"Everyone" complains about the judging. Okay, but judging is not easy at best and too often the judge is faced with the worst. Not the worst birds, but with good birds that are in poor condition, ill trained to the show cages, and often dirty. Almost every judge I know tries very hard to give every bird a decent break. They back away from nervous birds to give them a chance to settle. They coax shy birds, as best they can, to show themselves. Even so, the birds that are ready for the show stand a much better chance of winning. We judges are all human and very susceptible to the bird that presents itself boldly, whose plumage is unbroken and clean and lying close and silky, even when that bird isn’t quite what we are looking for.

One would think that the least amount of argument would exist among birds for which there are well defined standards. But here, controversy often reigns supreme. Even within a standard, there are styles and personal tastes. My personal preference is to stay within the standard and adhere to it regardless of current fashion. For example; were anyone brave enough to ask me to judge Norwich Canaries, I would be brave enough to disqualify almost every bird that came before me. For those who are interested, read the standard of the Norwich Plainhead Society, look at the officially recognized paintings of it by R.A. Vowles, then look at the birds that are currently being shown — and winning!

Standards don’t make the job of judging any easier. A bird may have every feature that the standard calls for, yet not have presence, balance, or whatever you want to call it. A certain amount of “feel” is necessary for a judge to be good. Feel may be acquired by long association with a given type of animal, but those who are best at it have it on an intuitive level that allows them to see quality in any animal, horse, dog, bird or whatever.

So much for birds for which there are standards, but what about those without a standard? There are about 8,650 species of birds in the world. Of these, we can dismiss about a third (Herons, Grebes, Bustards, Penguins, etc.) because they are not frequently kept and not at all shown. What it comes down to in North America are Parrots and Finches with a softbill here and there. Somewhat less than 1,000 species are likely to be shown or are available for shows.

The story doesn’t end there because the judge is also required to know hybrids and mutations. Fortunately, the judge can apply some of the same criteria to mutations as to the wild type while taking into account the lack of size and substance most often associated with new mutations.

Foreign birds and foreign birds judges frequently get short shrift in this country (DIVISION XYZ, Classes as needed), yet a good judge must have an intimate knowledge of a very large number of birds. So how does a judge go about it? How does he (she) determine that a Plumhead is better than a Scarlet-chest or a Bullfinch better than a Cordon Blue? What follows is my method and will differ somewhat from others. Too often I have heard, “Well, I didn’t show anything because I didn’t know what they were looking for.” Very well, here is something to look for.

**Condition** The first thing that strikes my eye is the condition of the bird. Given the limits of the show cage, are all of the feathers smooth and in place? Are wing and tail feathers frayed from the bird beating about? Does the plumage lie close and smooth or does it look dry and rough? Is the beak overgrown? Are the nails too long? Are feet and legs reasonably smooth and clean? A missing or crooked toe isn’t too important unless the competition is keen.

Get the bird used to the cage, spray daily with cold water, trim overgrown beaks and cut the nails.

**Con-form-ation** Not the best term, but it will have to serve. Does the bird fit itself? A Cordon Bleu with a big fat breast will look too heavy. A Plumhead with either an outsized head or a small, pinned one will lose its grace. A Goldfinch with a long tail will look misshapen. The whole bird should be “of a piece” and appear well balanced within the realm of its kind.

**Line** Assuming that we’ve come this far and taking into account that some Parrots in particular are naturally cross-winged, especially when nervous, the next step is relatively easy. Starting at the top of the beak and running to the end of the tail, is there a continuous, unbroken flow of line? The head should not flatten suddenly, but should gently curve to the rear. Where the neck is prominent, the line should flow to the top of the back without abrupt changes. Example; Thrushes, Starlings, Cardinals, Grey and Amazon Parrots. In the opposite case, the line should continue from the head to the upper back without a distinct nape. Example; Ringnecks, Gouldians, Bullfinches, Chlorophonias. The back should be either straight to the base of the tail or slightly convex. No hollows should appear, especially between the shoulders. In almost every case, the set of the tail should be a direct continuation of the body line.

