



# Three Faces Most Familiar

by Sheldon Dingle, Alhambra, California

American aviculture is dominated by three very familiar faces – not of people, but of birds – Budgies, Zebra Finches, and Cockatiels.

These three species may well be the very backbone of American aviculture. I suspect that one or more of these species can be found in a huge percentage of American homes – including yours. I include here a few things that occur to me whenever I reflect upon these little avicultural stalwarts.



Photo by Emil Kahler, III

A normal green Budgie as seen in the wild.

## Budgies

No doubt that the most common and widely beloved parrot in captivity is the delightful little Budgerigar *Melopsittacus undulatus*. The Budgie is native to Australia (our zoogeographical region this issue) where during ideal conditions it congregates in legendary flocks that darken the sky. All of these native wild Budgerigars, believe it or not, are green. OK, once in a great while a yellow or a blue bird may be spotted in a wild flock, but the myriad colors seen in captivity are unheard of in nature.

The first living Budgerigar to reach Europe arrived in England in 1840 with the naturalist John Gould. The Budgie's natural charm delighted the English people and the little bird became an instantaneous success. There was a great demand for Budgies and high prices were paid to import them from Australia. Of course, then, just as today, a few aviculturists began breeding Budgerigars for the profit of



Photo by G. Oppenbom

A Black-breasted mutation of the popular Australian Zebra Finch.

Photo courtesy of the San Diego Zoo



This is a normal colored male Cockatiel, a bird sometimes hard to find in this age of mutations.

it and soon the prolific little birds were domesticated. Later my grandfather raised thousands of them and I eventually followed in his footsteps also raising thousands. And, in addition, I had a personal pet Budgie who went many places with me, took his nap when I took mine, and whose English was better than mine, albeit spoken in a softer voice.

## Zebra Finches

I can never hear the term "Zebra Finch" without thinking "African Grey." What, you say, could possibly be the connection? Well, one day I put an

African Grey Parrot into a warm room in the house to watch it more carefully. In the room was an ornamental cage of Zebra Finches. After a few days, as I was about to take the Grey back outside, I heard a monstrous "BEEP, BEEP" from the room. With hair on end, I envisioned a massive 50 pound Zebra Finch ripping out the wires of his cage. The damn Grey had developed a masterful mimic of the finch – but magnified magnificently.

During the next few years, I saw more than one passing driver look around to find the Volkswagen that he heard beeping at him. The Grey "Zebra" was really *loud*.

### Cockatiels

I forget the year but probably in the late 1960s or early '70s, I had a flight of Cockatiels next to a flight of Zebra Finches at the entrance to my aviary complex. The rare and expensive birds were deeper in the complex for security reasons.

The great aviculturist and ornithologist, Dr. Jean Delacour visited and of course wanted to see the birds. As I lead him through the aviaries I became rather frustrated at the amount of time he spent right at the door looking at the Zebras and the Cockatiels. In the back were the Leadbeater's Cockatoos, rare rosellas, and a lot of very expensive species. I wanted him to see the *expensive* birds. I finally lost patience and almost tugged Delacour's sleeve to get on with the tour when I heard him mutter very softly to himself, "They are so beautiful" as he gazed at the Cockatiels. I was mortified and chastised to think I had been evaluating birds by the price tags. Delacour saw the *birds*.

I never see a Cockatiel but I think of that grand old man and the lesson he taught me.

### Gifts From Australia

The three above species are now domesticated and perhaps a bit different from their wild relatives. But from my viewpoint, these species represent about the finest gifts we could ever have gotten from the land down under. Never lose your appreciation for the Australian Budgie, Zebra Finch, and Cockatiel. 