

A  
Business  
and  
Pleasure  
management  
approach to  
aviculture,  
rare birds  
and  
color varieties

by  
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St. Petersburg, Florida

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Articles usually deal with the management of a given species or with a breeder's experience with a specific pair of birds. My own beliefs on proper management for many different types of birds, not just finches, are described in *The TFH Book of Finches*, so I'd like to use this space instead to propose a "business-and-pleasure management approach" to breeding.

We've gotten a great deal of pleasure and a modest amount of financial return from following a few simple principles. Because we use the profits from one breeding effort to finance the next one we're eager to undertake, the orientation to financial return is directly related to our personal satisfaction.

I think, by the way, that in return for that satisfaction we each owe it to our hobby to devote another part of our time to efforts to breed some threatened variety of bird. It may be threatened legally, due to intrusions into its native habitat, or simply precarious in its role in aviculture because of difficult breeding habits. A section of my book deals at length with the likelihood that many common African finches would immediately become scarce or unavail-



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able to us, should imports be stopped, because we've *not* given them the attention they deserve. Still, this aspect of your breeding efforts is likely to cost you dearly in time and money. Your other, business-and-pleasure-managed efforts can support this more important activity.

The first question you must ask is whether there are birds you'd enjoy working with which offer greater potential return on your investment. Star finches breed about as well as zebra finches, but sell for ten times as much. Australian grass parakeets breed about as well as budgies, and require little more space, yet are worth ten times more.

The fact that both examples refer to Australian species is not accidental: because that continent's borders have been closed to export of native animals for more than two decades, you have to compete only with other captive-bred specimens. You can struggle to raise violet-eared waxbills, or Quaker parakeets (and both are worth the effort) but you run the risk of imported birds being offered suddenly at \$28/pair, in the case of the finches, or \$16/bird, in the case of the Quakers.

I suggest this kind of analysis because I've seen so many breeders who work diligently and intelligently to breed their birds, and to whom some financial return, if nothing more than to cover costs, is important, yet their choices of birds limit strictly the financial possibilities.

This approach leads logically, too, to consideration of various color varieties of birds. The principles, in any case, are the same. These are the factors you should weigh when planning your breeding strategy:

1. Is the species you're interested in one that is also popular with others?
2. Is it one you're convinced you can breed successfully?
3. Are there attractive color varieties of that species, available but at substantially higher prices than "normals"?

An important ground rule: start with a single "target" species, so you can afford sufficient breeding stock to assure some sort of results. If that first effort succeeds, then you can broaden your range.

Let's consider each of the three factors:

1. Select a species popular with others, too.

At Bird Bay Breeders we raise Goul-

dian finch mutations, the rose Bourke parakeet, and the white-faced or charcoal cockatiel mutation. It's not by accident that there are thousands of other breeders throughout the U.S. breeding the normal varieties of these birds: we chose to work with these varieties not only because *we* like them but because we know that many other breeders do, too. They form a vast pool of potential customers for the new, rarer and more costly color varieties.

Those breeders know they've successfully bred the normal birds, and presumably generated some cash from selling those young. They, like we when we started, can understand the likelihood of recouping their investment in the new variety by raising more of them themselves.

You've assured yourself there will be *demand* for what you raise.

2. Select a species you're confident you can breed.

The best way to do this is to work first with the normal variety: we raised normal Goulds successfully, and learned how to properly manage them, before we invested in our first, costly white-breasted Goulds. We worked with normal Bourke keets and cockatiels before moving on to the rare and expensive color varieties of those birds. Now, in anticipation of breeding yellow turquoisine parakeets next year, we're "practicing" with normals, as well as building on the experience we've obtained over the past five years with the closely-related scarlet-chested parakeet.

If you prove to yourself you can breed the species successfully, you're not guaranteeing success, but you're increasing the likelihood of it.

That means you'll have a *supply* of young to sell or trade for other birds you want, and to cover your expenses.

You also have an added advantage: your pool of normals, with known rearing skills, are perfect same-species "foster" parents for your new rare and costly acquisition.

3. Select a species that has produced some attractive and still rare and expensive color varieties.

You can breed zebra finches until you're blue in the face, but you'll barely cover the cost of your seed, because none of the varieties now sell for more than perhaps \$10 each. White-breasted Goulds, on the other hand, sell for three times the price of normal Goulds, but require no more seed, no more effort, no more cage space. Rose Bourkes sell

for about ten times the price of normals; charcoal cockatiels for about 20 to 25 times the price of normal gray cockatiels.

The opportunities exist with many kinds of birds: your rarest budgies, or canaries, or ringneck parakeets, or doves or pheasants or what have you, can bring immeasurable pleasure *and* support the rest of your breeding efforts at the same time.

True, you must pay prices that may seem exorbitant to get your initial breeding stock, unless you're fortunate enough to have a new color appear spontaneously in your own collection. Keep in mind that the breeder you're buying from probably paid even more for *his* stock, since prices, with few exceptions, decline gradually. But if you can raise five (or ten) \$30 baby cockatiels from a \$75 pair of normals, during a year, doesn't it make sense to consider what you might do with a \$1,000 pair instead, in anticipation of raising five (or ten) birds worth \$300 to \$750 each? That, at least, is how we justified our tremendous cash outlays.

A few warnings:

- Don't overextend yourself with birds any more than you would in the stock market: despite your best efforts, your newest acquisition can die, can be sterile, or can be incompatible with its mate, and that's far more painful with a \$500 Bourke than a \$50 one. Starting with a minimum of three pairs (and, ideally, a few extra hens) overcomes some of these possible setbacks. A good rule might be not to get involved with a variety *unless* you can afford at least three pair. If you can't afford that, try to acquire males to pair to your best hens, to produce a good supply of splits you can then work with.

- Look into insuring your birds: unfortunately, the likelihood of theft increases directly with the value of your birds, and fires don't respect the color of plumage. Fortunately, you *can* insure your birds. The American Federation of Aviculture offers coverage, or you can ask your own local agents about an "inland marine" policy that will cover your birds.

I've talked to a few people who think that loving one's birds and breeding with an eye towards economic return are incompatible attitudes.

That's hogwash. If I were a millionaire, I might do things differently. I wouldn't have to worry where the money would come from to support my hobby. I'm not a millionaire, so I do

have to be concerned, and, I suspect, so do most of you.

We breed for profit as well as pleasure, and you'll get no apologies from me. I think yellow turquoisines may be the most beautiful birds in existence, and I went to considerable sacrifice to get them. But when I finally bought my stock last month in England, I knew I was paying for them with money I'd earned from my other birds.

And if you think that once you take an economic approach to your breeding program, the thrill is gone from seeing a bird in the nest, you're wrong. When we hatched our first white-faced (charcoal) cockatiel, the tell-tale white down covering the hatchling, so different from the yellow of every other cockatiel variety, brought a thrill related not to its value but to the pride of accomplishment of having reproduced such a rare specimen. It was a thrill we never would have known had we not for many past years practiced the kind of management I'm proposing here.

A sound business-and-pleasure management approach may be the key to maximizing your avicultural pleasures. ●

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