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Mother Nature's Conditioning Food

by
James D. Ford
Salt Lake City, Utah

Just a word first off on our experience with raising canaries. My wife and I are relatively new comers to the art of raising canaries and have enjoyed their beautiful song for only 7 years. We've learned a lot from both experience and listening to some of the real pros that have kept birds for many years. This article is in response to one of these fine canary breeders.

My background has been a lifetime of intense interest and schooling in the biological sciences and especially in the invertebrates. I've been especially interested in animal behavior since my graduate work in bee behavior. Currently, I'm a professional beekeeper and international consultant on beekeeping. The mention of my broad interest in biology and specialty in bees pertains because the following observations and eventual conclusions would not have been possible without interest and training in both areas.

Early in our endeavor to breed canaries, we realized the difficulties of getting our birds into both breeding condition and feeding condition. We soon learned it is one thing to have eggs, it's another to have them hatch, and yet still another to have the hens raise the babies until they can feed themselves. We've tried about all the different mixes known. We've given vitamins, minerals, tonics, sixteen different types of seed, cod liver oil, and even Geritol. Experience-wise, we feel like we've become chemists and nutritionists for our birds.

With all our reading and knowledge on bird care, it was very apparent that if Mother Nature's results were only as good as ours, the survival of the species would be in serious jeopardy. It wasn't until two years ago that we discovered what Mother Nature makes available to bring some of her wild birds into breeding condition.

In 1968, while attending junior college in Idaho, I had the good fortune to take an ornithology course from a very fine professor who believed Mother Nature was the best teacher, and the woods should be the classroom. We spent many hours observing the behavior of birds in

the Yellowstone area as well as in the southern part of Idaho. The finches were especially fascinating. It was then, in the early spring, that I first observed a specific behavior of finches and other small birds.

In the very early spring, long before the early flowers pop out of the ground, and long before the first insects become plentiful, these small birds could be observed high in the elm and willow trees seemingly pecking at bare branches. At that early time of year, there are no leaves on the trees. I simply wrote in my notes, "unusual behavior of various finches seen high in elm and willow trees pecking at branches." Some years later as a beekeeper, I took for granted that beehives located near elm and willow trees would always start to raise their young earlier and in greater numbers than beehives not near these trees.

On closer observation, it was determined what these trees had that made the difference between bee locations — POLLEN. In the publication *American Honey Plants*, it states, "The elms are very attractive to bees for pollen. The American or White Elm is especially valuable and a large tree will attract so many bees that the humming sounds like a swarm."¹ The elms and willows pop out with a little catkin much like a pussy willow. Little, if any, honey is to be collected, but tons of pollen are available. The stored honey in the hive along with this magical food is so nutritionally power packed with its proteins, minerals, and vitamins that it makes the bees' diet complete.

These two separate observations, the birds pecking at supposedly bare branches and bees collecting pollen, did not come together until a couple of years ago when upon closer observation of our bird friends, I noticed they were obviously eating the pollen from the trees and not pecking uselessly at bare branches.

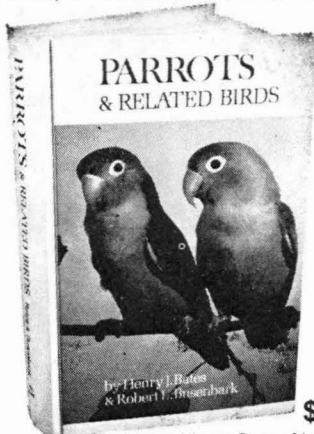
The third element of discovery occurred when we started to collect pollen from our beehives for our human customer's consumption. It seems the Europeans have been eating pollen for lots of years

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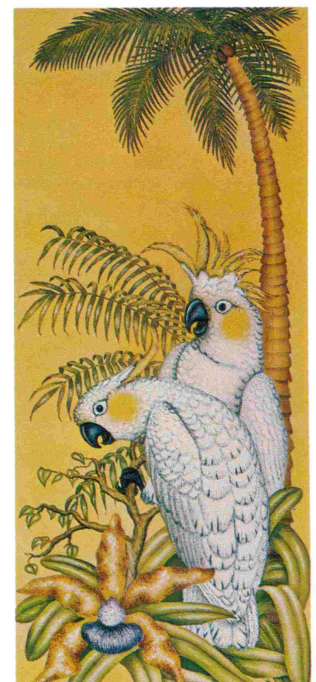
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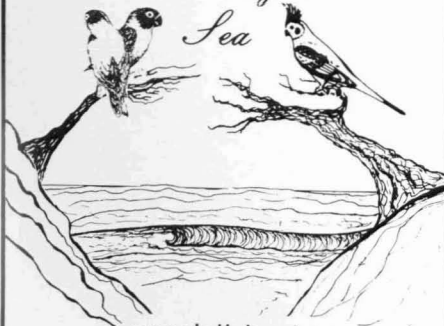


