



# the Quaker Parakeet and Its Mutations

Exciting Prospects For Future Aviculturists

by Bob Nelson, Coquille, Oregon

**Introduction**

**S**ince their first documented breeding in captivity, in a Vienna garden in 1867, the popularity of the charming Quaker Parakeet, *Myiopsitta monachus*, has grown with aviculturists and pet owners alike throughout the world. Although usually referred to as the Monk Parakeet in European aviculture, most enthusiasts in the U. S. simply refer to it as the Quaker.

The first blue mutation apparently appeared in Belgium in the 1940s. Currently, new colors are starting to appear on a fairly regular basis and the Quaker, as a species, has enjoyed an acceleration in popularity in the last decade.

My first personal experiences with the species began in 1971. I was offered a pair of birds that had "paired off" in a cage containing a number of imported birds. Of course, at that time, surgical and DNA sexing procedures were not yet available so we were compelled to do a lot of guessing when attempting to choose breeding pairs. We used to laugh and say that if a pair produced eggs you were certain one bird was a hen, and if the eggs were fertile it was a true pair! Needless to say, I was very pleased to be offered a pair of birds that had been allowed to pair by natural selection, thereby assuring, hopefully, a breeding pair.

They were, indeed, a well-matched pair, and lost no time in producing offspring. We were immediately enchanted with their cute little fat cheeks, and amusing gyrations while being handled. They were obviously extremely intelligent, and each had a distinct personality of its own. Their individual idiosyncrasies became apparent at very early ages, and some were mimicking

sounds around them and attempting to talk well in advance of being weaned. Since the babies were offered as pets, we soon heard lengthy tales of their delightful antics from their new owners. We soon became "hooked" on Quakers, and their potential as pets.

## Mutations

In 1989 we were able to acquire some blue Quakers from the late Tom Ireland of Florida. These birds were rather small, and he informed us that they had not been particularly good breeders. We decided to split them up and out-cross to wild-caught green birds. The results were dramatic, and when splits from the different pairings were mated, the first blue offspring produced were appreciably larger. We therefore felt we were headed in the right direction with our breeding program. Then in 1993, we were able to acquire several unrelated bloodlines of the blue mutation from Europe, along with the first red-eyed cinnamons to be imported into the U.S.

Since that time, we have seen several new mutations emerge. The blue mutation is simple recessive. The European cinnamon is sex-linked. This makes the inheritance pattern of the cinnamon blue combination both sex-linked and recessive.

A red-eyed cinnamon mutation that is recessive appeared in Texas in 1996. There is a similarly colored mutation that originated in Florida that is sex-linked, and has dark eyes instead of red. It seems there is a bit of variability in the depth of color in the dark-eyed birds from Florida. A bird in my possession, for a brief period of time, could be described as a lovely lime green. While others that I have seen pictures of are much lighter in color. A

yellow bird, also with dark eyes, has subsequently been produced from the stock in Florida. This almost extreme variability is relatively common in other mutations. Most recently, I have observed wide variations in the color and density of the yellow-suffused or spangle Cockatiel.

In 1996 we were able to purchase a single lutino Quaker and the green birds that produced it. That first "lutino" proved to be a male, and we have since raised several more offspring of both sexes from the parents. With lutino offspring of both sexes being produced by normal appearing green birds, this lutino-appearing mutation is obviously recessive.

There are green birds with yellow feathers showing up on a regular basis, so legitimate peds should be established in the near future. I use the term legitimate regarding the peds because pied-appearing characteristics, in any species, are not always a true mutation. Many times they are related to age, diet, or even a metabolic imbalance.

There are also green birds with blue-tinged feathers throughout the body. These variations, as with the pied, are not always a true mutation either. My fertile imagination has hypothesized that if a true mutation with these characteristics were to become established, it would probably lead to the production of a creamino Quaker similar to the Indian Ringneck mutation. For a new color or variation to be considered a viable genetic mutation, it must be reproducible. So far, to my knowledge, neither the peds in the U.S., or the blue-green birds have proven themselves repro-



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ducible in a predictable manner.

It seems obvious that there are many new stars on the Quaker horizon in the form of new color mutations. And, of course, many combinations of the colors we already have to work with. I believe it all adds up to new challenges and lots of excitement for years to come. For example, we already have young lutino and blue birds paired to produce double-splits. These birds will, in turn, be capable of producing a white.

