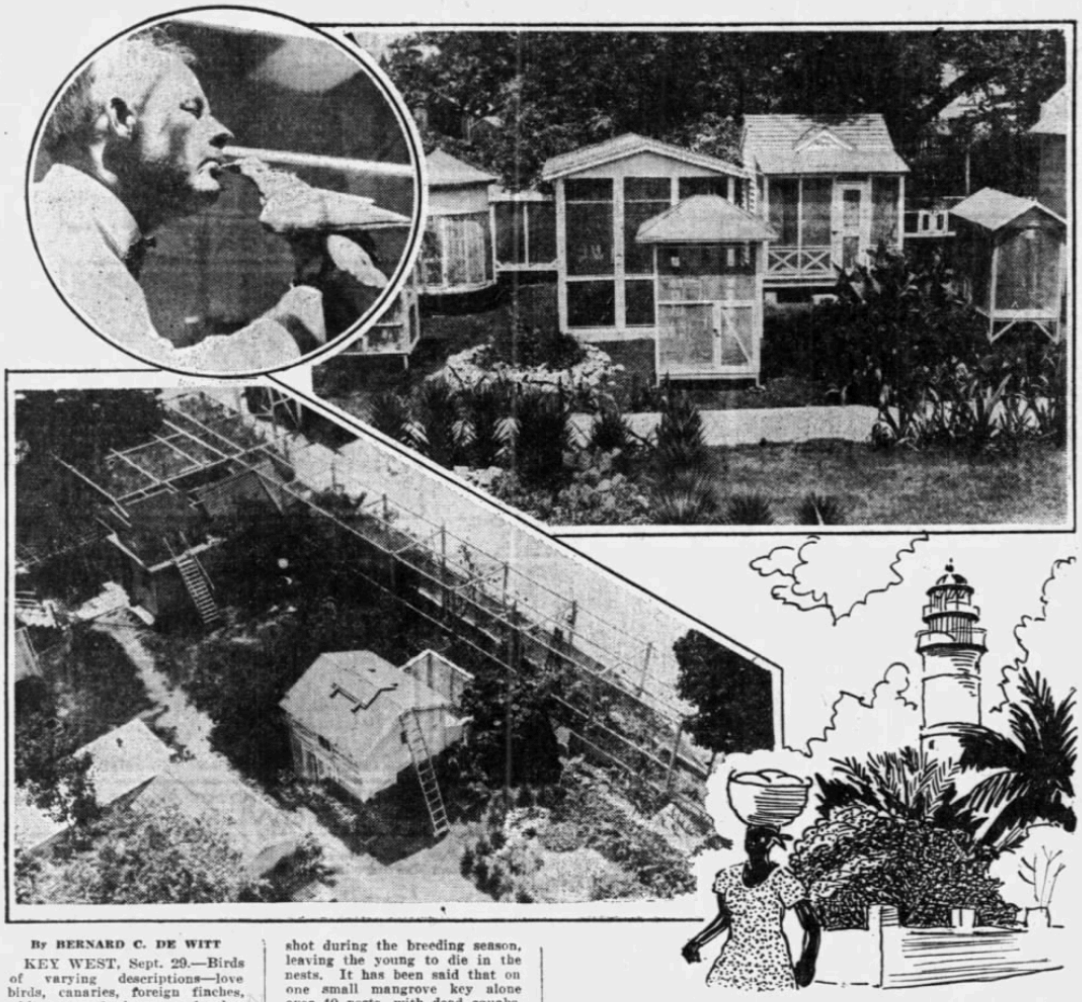
Lighthouse Official Has Large Private Aviary

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Demeritt, Superintendent of Seventh District, Collects Birds at Key West Home for Unusual Hobby



Collection of birds in his private aviary at his home beside the Key West lighthouse is the hobby of William W. Demeritt, superintendent of the seventh lighthouse district, who is shown in the upper left accepting a kiss from Pete-E, his favorite white crowned pigeon. Upper right are several of the smaller aviaries while below is a corner of the lighthouse reservation showing some of the aviaries.

By BERNARD C. DE WITT

KEY WEST, Sept. 29.—Birds of varying descriptions—love birds, canaries, foreign finches, white-crowned pigeons and other specimens rare on the Florida keys—can be found in one spot in Key West, where a small sanctuary and a number of aviaries have been constructed and are being maintained as one man's hobby.

William W. Demeritt, superintendent of the seventh lighthouse district here, a native of this city, since a young boy has been interested in the birds found in decreasing numbers on the keys. Some men have their golf, others tennis, some cards, some books, but the greatest delight of the lighthouse superintendent in his hours away from his office is obtained among the small and large birds that fill the grounds around his home and the Key West lighthouse.

"Bird cultivation gives me my nine holes of golf," the lighthouse superintendent says, if asked how he happens to be so interested in the many varieties which he has caught and cultivated.

He has taken numberless steps for their protection on the island and has aided them in finding sustenance. They, in turn, have found a friend and some come to him at his softest call.

