

Thrush waifs rescued and fostered

LAST NOVEMBER my sister Edna picked up two tiny birds, only partly feathered, from the footpath of Arney Road, Remuera. One bird was in the gutter. There had been heavy gales in the previous 2 or 3 days, and the remnants of a nest hung in tatters in a nearby tree. With so few feathers, it was hard to decide what the birds were. As the beaks were brownish, we thought that they were more likely to be thrushes than blackbirds.

We bedded them down in a makeshift nest of soft toilet tissue in a small plastic bowl with a cloth cover, and they showed no signs of distress.

We named them Andrew and Koo, Andy showing the more dominant personality and slightly larger size and Koo the characteristics of a gentle little hen.

First diet

Their first diet was canned dog food and water administered with an eye dropper. Edna had been advised to feed the dog food to the birds on a match-stick, but we learnt a real lesson from this. Little Koo not only sucked in the meat on the match-stick but the match-stick itself. Edna, of course, had removed the head from the match beforehand, but the little bird had sucked in the match like a vacuum cleaner.

Our first lesson was therefore: don't use a match-stick for feeding birds. We thought we had killed Koo, but, as luck would have it, there was the match-stick on the floor of their "nest" the next morning, having passed through the little bird's system. Thereafter, the birds were hand fed, the food being inserted into open beaks with fingertips.

By Thelma Clarke

In a short time Andy had acquired the knack of getting out of the bowl; so we transferred them to an empty parrot cage. Their bodies were now too big to squeeze between the bars of the cage, though the first night in the cage was traumatic for them (and for us) until they resigned themselves to confinement.

New diet

The birds soon tired of the dog food diet; they just refused to eat what they did not like, and a replacement of boiled egg yolk, mincemeat, and wholemeal breadcrumbs, mixed with a little water, was tried.

This new diet met with their entire approval. They allowed themselves to be hand fed to capacity; "stuffed" might be a more appropriate but indelicate word. One could really measure their daily growth visually and their intelligence emerging.

They both showed unusual exuberance when Edna approached the cage with the glass of water and the eye dropper in her hand. They jostled each other to be first at the door of the cage to get their tippie of plain water. We were warned that they must not be allowed to dehydrate. Two little beaks snapped shut when the food and water administered was deemed sufficient by them.

Edna varied the birds' diet with garden worms, which were hard to get at the time through lack of rain. As with the "egg nog", the small worms were hand fed into their open beaks.

The birds became bored with their confinement; so we gave them some "toys" to play with—small jam-jar lids, which they could grasp with their beaks and play shuffle-board around the floor of the cage, and a tethered bell, which they could grasp and ring vigorously. They played their own version of soccer with a plastic ping-pong ball in the bottom of the cage, and it was comical to see their surprise when the ball sometimes rolled between their long legs.

Darker colouring

As the down gave way to feathers and their breasts were splashed broadly with spots there was no question of their not being thrushes, though they were darker than the usual thrush. Perhaps the prolonged egg yolk diet was responsible for this.

We knew that the birds could not be released until their tails were fully grown and the birds themselves mature. We thought that Andy might have been ready for release before Koo, and both birds appeared to want to be hand fed indefinitely; so we decided to place the "egg nog" on the floor of the cage, and they, with some reluctance, learnt to peck the food.

For greens we tried a small piece of thistle in the cage, but the birds were terrified of it; so we removed it. However, they showed a real interest in pecking at the residue of earth from the thistle's roots.

It has been interesting to observe the daily development of these two "harum-scarums". At first they played baby games of gently pecking each other's toes, with a sly peck at the other bird's wing tip in passing. Then came fast cir-