### Breeding and General Management

I believe that in all species, we would see greatly increased breeding results, if we were able to allow our birds to pair by natural selection. Unfortunately most breeders are rarely able to do this, and the end result is that many pairs are slow to bond, settle down, and produce young.

Some pairs choose never to multiply for the reason, I believe, that they are simply not compatible. This is true for all species, not just Quakers. I've even had pairs of Budgerigars that were unproductive, and when they were given different mates, became quite prolific.

Although a large percentage of young Quakers, approximately 75%, are ready to reproduce at one year of age or earlier, some make no attempt until their second year. I personally feel that if young birds are given good flight and exercise space while maturing, they will become more successful breeders at an earlier age. Good exercise promotes overall better health, which translates into better breeding results.

If only a few birds are available to work with, they should be paired as young as possible, and allowed to mature together. I truly believe that birds handled in this manner are more apt to evolve as well bonded, producing pairs. If you are able to work with larger numbers of birds, better results will be attained if the natural selection process is implemented. Then, after the pairings become obvious, the individual pairs can be removed to separate pens to breed.

If your situation is such that you choose to breed in individual cages, it



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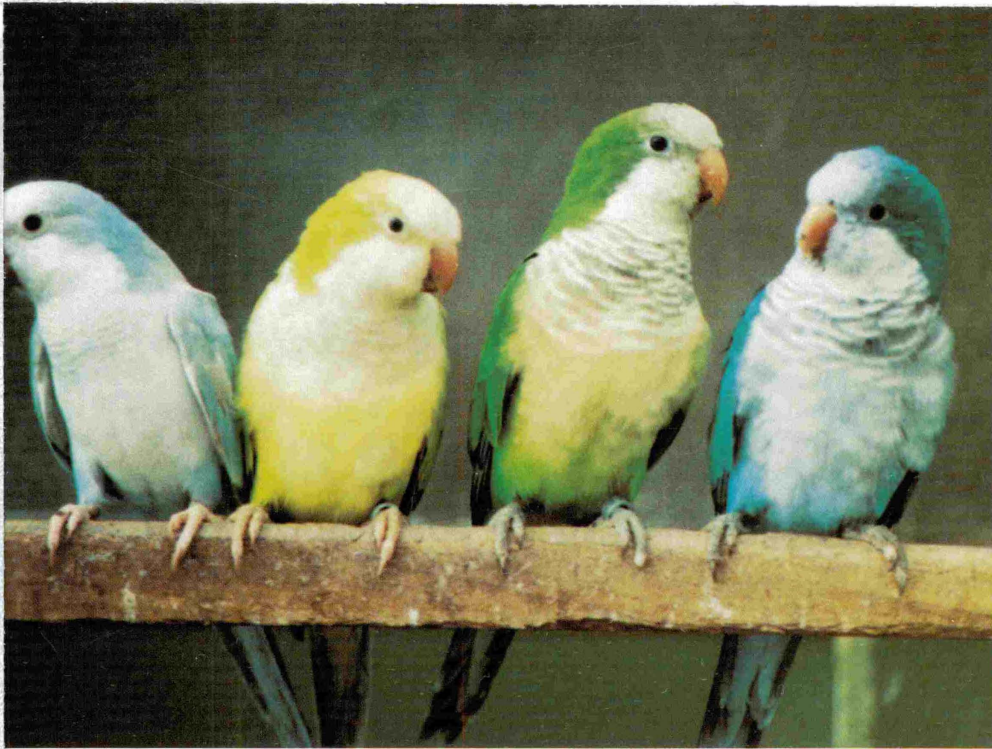


Photo by Bob Nelson

Left to right: Cinnamon Blue, Cinnamon Green, Normal Green, Blue.

is a good idea, if at all possible, to allow your birds exercise in larger pens or flights during the off season. Since Quakers are normally a flocking species, they can easily be flighted in groups. If they are banded, and they should be for the sake of record keeping, keeping accurate records will insure proper pairings for the next season. This will allow proven, productive pairs to be re-mated the following season. Pairs that were not so successful can be tried with other mates.