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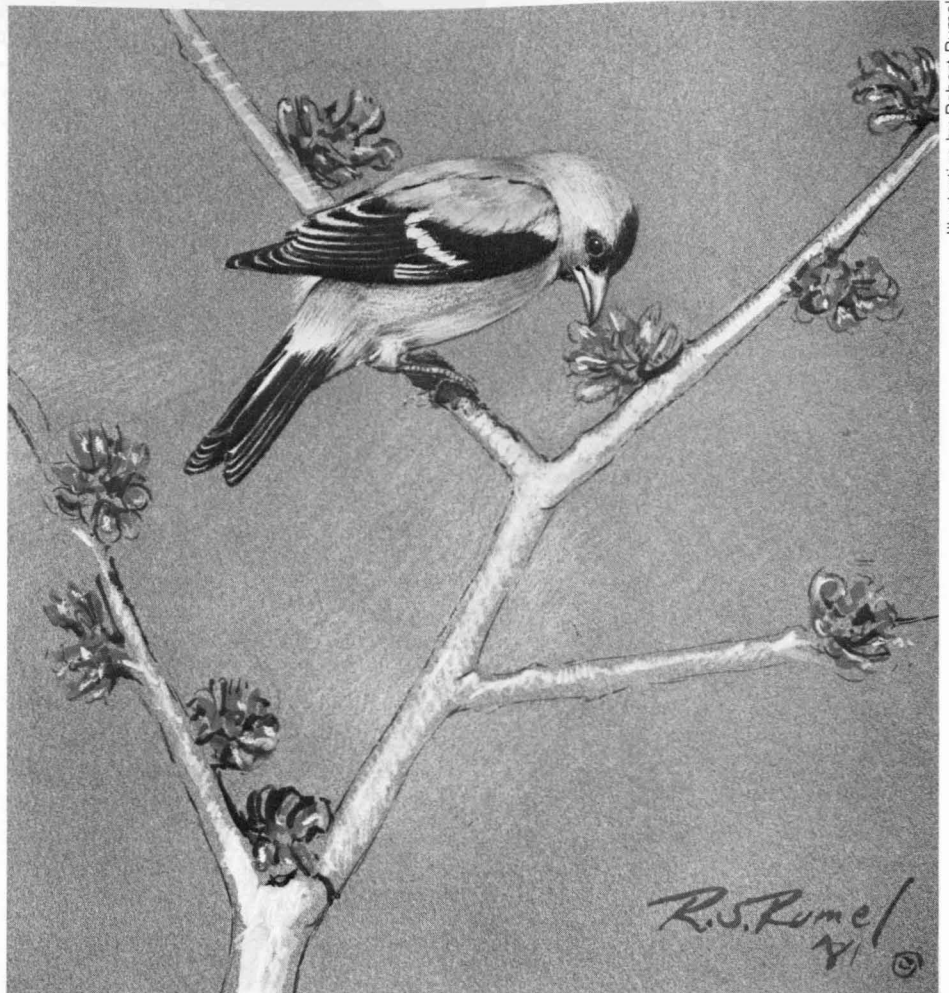


Illustration by Robert Rummel

Male American goldfinch pecking the buds of the silver elm tree.

and in fact, some very exciting research was completed by a team of scientists in Russia linking the eating of pollen and honey to human longevity. It seems every person over 100 years old in Russia was either a beekeeper or had a neighbor as a beekeeper and all had as a principal part of their diet pollen and honey.²

This is all well and good, but what has all this to do with the “birds and the bees”? The simple conclusion is that birds, bees, and people do very nicely eating pollen. But why? What’s in this golden food? Interest in the U.S. has increased and at long last research has been done on pollen. The findings so far are tremendously exciting to both human and bird nutrition.

First, let me comment that Mother Nature is the finest nutritionist, scientist, chemist, etc., and she always provides the best diets for her many creatures. We who try to raise and breed her wild creatures would do well to heed her methods. Pollen, the most complete, naturally-occurring food on the face of the earth is one item our feathered friends were eating. It seems most logical that this pollen available in rich supply very early in

the spring is assisting to perfectly condition the finches and wild canaries for the breeding season.

It has been said that if science were able to synthesize pollen, they could synthesize life. Pollen is the male germ cell of plant life, and as such contains the mysterious power which enables it to regenerate plant life. An observation may be drawn at this point. It seems logical that pollen should be the most complete food when one considers that it is from the flower that all foods ultimately develop and it is the pollen that flowers depend upon to develop the fruits of most plants.

This assumption is now verified with scientific data on the composition of pollen. The following is a brief summary.

