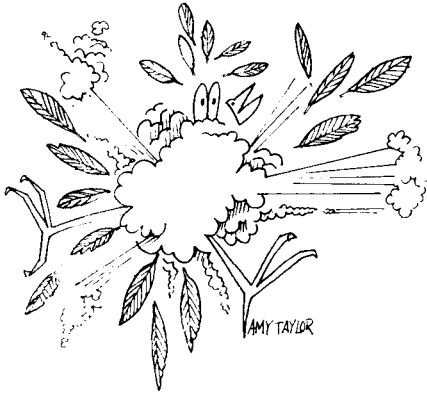


# Bird Myths Exploded

CHARMING, BUT USELESS,  
NONSENSE

by Arthur Douglas



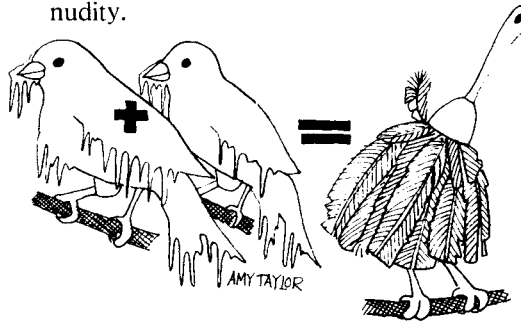
From the time I was a small boy to the present, I have greatly enjoyed the company of canary-breeders of the old school — fellows with little formal training, but heirs to an inexhaustible fund of bird-lore. I imagine that some of these old-timers have been as aware as I was that their canary-lore owed far more to speculative imagination than to objective reality, and that it should be enjoyed for its own sake rather than be used as a basis for practice.

We live in an age of scientific enlightenment. Some people think that is great; others find it unattractive. Like almost everything else, the canary has been the object of scientific scrutiny, and a good deal of valuable factual material has become available in recent years. It has not had much influence on the folklore. Canary-lore is here to stay. Not only that, the proportion of fanciers who mistake the lore for proven fact seems to be pretty permanent also. I would assume that my present reader is not among them.

Just for idle amusement, let us glance at a few old chestnuts that still pass as gems of insight and wisdom.

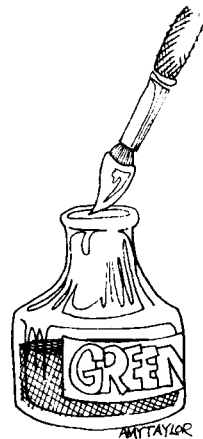
A surprising number of canary-breeders still seem to imagine that, simply by selective breeding, a stock of birds can be modified forever in any desired direction. For example, simply by pairing the biggest male canary to the biggest hen for a number of generations you are bound, so they believe, to get bigger and bigger offspring, no matter how slow the process may be. Or, by the opposite selection you must get even small offspring. Continuous

frost to frost for many generations will produce feather-dusters; hard-feather to hard-feather will lead to near if not total nudity.



Fanciers may assume that a bird that is on the small side because it has been poorly fed as a nestling is bound to throw undersized offspring. It stands to common sense, they say, that a well-nourished parent will throw good, big offspring. Shades of Lamarck!

All canary fanciers have heard, and apparently most believe, that repeated clear to clear pairing will bleach away the red or yellow ground color, especially so if the birds are "sib-bred", that is, bred brother to sister. They also are inclined to accept without serious question the myth that outcrossing with a variegated bird will restore the failing ground color. The process is known to all as "dipping into the green."



Cinnamon canaries give the impression of having softer and smoother feather-texture than green-marked canaries. The better feather-quality is an optical illusion, as any careful observer can verify for himself. Not only is it difficult to persuade an orthodox fancier that this is so, it is even harder to persuade him that an occasional introduction of cinnamon blood will not improve the feather-quality of all his non-cinnamon birds. He has heard it from the experts so many times over the years that it must be true. He has been cautioned that the cinnamon blood must always be introduced by a hen. Cinnamon blood in male birds is too strong, and may take over, so that after a few generations his stock may be flooded out with cinnamons.

Nearly all fanciers believe that inbreeding automatically causes the vitality of a stock to run down, and that outcrossing or "blood refreshment" winds it up again. This is not the same as saying that inbreeding will bring to the surface all recessive characteristics, good, bad and indifferent, and that outcrossing will keep them submerged.

Experts on crested breeds rightly warn of the dangers of crest to crest pairings. However, they also frequently advocate an occasional crest to crest "by fanciers who know the pedigree of their stock" in order to get bigger and rounder crests. It is futile advice.

Most breeders of crested canaries believe that the browiness of their crestbreds and consorts is due to crested ancestors which have left a trace of their crests to their non-crested descendants. They are wrong; but I would not try to persuade them that they are.

Not infrequently, the lore goes contrary to common experience. For example, it is quite usual to find a local fancier or two who never soak seed. They are known to be about as successful as anybody else. Nevertheless, close friends and neighbors who do soak seed will assure you in all sincerity that young canaries cannot digest dry seed and should have soaked seed only until they are at least through the molt.

Similarly, the folklore often goes against what would seem to be common sense. Everybody knows that wild canaries on the seaward Canary Islands and Madeira raise large and healthy broods in a region abounding in greenfood but utterly devoid of eggfood. Yet we have heard a thousand times, and shall continue to hear, that a generous allowance of greenfood is dangerous, if not deadly, and that egg-food is to canaries what hay is to horses.

It would be tedious, but very easy, to add many further examples of the rubbish that is handed out to canary-fanciers as choice insight and expertise.

Whenever you hear or read about prepotence; cinnamon blood, green blood, or any other color of blood than red blood; blood-refreshment every so many generations; results requiring four or five generations; the Island of Elba; cinnamon for feather-quality; linseed for gloss; niger seed for eggbinding; nourishing suppers that are easy on the crop; the need for tonics, conditioners, stimulants, aperients, astringents, or mordants to fix the color; then you can be pretty sure you are being treated to a juicy slice of the canary-lore. You should relax and enjoy it for what it is — a lot of charming but useless nonsense. •