To prevent bonding of undesirable combinations, we find it is prudent to flight the sexes in separate quarters. Bonded pairs seem immediately happy to be back together the next season. On the other hand, the separation of sexes for a time seems to make it easier to switch mates, if desired.

Over the years, we have experimented with several colony arrangements with both normal green and with blue mutation birds. If nest boxes are given, some pairs, even wild-caught birds, will utilize them instead of attempting to build "from scratch." Other pairs will focus on weaving twigs into the wire, in an attempt to start a stick nest. If a shelf is placed at a high point in the aviary, it is quickly chosen as a construction site.

If the colony system is chosen, it is

imperative that a constant supply of fresh building materials is provided. Otherwise some birds will steal sticks from their neighbors' apartments to enhance their own. In our experiences, there were never any signs of actual physical violence among the adult birds in the form of obvious injuries.

One acquaintance of ours tried the colony system with 20 birds of unknown sex in a 10 X 15 foot aviary. In my opinion, the size was a bit small to begin with. His experiences, since he did not attempt to "harvest" the young for hand-feeding prior to fledging, were much less than desirable. He had numerous, almost routine, instances of youngsters being attacked by other birds in the colony, as soon as they left the nest. It seems to me that this could, in part, have been due to a gender imbalance within the flock. Since the sexes of the original 20 birds were never determined, there is no way to prove my theory.

Still another friend, one who intended to remove young in his colony for hand-rearing, had a very unpleasant experience of another kind. He made the mistake of providing pyracantha branches, complete with rather wicked thorns, for his flock to utilize in their nest construction. He found that when he attempted to remove the young-

sters from the nest chambers, he had scratches from said thorns, from wrist to shoulder! The adult birds, however, popped in and out of the nests with no problems.

Combined experiences of colony breeding attempts seem to add up to the fact that while they are incredibly fascinating to observe in their various activities, it is actually counterproductive to attempt colony breeding under average aviary conditions. On the other hand, an over-sized aviary in an institutional setting, containing a colony of Quakers, would undoubtedly be of great interest to many observers. They are indeed very clever and creative in their construction design and execution. Their diligence and determination during the construction process is captivating and inspiring, to say the very least.

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Most of our individual breeding pens are 18 inches wide X 24 inches high X 48 inches long. The nest box, a standard 10 X 10 X 12 inch Cockatiel type, is attached to the outside. These pens are hung on the wall with about four inches spacing between them. We do not use visual barriers between the cages as we do with other species. The nests are actually hung on the other side of the wall, so inspecting a nest does not disturb other pairs. About a four inch layer of pine or fir chips is placed in the bottom of the box. Fresh supple twigs of willow, honeysuckle vine, and small branches from Japanese arrow bamboo, *Pseudosasa japonica*, are favorite building materials.

While Quakers will nest in a box with only chips or shavings, I believe they do better when supplied with building materials to cater to their natural instincts, and to actually allow them the activity of at least partially constructing their own nest. The building materials are, I feel, of important psychological significance. While some birds take almost nothing into the box, others create an elaborate basket-like lining. Still others will design intricate porches or awnings at the entrance. In all cases, it gives the male some physical activity outlet while the hen is incubating. This keeps him from interfering with her and possibly breaking eggs. We must keep in mind that the Quaker is naturally a very active bird and they can easily become bored. Bored Quakers are very much like bored children – and undesirable results often occur.

It has been my experience, that Quakers in general, resent having their nests tampered with much more than most other species. While it is true that we have pairs that will tolerate almost anything, most pairs simply want to be left alone to carry on their nesting activities. I hear stories on a regular basis about egg-breaking, burying, etc. When I ask questions about conditions, I usually learn that the nests are tampered with all too frequently. Some birds simply will not tolerate interference of any kind. Of course, this is actually true of all species. On the other hand, some pairs are so anxious to raise a family, they would probably reproduce on a