One white-crowned pigeon, "Pete-E," hesitates not at all when his keeper calls, and before the frequent rendezvous is terminated Pete E is eating berries from the lips of Mr. Demeritt.

The superintendent lays claim to the largest colony of captivated white-crowned pigeons in the world, and perhaps his claim is well founded, for more than 100 can be found within the grounds of his home. They are slate colored, with white crowns circling their heads. A difference in shading makes easy the distinction between male and female.

The superintendent is particularly interested in the white-crowned pigeons. They arrive on the keys for breeding early in May and depart in October. From Matecumbe to Marquesas the pigeons breed in abundance. In captivity, however, their breeding period is extended to about nine months.

"Unprotected, hundreds are shot during the breeding season, leaving the young to die in the nests. It has been said that on one small mangrove key alone over 40 nests, with dead squabs, were observed. It is not unusual for hunters from Key West to go to Sugar Loaf key, about 20 miles from Key West, and there slaughter birds when obtaining food, or when in flight between their feeding and nesting grounds," Mr. Demeritt says.

In addition to several aviaries, the largest of which is over 100 feet long, 12 feet high, and varying from eight to 24 feet in width, on the well-kept grounds of the lighthouse are several bird baths.

The baths have been placed within the grounds just to create a haven for migratory birds, and hundreds of them stop there on their seasonal treks northward and southward. While the baths have been placed on the grounds in order that the beautiful fowls can indulge in their fresh-water baths, food also is scattered around the grounds—guinea corn for the hard-billed visitors and blackberries for soft-billed birds, while there are sufficient worms available for those visitors from the North and South who prefer insects in their diet.

Although there are few birds on the keys now, the superintendent believes the number could be increased easily if sustenance were made available. There is little fresh water on the Keys from here to the mainland, he points out, and neither is there a great deal of desirable food.

Just as he has seen increasingly large number of migratory birds stop at the lighthouse reservation, others on the keys could enjoy the visits of the birds, if a few baths and food were placed at the disposal of the migratory flocks, he says.

A marked antipathy for cats can be noticed, if one talks with the bird fancier. They, he believes, are the first cause for the diminishing number of tropical and Florida birds on the island here. The cat, he says, will destroy more birds than all the boys in town with their air rifles and slingshots.

The beauty of the tropical birds can hardly be described. They range in color from the bright hues to soft, subdued tints and shades—orange, blue, brilliant red, yellow, pure white, shades of gray, and others.

Their life, to the visitor, seems one of complete joy. Some sing, and others spend their days swinging back and forth on the trapeze-like furnishings within the aviaries. In the larger pens, many birds can be seen, and when they are stirred into action, their fluttering wings present a panorama of color.

The lighthouse reservation, in the heart of the city, is considered one of the outstanding points of interest on the island of Key West, because of the large number of birds, the lighthouse itself (which is in the back yard rather than on a water-beaten bit of rock in the sea) and the beauty of the spot, which is bedecked from corner to corner with myriad tropical plants, fruits and flowers.

The lighthouse is open to visitors each day from sunrise to sunset, and a courteous employe of the lighthouse service is there to greet visitors and take them into the lighthouse and around the grounds. Seats have been provided under shade trees, and it is not unusual to see out-of-town visitors enjoying their lunch under the larger, shade-giving trees on the reservation.

A "tropical garden" in the true sense is the expression used by many when they visit the reservation. Towering above the date, fig, banana, coconut, cocoplum, seagrape, sugar cane, rubber, royal poinciana and numbers of other tropical trees and plants, rises the lighthouse itself, from the summit of which perhaps the best view of the city can be obtained.

One can climb the 92 steps from the ground to the circular balcony around the tower and from a point 86 feet from the ground look in every direction—see the water that takes on so many different appearances in color around the city, the quaint houses that are located from one end of the island to the other, the tropical foliage of every kind, and, by looking directly down, get a bird's-eye view of the lighthouse reservation, with its fish ponds, bird baths, aviaries, birds and tropical plants and fruits.

While he is responsible for all the lights in this district, the superintendent of the seventh lighthouse district has found time to make a place of beauty of the reservation here. For 35 years he has been in the service of the lighthouse department, having served from Boston around the coast to the Rio Grande, but for the last 20 years he has been senior officer of the district, with headquarters in Key West.

Bird-banding has taken a considerable part of his free time in the last few years, as he was granted a banding permit in 1931 which has resulted in the "southernmost banding station" in the United States being located at Key West. He has given most of his time in that work to banding mourning doves, being especially interested in the haunts of these birds that fly over Key West in flocks ranging from 50 to several hundred.

By placing a small metal band with identification marks on the legs of the doves, they can be easily identified when found in other sections of the country and world. The identification marks are registered in Washington.

While there is a surprising absence of Florida and other tropical or sub-tropical birds on most of the keys, visitors have an opportunity to see many varieties here, because the lighthouse superintendent has the hobby he has.

The lighthouse reservation attracts numbers of visitors and there many have a chance to see concentrated tropical life of birds and flora, for the entire reservation is a place of unusual beauty.