way it is going". I don't know to this day why, but I bid, I called out, "ONE QUID". At the same time I felt into my pocket to reassure myself that I did have the money with me. It was a relief to discover that there was a crinkle in my pocket, revealing the pocket I had placed the money in. The auctioneer looked at me and so did the whole audience around me. I thought I had committed a sin! To my surprise, the auctioneer called out, "ONE QUID I AM OFFERED, DO I HEAR ANY MORE BIDS?" Then an epidemic started and the amount soon increased in five shilling increments until it reached ten pounds. Somehow I had got myself involved in this crazy caper of bidding. I had no idea who I was bidding against, or even if it was my bid that had been accepted, before it would go upwards again. This "few quid" I had earlier been advised, had now reached many quid and it seemed everyone wanted these wretched turkeys. It dawned on me that if they all wanted the birds they must be good and well worth the amount, so I persisted with my bidding. Soon an amount of 15 pounds was called out by the auctioneer and he followed this with the familiar pattern of, "ARE WE ALL DONE?" In desperation I bid again and the auctioneer informed me that it was already my bid. I had reached a stage in the exciting game of bidding against myself! I went cold all over and for what appeared to be an eternity, no one bid, and the auctioneer knocked them down to me for 15 pounds.

I had one pound left in my pocket, my throat was dry and I had five large birds in a crate. I went straight to the clerk attending on the busy auctioneer. I was shaking as I handed over the money. I awakened from the initial shock only to further dismay when I remembered that I had arrived at the auction on a push bike. I certainly could not take them home on that. Then another shock wave went through me. Where was I going to keep these birds? Yes, we had a farm alright - 40 acres, but the fences were designed to keep cattle and horses inside, not turkeys. I thought then that I must have been the biggest turkey about.

I hastily rang my foreman at work - we used to go fishing together and he had a utility, perhaps he might come to my aid. He was playing cricket that afternoon and would not be home until 6:00pm his wife told me. She would arrange for him to call at the place and pick me, the bike and the birds up and take all home. I had not let my family know where I was going, nor for that matter that I had bid for five turkeys - and been successful!

My mother was first to greet me upon my arrival and after inspecting the livestock, I was pleasantly surprised to learn, that she thought it was a good bargain. I do not think she would have arrived at this conclusion if my boss had not been with me. I got the impression that she thought that he had bid on my behalf and I made no attempt to inform her otherwise.

To the rear of the house was an old tennis court made out of one inch pipe and quite substantial. It was in there my mother suggested the turkeys be put for the night. More definite housing could be provided the next day. The boss thought this was a good idea. He drove the utility to the gate of the tennis court and the birds were then released into the area where once a game of joy and happiness was played. No sooner had we released the birds than they took off and landed on top of the pipe at various intervals around this rectangle. All except one - the gobbler - he was too heavy to fly. He just ran into the wire netting at ground level. I thought he was going to break his neck. My boss thought it was hilarious that at one stage I was concerned that if he went any redder in the face, he might expire. He then bid me farewell still laughing his fat head off while I pondered the future of the four hens perched at the top of the tennis court and obviously as distressed as I was. My mother did not speak to me much that night and when I reflect back, perhaps it was just as well. My father was even less impressed with the "bargain". He looked at me quite vaguely and I tried to work out what must be going through his head. I knew what I was thinking about. Twelve quid sitting on top of the tennis court and tomorrow NIL!

This was 1953. I was getting £5.00 per week as a second year apprentice fitter and turner and I was paid fortnightly. After paying board of 10/- per week and borrowing £1.00 back from my mother, I was really in dire straights. Fortunately, I had a bit left over from the previous fortnight, but to see the unexpected happen so quickly was beyond me. What a fool I had been! I should have clipped the birds' wings before releasing them. Any sane person would have done that!

I retired early that night and began to reflect over the events of the day. My mind was constantly drawn back to the unforgettable sight of these large birds perching on the top rail of the tennis court. I had a restless night's sleep. When I got up at about 6:00am I hurried outside in the vain hope of seeing the turkeys alive. I was delighted to find them all not only alive, but in the tennis court. My joy was incredible. All was not lost. It was later explained to me that as the gobbler could not fly away, the others being in a strange environment, had joined him in his captive state inside the tennis court. This was as good a reason under the circumstances and I accepted it. There was grass growing a foot high in the tennis court at the time. Within a couple of weeks the five turkeys settled down in it. I had built a cover in one corner for them and to my astonishment, they used it. I had been in touch with the Department of Agriculture and had received literature from them on the keeping of turkeys.