Photos by Cyril Laubscher

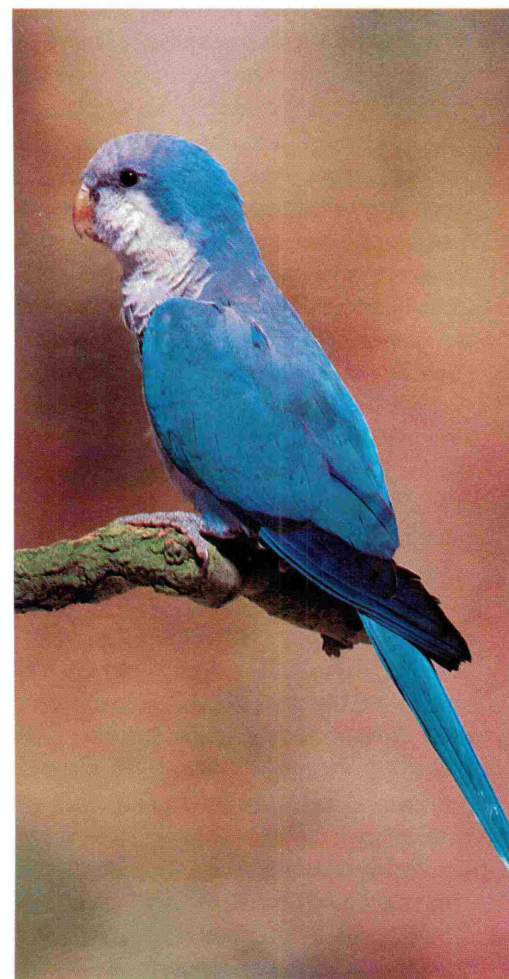
*The lutino Quaker mutation is particularly rich in its coloration. This being due, of course, to the depth of color in the normal green birds.*

freeway median if supplied with a nest.

A few years ago, we had a Quaker hen raise three babies in a feed dish because there was no nest available. This was accomplished with several other birds in the same cage. And it was in the "off" season with a very short photo period.

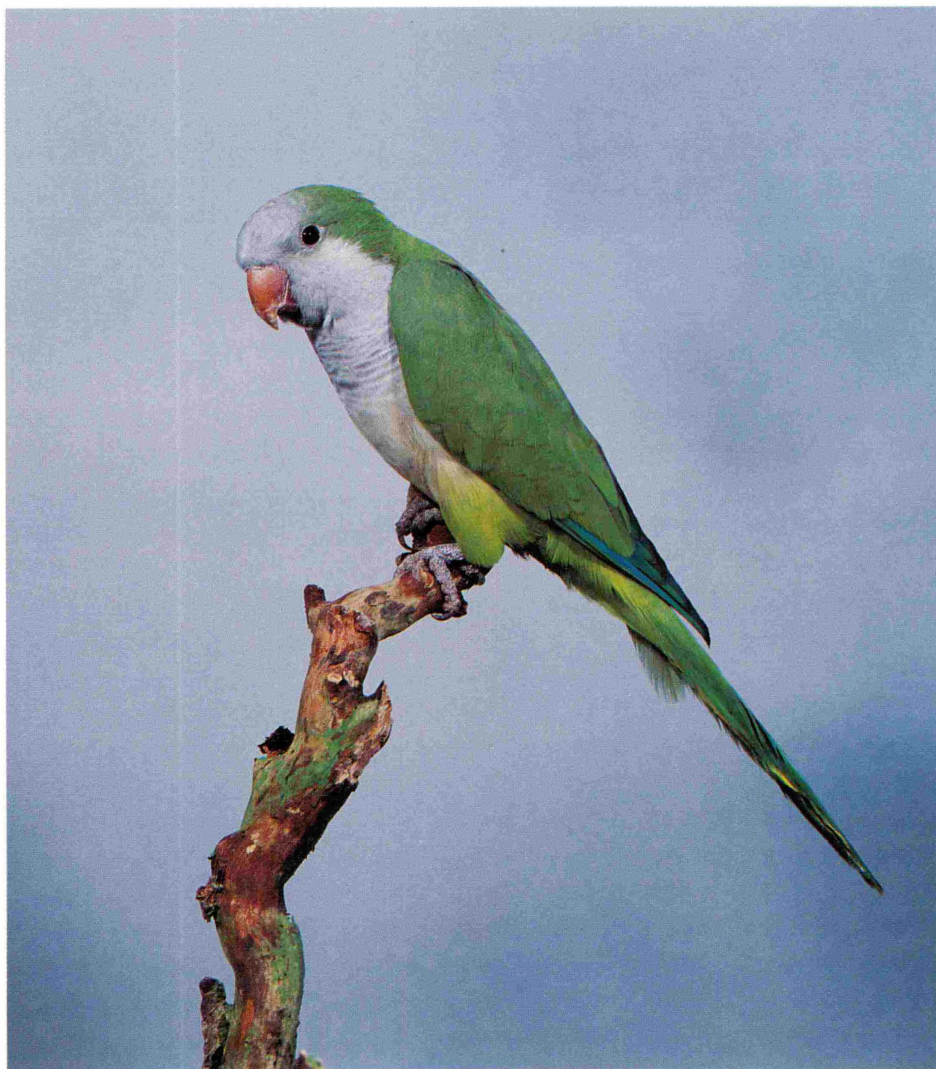
Regarding nest inspection, the basic protocol we observe for all species, not just Quakers, is as follows: During the breeding season, the nests are inspected regularly on a weekly basis. When the first egg or eggs is/are observed in a given nest, the nest card is marked. No further inspections are initiated for that nest until a few days after the eggs are calculated to hatch, at about 26 days. Some hens seem to start incubation as soon as the first egg is produced. Others seem to wait until two or three eggs are in the nest before getting serious.