Amino Acids — There are 22 essential amino acids (proteins). Only one food known to exist contains all 22 essential amino acids — pollen. The average amount of proteins by weight in pollen is 25%.

Vitamins — Pollen contains vitamins A, B₁, B₂, B₃, B₅, B₆, and B₁₂; also, C, D, H, K, E, Choline, Folic Acid, Pantothenic Acid, Rutin, and vitamin PP, just recent-

ly discovered. Likely, pollen has vitamins not yet discovered.

Major Minerals — Pollen contains Calcium, Phosphorus, Iron, Copper, Potassium, Magnesium, Silica, Sulphur, Sodium, Iodine, Chlorine, Boron, Titanium, Molybdenum, Zinc.

Micro Nutrients — 28 minerals are found in the body. 14 are essential vital elements present in such small amounts they are called trace elements or "micro nutrients." Pollen contains all 28 minerals.

Enzymes and Coenzymes — Pollen contains Lactic Dehydrogenase, Succinic Dehydrogenase, Cytochrome Systems, Saccharase, Phosphatase, Amylase, Diaphorase, Catalase, Pectase, Diastase, Cozymase. These represent the known enzymes and coenzymes.

Fatty Acids — Pollen contains Caproic, Capric, Myristic, Stearic, Palmitoleic, Oleic, Linoleic, Linolenic, Brucic, Arachidic, Caprylic, Lauric, Palmitic, Behenic.

Carbohydrates — Pollen contains Pentoses, Cellulose, Sporonine, Starch, Polysaccharides, Raffinose, Ribose, Desoxyribose, Sucrose, Fructose, Glucose.

Pigments — Pollen contains Xanthophyll and Carotene.

Calories — Each ounce of pollen contains 28 calories with approximately 2 tablespoons per ounce.

All these vitamins, minerals, oils, carbohydrates, and proteins sound great, but if not mixed together just right, balanced and counter-balanced in just the right combination, their value cannot be utilized. Mother Nature is the originator of this recipe and has had several thousand years to test its effectiveness and proper combination. The success of all wild creatures attest to the credibility of the originator of the pollen recipe.

We can conclude then that in nature pollen is available to small birds and that it is power packed with nutrients to assist conditioning the birds for the breeding season. What can we as breeders of small exotic birds do? Obviously, we cannot let our birds loose in February and March to eat pollen and come back to lay eggs. Most of us can't provide elm and willow trees in our small basement aviaries.

Well, that's where the beekeeper comes in. Beekeepers have developed a special device that traps the pollen bees collect and put in their pollen baskets on their hind legs. We make the bees crawl through small holes to get into the hive, holes that are just big enough to allow the bees through, but not the pollen pellets on their back legs. The pollen falls off and is

collected in a little drawer.

Pollen, thus collected, can be dried or frozen and fed to the birds either all by itself or mixed with their special conditioning foods. My canary breeder friend took some and mixed it up with her super deluxe high-potent breeder mix and was amazed as she watched her birds literally pick the pollen out of the mix and eat it before they would eat the rest.

Now, I can't claim we've had any great scientific study with small, exotic birds. I could tell you of the studies with mice where increased growth and vitality was noted, increased breeding and litter size, and even how pollen stopped cancers in mice; or how sick monkeys responded almost as magic to pollen. I could even verify how pollen cures anemia in people as it did in my three year old son and how it regulates digestion to alleviate chronic constipation and chronic diarrhea, and helps colitis.³ I could even tell you about the Florida beekeeper who fed pollen cleanings to his chickens and about his huge rooster people from that part of Florida came for miles to see because of its size. I could tell you how President Reagan eats pollen every day and attributes his youthful appearance to eating pollen.⁴ But, all I can tell you about birds is that my canary breeder friend had one of those unusually successful breeding seasons last year and for the first time in seven years, I am beginning to believe canaries won't be an endangered species if they have pollen to eat.

So how can a bird breeder acquire pollen? Currently, it is available in most health-food stores. Other pollen sources include: C.C. Pollen Co., 7000 Camelback, Scottsdale, Arizona, 85251; Green Grown Products, Box 3383, Santa Monica, Ca., 90403; James Ford, 7160 Brookhill Dr., S.L.C., Utah, 84121.

I am very interested in compiling as much information as possible regarding the effects of pollen in bird's diets. If you have data to contribute or want additional information regarding pollen, please contact me, James Ford, at the address listed above.

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¹*American Honey Plants*, Frank C. Pellett, Dadant & Sons, Hamilton, Illinois.

²*The Golden Pollen*, Marjorie McCormic, McCormic Fruit Tree Co., 1315 Fruitvale, Yakima, Washington.

³*Ibid.*

⁴CBS T.V. interview, October 8, 1980.

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