A few months later I was able to feed the turkeys from my hand. I was of the opinion that if I was to open the gate during the day, let the birds browse about and put them away at night for their security, the feeding costs would be substantially reduced. I am not so sure about the costs being reduced but I am sure that the birds appreciated being set free. It was the gobbler that remained at close range to the house at all times. The hens, well that was a different story. They would wander up to three farms away during the day but would always return in the evening to be fed before being locked in their fourteen feet high enclosure. It occurred to me that with a few turkeys wandering about like this there was a future for making a profit from them. These hens weighed about ten pounds each and the gobbler was putting on weight daily. He must have been about 20 pounds. The highest he could get off the ground was two feet. Later on when he weighed 32 pounds he could not get off the ground at all and was quite content to lay on the ground under the cover with the hens on the roost above him.

One night, one of the hens failed to arrive home. I feared the worst. Some maniac with a rifle had shot her. This was not the case, for when I went to release the others the next morning, she was waiting on the outside of the fence. Seeing that she had missed out on her evening meal I produced some food for her. She consumed this ravenously. That evening she again failed to come home, yet in the morning there she was waiting for the expected handout. Being a suspicious person, I decided to follow her to see what she was up to. It didn't take long to discover the reason for her absences. No sooner had she eaten her breakfast and departed from the enclosure with the rest of the flock than she strayed from them and was hurrying in the direction of the pig sty. Now for obvious reasons, the pig sty was set at some distance from the house. A turkey is not the stupid bird I believed it to be. Far from heading directly to the pig sty, she went past it and then doubled back. As I watched from a distance of about 100 yards, to my surprise I saw her fly onto the roof of the sty and disappear. I waited about half an hour and then climbed onto the roof from the other side. Next to the sty was a loquat tree. This was used for shade over the corrugated iron roof. Over the years and due to the protected position of this tree, all its leaves would fall onto the roof and there was quite a large area covered with leaves at various stages of decomposition. There right in the middle of this pile of rotting leaves, with her head bent down and almost flattened, was the turkey hen looking at me. I climbed over to where she was. Up came her feathers and she adopted the stance of a broody hen ready to do battle with me as an intruder. She was quite tame with me and knew me well, I thought, so she would not object to me lifting her a little to have a quick peek underneath to see what she had. This was not the same tame hen I had followed. She was a regular Jeckyl and Hyde. She flew for me, with her wings and feet and really kicked up quite a commotion - enough to get the pigs to join in the chorus. I did not get a view of her nest, but I did get my arms bruised and her beak drew blood.

I hastily departed from her nest, but the next morning when she returned for her breakfast, I beat her back to the nest and counted 19 eggs. I did not know how long she had been sitting on the eggs, but I did know I had a problem when they hatched out. The roof of the pig sty was ten feet off the ground and the poults (chicks) would not be able to fly down after they hatched. That day I began to build a wall around the nest and had to knock off when she returned. This brick construction took me several days to complete as I only had short periods to work on it when she was not about. I did not want to tangle with her in the same frame of mind that she was in on our previous occasion.

In due time the chicks hatched. Yes! The whole nineteen of them!

It was the hen who tried to induce the birds to get over the brick wall I built around the nest but they could not manage the height. One by one I caught the chicks while the hen displayed her contempt for my efforts and flew at me while I was in a restricted area and not quite able to defend myself from her onslaughts. A frantic mother is an aggressive and dangerous opponent, particularly when you are on your side and precariously close to the edge of the roof of the pig sty.

As I placed her chicks in a box by my side, she must have been counting them with me, for after I had them all she left me alone as I descended from her lofty nest. Once I was on the ground, the situation changed. No sooner had she seen the chicks released than she flew off the roof and went for me once more.

I stood a distance away from the hen and her brood, as she settled down with them under her. As small as these chicks were, within two hours they had followed the hen back to near the house and the tennis court come turkey enclosure. No sooner had the gobbler seen the hen and her family than he immediately went over to them and to my surprise squatted beside her while the chicks found their way underneath him. It was one of the most inspiring and memorable events I have been fortunate to witness.

From this brood only one died.