Babies are removed for hand-feeding at approximately two weeks of age. The only exception to this routine, is if there are some obvious signs that all is not well. Examples include



*Quaker Parakeet, Blue mutation.*





*Normal Quaker Parakeet.*

both birds being off the nest for prolonged periods of time or a dramatic reduction in food consumption. With this regimen adhered to, we have minimal problems with nesting birds.

I must confess that I become very concerned when I hear of people being told that Quakers are such terrible breeders and poor parents that the eggs need to be artificially incubated. This is simply not true. Furthermore, if such practices are implemented and perpetuated, it will have a very negative effect on the species. Babies that are deprived of being cared for by the parent birds for at least a few days, are deprived of the advantages of the natural flora from the parents' crops. This ultimately results in a compromised immune system from the very beginning. Also, it is reasonable to assume that they are also deprived of the natural imprinting process, and this is

likely to have a negative effect on their breeding behavior as adults. I firmly believe that 90% of the time, poor breeding results are a product of improper husbandry. Again, this is true for all species, not just Quakers.


Another important thing to consider, is to give the birds an overall sense of well-being in a secure environment. This means that strangers should be kept away from all breeding areas. If you like the ego trip of playing "show and tell" with your breeder birds, you may well be depriving yourself of what I consider a much more gratifying ego trip – that of playing "show and tell" with beautiful babies.

### Diet

With regards to diet, I feel that all birds in captivity should have the most varied diet possible. It is my belief that this practice provides psychological, as

well as nutritional benefits. In their natural habitat, the diet varies on a daily basis, as well as with the seasons. It seems to me common sense that these variables have a stimulating effect on their breeding behaviors.

Our birds are provided with a varied mix of seeds and pelleted food, with quantities rationed. The rationing forces them to consume a varied diet. Not unlike children, they will consume their favorites first, and eat the rest when they get hungry. They are also provided with chopped fruits and vegetables, and a variety of germinated seeds.

Quantities of these foods are increased during the breeding season, with less "dry" food being offered during this time. For the sake of convenience, frozen peas and carrots are an excellent choice. If they are put to thaw in their packages at bedtime, they will be thawed and feeding temperature by morning feeding time. Or, if you prefer, they can always be quick thawed in the microwave. Sweet corn on the cob is always a favorite. We cut them into 1 to 2 inch sections to make them easier for the birds to manage. This is also excellent for weaning babies. We find that the babies consume the corn, and then treat the remaining cob like a toy. Cuttlebone and calcium blocks are always provided, and we note that the cuttlebone is consumed in noticeable quantities just prior to egg laying. 

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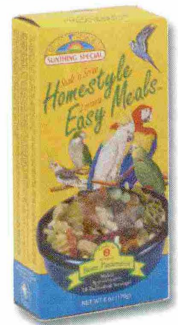
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Avicultural Society of America .....	7
Cuttlebone Plus .....	43
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Humidaire Incubator Company .....	39
InkaNatura Travel .....	53
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