

LIFESTYLE

He knows why the caged bird sings

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Just a two-minute walk from Denenchofu Station in Tokyo's Ota Ward, a narrow path from the street leads to a back lot and a small one-story house. *Kotori no byōin* written on a sign is the only indication of what lies behind the tree-shaded entrance — more than likely some 10 or 15 waiting people, each clutching a small cage.

This is the Bird Hospital, operated since 1962 by Dr. Tatsushiro Takahashi and his wife Chise. A pioneer of avian medicine and care in Japan, Takahashi is known throughout the country as *the* bird specialist.

On an average afternoon, 50 to 100 people, some coming from as far away as Kyushu and Aomori, will seek his expertise for a wide variety of birds ranging from the usual pet parakeets, canaries and finches to the more exotic falcons and flamingos as well as an assortment of orphaned and injured wild birds.

The Bird Hospital's consulting room is dominated by a huge wooden table, separating more waiting people from the doctor-wife team, surrounded by instruments and thousands of patient files.

Eventually Takahashi regained enough use of his legs to stand, but not walk. From 1952 he decided to raise birds, and, as birds weren't covered in the veterinary school curriculum of the time, used his own birds to observe and experiment with. Whenever a bird died he performed autopsies. Any books he could get his hands on from overseas he painstakingly translated, studied and compared with his own findings.

In the neighborhood his reputation grew as a bird healer, until in 1962 he decided to make it official and hung out his sign.

Fresh start

A novelty at the time, the bird specialist immediately attracted the attention of the media, and business steadily increased.

Even today, although avian medicine is finally being taught in school, bird specialists are extremely rare. "Financially, it's hard to survive only caring for birds," Takahashi points out.

Also, acquiring an ease with the delicate creatures is difficult. "Most vets," he says, "rarely get birds and when they do they're often afraid to touch them for fear

bird food, people people food," Takahashi urges.

Giving a bird warm-water baths is also a common mistake of well-intentioned owners. Warm water strips the feathers of oil, and the bird can no longer maintain its body heat.

Stress also takes its toll on birds, leading to skin diseases, feather loss and a number of other ailments. Stress for birds, as it does for humans, comes in various forms — getting a taste for certain foods that are later withheld and, similarly, not being let out of the cage as an adult after having enjoyed freedom as a baby.

Seeds with the hulls removed, though they make for cleaner apartments, are another source of stress for birds. "Hulled seeds were made only with people in mind," Takahashi points out. In addition to the lack of stimulus proffered by cracking seed, for which a bird's bill is designed, "The seeds dry out lose their flavor and birds don't want to eat them."

Always genuinely concerned for a bird's welfare both physical and mental, Takahashi has one other pet peeve — clipping wings. "To a bird, it's like cutting your