Within two years the other hens had gone to nest and reared their poults several times each. The flock had now grown to 240 in two years. The gobbler had gained a weight of 40 pounds and was a very tame bird.

As the flock had increased so had the enclosures and the problems. I had gobblers in several pens and these insane creatures spent their entire day walking up and down the wire enclosure attempting to attack the gobblers in the adjoining enclosure. As they walked up and down their weight went only in one direction and that was down.

A turkey has a peculiar way of fighting. If two gobblers get together and show contempt for each other, which appears to be a common opinion, they will peck at each other's head trying to fasten onto the appendage on top of the beak. Not happy with being able to hold this particular part of the other bird's anatomy, they will proceed to twist themselves together and create a situation similar to a vine entwined around a vine. In this position it becomes very difficult for both birds to breathe and urgent action becomes necessary to untangle them.

A solution was found whereby I could release these gobblers and let them wander around the countryside. Certainly they would not put on as much weight as if they were contained in a smaller enclosure, but then again I was losing as much weight extricating them from their frolics.

I developed a scheme by bashing the bottom of a drum, the birds would return post haste for a meal. As the distance increased and the flock got further away, a larger drum was used. This method was very successful in getting the birds back, but boy oh boy did my ears suffer. My mother was a bit deaf, or so she pretended to be, but the neighbours were not, and they were not at all receptive to the melody being played - and told me so!

It was at this time that the price of turkey was [5/6](#) a pound for dead weight and [2/9](#) a pound for dressed weight. I had no trouble selling the birds and it appeared as though the effort was about to bear fruit.

Without warning, one morning I noticed a few of the flock were lethargic and were retaining fluid on either side of the head below the nostrils. I contacted a vet straight away. He informed me that it was [coccidiosis](#). Yes, a disease had hit them. But the disease was treatable. The vet was an elderly person and very understanding. He showed me how to express the fluid with a hypodermic syringe and to inject the treatment with another syringe. Within a month the disease was repressed and except for a few scars on the [wattle](#) of the gobblers, they were as good as previously.

At this early age, I was fortunate enough to have a vet as a friend and he became more of a friend than a vet over many years to come. He is still alive today and I visit him to recant old memories that we shared. Great advances have been made for the [the treatment of birds with the same disease today](#), and like all forms of medicine, both avian and human, tremendous strides forward are witnessed as a common event almost daily.

However, my leap into this larger form of aviculture was soon to come to an end. The American breeders had realised there was a potential in Australia for a market for turkeys and soon the price dropped and the feed became dearer. Not much dearer, but enough to tilt the balance from profit to loss. I was also assisted in my decision to abandon this sleepless and profitless hobby by a number of irate neighbours. You see, there were a number of nearby farmers engaged in the growing of table grapes. By near neighbours I mean within a mile of where I lived at Camden. I would hear a shot being fired in the distance and one of the number would be plucked from the flock. I was very sympathetic to the farmer and tried to appease him by telling him that turkeys wouldn't eat much. They readily retorted that I did not know what I was talking about and with them supplying the food by way of grapes, lucerne, oats, peas and bean, I should be making a very good profit. "They wouldn't eat much I said"! I was telling fibs, this flock was worse than a plague of locusts on a bowling green and they were making me about as popular as a crocodile in a backyard pool on a hot day. These creatures ate everything with the appetite of a hippo!

It was soon after this that foxes began to close in due to a drought in the area. I would see the half eaten remains of a hen and the chicks scattered. Here again I witnessed the old gobbler take 15 chicks and in concert with another hen and her brood of 20, raise the lot. It is truly remarkable to see how nature provides the answer each time a catastrophe occurs.

From this venture into turkeys, I went into smaller birds. I built up a collection of Firetail finches, Zebra finches, Gold Finches and parrots. I was very successful with them and when I left the country town to come to the city, I was not able to return to the hobby for several years due to the idiotic type of hours and idiotic mania to exist in the moronic world of suburbia.

I have once again picked up where I left off and will endeavour to supercede my wildest expectations as I follow the wonderful hobby of aviculture. I am sure I will never make any profit from birds (monetarily speaking), but I will get more enjoyment and endless hours of pleasure watching each newborn chick as it grows and fedges to become part of the reproductory system to which it belongs. I have been absent from breeding for some time, and that time has been irretrievably lost for me. Don't let it happen to you!

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