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Line Breeding Canaries

by Sig Larson

Editors Note: This article is an outgrowth of years of breeding, exhibiting, and judging Border Canaries; and of years of encouraging and helping novice breeders and exhibitors to acquire and produce award winning canaries. Although some of Sig's ideas are controversial, his judging skills and the birds that he and his wife, Peg, raise are in constant demand.

*Specialty Canary Editor
Ken Stubbart*

The ban on importation of canaries and other cage birds has changed the outlook of the serious breeder and exhibitor in the United States. No longer can we get all the breeding birds we want from overseas so we have to raise our own and also we must make plans for the future.

Exhibition canaries do not just appear, they are the result of many years of selective breeding. Whether this breeding is done in England, Scotland or other European countries and the birds shipped to the United States or whether American breeders do the job themselves, selective breeding must be done to consistently produce good show stock.

Did you introduce more than two (2) birds into your breeding program for 1979? If you did you are probably doing random cross breeding as opposed to line (selective) breeding. You buy birds from several good breeders and cross the birds with the hope that the resultant offspring are good exhibition types. Since we only need one very good bird a year to be a winner this method has its advantages. The emphasis here is to spend the money and buy good birds from winning breeders. This presupposes that the buyer does know good exhibition canaries and that he can buy the better birds that the seller has.

Using the random cross breeding technique there are bound to be hills and valleys as far as results are concerned. One year we have good luck and the pairings we make are genetically compatible. The next year good looking birds paired together result in poor looking offspring.

If we want consistently good results without extensive outlays of money for breeding stock then we should find a pair of birds that breed the type of offspring we want and start to develop a "line" of canaries from this one pair, keeping the blood lines going back to the two original birds. The second year we must breed brother to sister, son to mother, and father to daughter to test the line. We must make sure that there are no abnormal faults appearing that would prevent our line from being strong and a useful producer of exhibition canaries. The good features as well as the faults will especially be enhanced in brother to sister matings. If poor birds result here, disregard the line and start over. If the second year mating proves fruitful, the third year will give a much more varied breeding scheme with cousins of the original cock and hen being used. Emphasis can then be given toward the blood line of the cock if he proves to be the producer of the exceptional traits or to the hen if she is the best.

One cock can be bred to three or four hens and the line developed from the pair that proves out the best the second year. Often two pairs of similar breeding can be found and two simultaneous lines started. If both pairs prove good the second year, bloodlines for both these lines will be similar and an experimental cross between the lines can be made. The third (cross over line) may prove to be the best in the long run.

The emphasis on line breeding is to keep a strain of similar blood in both cock and hen so that the good characteristics can be strengthened and reproduced year after year. If the line has faults they will also be strengthened so any birds with serious faults must be culled ruthlessly in each generation.

Stamina in line bred birds becomes a problem only if weak birds were used to start the line or if physically weak birds are bred to continue the line. Any serious physical or exhibition defect must be culled

out each year. Show winners that are not strong should not be kept.

After five or more generations the breeder will be amazed and disappointed to find that a fault appears in one or more of the young. These must be culled from the line and each generation should result in a more stable and similar appearing young.

Minor faults can be corrected within the line itself but sometimes a serious condition (weak back, poor heads, etc.) appears in many of the young. Then comes the time to provide an out cross to a strong cock bird with very strong desired characteristics. This cock mated to several hens of the old line will be a means of correcting a specific fault. If the line has been bred closely for several years the good characteristics are pretty well set and will show in the outcross offspring but it will also be hard to change contour of back or head since they are also set. Selective culling of the outcross offspring usually will result in improvement in the problem characteristic. Then, if the outcross offspring are bred back into the line, added vitality is provided and improvement in exhibition potential is hopefully achieved.

We used to be able to buy breeding stock from the same breeder over seas as we needed new birds for breeding. If they bred true to type then we were probably benefitting from line breeding overseas. Our source of birds provided line breeding programs so they were not so important to us. Times have changed so we had best look forward to doing some of our own work in order to have a constant source of useable exhibition canaries.

I purchased eight birds during the last three years and only two are being tentatively used in the two lines of Border Fancy Canaries that I maintain. One line started out variegated and one clear. Adding a self green and a self cinnamon to the variegated line is resulting in some dark birds of good conformation. Hopefully, in two years, a third line of dark birds will be achieved which incorporates the good features of the original two lines with a change in color. All three lines will then be useful for crossovers if needed since most of the birds will have three parts out of four of the original blood lines.

It is nice to know what to expect from your birds and it is very interesting to watch them appear as predicted. When you line breed and come up with a good strain you can say you have accomplished something and have the proof in your aviary. Try it; you might like the results. Starting today you cannot expect much in the line of positive results for five years. If you are a dedicated canary breeder that should not be too long to wait.

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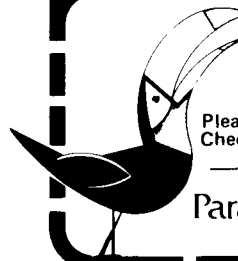
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