Now start at the chin and look for smooth lines right to the undertail coverts. Most common faults are bulging breast and pinched weak belly, usually near the thighs. In some birds, thighs are prominent, in others, not. The judges knowledge of the species plays an important part here.

When it is possible to view the bird from front and rear, look at the lines of the side of the head to the neck and shoulders. Commonly this line is broken by jutting wing-butt's; most often when the bird is tense.

All of this depends on the bird sitting solidly on the perch or moving about the cage confidently. Give it its due chance and prepare it well in advance of the shows.

**Color and Pattern** Abrupt changes of color tend to fool the eye and unless the lines of a bird are carefully observed a fault may appear that isn’t really there.

All birds have color of some sort and likewise they have pattern. Colors should be clear and as rich as possible. Exclusive of pieds, no odd colors or shadings should occur in areas that ought to be pure.

Pattern should be as definite as possible. Even streaky birds in top shape show clearly defined patterns. Much of this falls back on condition.

**Rarity and Difficulty** Rarity counts for nothing with me if the bird is in bad shape. On occasion this has been a source of some temper on the part of the exhibitor. Fortunately, once over their initial mad, most have taken it in good stead and I have had the pleasure of seeing their birds back on the show bench the following year properly prepared.

Difficulty of maintenance should be taken into account. Difficulty in steadying certain birds is more important. Some birds always seem to be ready for the Countess’s soiree. Plumheads, Gouldians, Java Sparrows, Bullfinches, Cockatoos and others just seem to come that way. It’s easier to have a good looking Plumhead than a good looking Painted Conure. The final count sometimes falls here and all other things being equal, I think it justified.

As a Foreign Bird judge, I am required to make a decision about which is the better of widely divergent birds. All of the following is intended to help me decide if
this is a better example of a Paradise Why­
dah than that is of a Chaffinch.

Hybrids Here’s where the fun (or work) begins. All of the above apply. In addi­
tion, there is one criterion by which all
hybrids are judged. To wit: How clearly
does it show a 50% blending of BOTH
parents? Since hybridizing is my game, I
can recognize a fair number of them on
sight, but even when this is not the case, I
must be able to call to mind a clear and
concise image of each kind of parent in
order to judge the merits of the hybrid. Can
I tell the difference between a Slaty-head
× Ringneck and a Mustache × Ringneck?
Do I know a Song Thrush, Coal Tit, Red­
poll well enough to determine if it is the
most probable parent of a given hybrid?
Great fun for me!

Cocks and Hen Classes versus Single
and Pair Classes I have long been in vol­
uble favor of cock and hen classes and
opposed to single and pair classes. It is
very difficult to get a pair of birds into
identical condition and keep them that way
throughout the show season. Assuming,
of course that they are of equal quality to
start with. I was very disappointed at one
show to have two pairs of Gouldians come
before me. The red-head cock was out­
standing but the hen was decidedly poor by
comparison. The black-head pair were
good solid birds, evenly matched but not
outstanding. Because they were shown as
pairs, I had to give the class to black-heads
on the strength of their uniformity. Later,
when the section was being judged, a very
beautiful pair of Cutthroats came up and
they naturally beat the Gouldians. The
Cutthroats went no further. The shame of
it is that had the red-head cock been shown
alone, he would have placed very high in
the Foreign Bird divisions. Recently, I
saw two Goldfinch cocks shown as a pair.
Had I been the judge, I would have had to
disqualify them on the spot. They are not
easy birds to sex, but I have worked with
them a great deal and usually spot them.
On the other hand there is no way that I
could assure that two Nuns, Silverbills,
Spice Finches and the like are a pair. No
way, that is, short of laporotomy which is
strictly forbidden.

Anyway, there it is. Much of the fore­
going applies to Canaries, Budgies, Zebra
Finches and Cockatiels for which there are
existing standards. Look your birds over.
If you find some that meet the above, you
will know that you have birds of show
quality and they may have the stuff of
winners.

Footnote I have to agree with Janice
Pritchard and deplore the current craze for
SIZE. Don’t be fooled. A big bird is not
necessarily a good one.