

Judging Birds

by Joseph G. Griffith

“Everyone” complains about the judging. Okay, but judging is not easy at best and too often the judge is faced with the worst. Not the worst birds, but with good birds that are in poor condition, ill trained to the show cages, and often dirty. Almost every judge I know tries very hard to give every bird a decent break. They back away from nervous birds to give them a chance to settle. They coax shy birds, as best they can, to show themselves. Even so, the birds that are ready for the show stand a much better chance of winning. We judges are all human and very susceptible to the bird that presents itself boldly, whose plumage is unbroken and clean and lying close and silky, even when that bird isn't quite what we are looking for.

One would think that the least amount of argument would exist among birds for which there are well defined standards. But here, controversy often reigns supreme. Even within a standard, there are styles and personal tastes. My personal preference is to stay within the standard and adhere to it regardless of current fashion. For example; were anyone brave enough to ask me to judge Norwich Canaries, I would be brave enough to disqualify almost every bird that came before me. For those who are interested, read the standard of the Norwich Plainhead Society, look at the officially recognized paintings of it by R. A. Vowles, then look at the birds that are currently being shown — and winning!

Standards don't make the job of judging any easier. A bird may have every feature that the standard calls for, yet not have presence, balance, or whatever you want to call it. A certain amount of “feel” is necessary for a judge to be good. Feel may be acquired by long association with a given type of animal, but those who are best at it have it on an intuitive level that allows them to see quality in *any* animal, horse, dog, bird or whatever.

So much for birds for which there are standards, but what about those without a standard? There are about 8,650 species of birds in the world. Of these, we can dismiss about a third (Hérons, Grebes, Bustards, Penguins, etc.) because they are

not frequently kept and not at all shown. What it comes down to in North America are Parrots and Finches with a softbill here and there. Somewhat less than 1,000 species are likely to be shown or are available for shows.

The story doesn't end there because the judge is also required to know hybrids and mutations. Fortunately, the judge can apply some of the same criteria to mutations as to the wild type while taking into account the lack of size and substance most often associated with new mutations.

Foreign birds and foreign birds judges frequently get short shrift in this country (DIVISION XYZ, Classes as needed), yet a good judge must have an intimate knowledge of a very large number of birds. So how does a judge go about it? How does he (she) determine that a Plumhead is better than a Scarlet-chest or a Bullfinch better than a Cordon Blue? What follows is *my* method and will differ somewhat from others. Too often I have heard, “Well, I didn't show anything because I didn't know what they were looking for.” Very well, here is something to look for.

Condition The first thing that strikes my eye is the condition of the bird. Given the limits of the show cage, are all of the feathers smooth and in place? Are wing and tail feathers frayed from the bird beating about? Does the plumage lie close and smooth or does it look dry and rough? Is the beak overgrown? Are the nails too long? Are feet and legs reasonably smooth and clean? A missing or crooked toe isn't too important unless the competition is keen.

Get the bird used to the cage, spray daily with cold water, trim overgrown beaks and cut the nails.

Con-form-ation Not the best term, but it will have to serve. Does the bird fit itself? A Cordon Bleu with a big fat breast will look too heavy. A Plumhead with either an outsized head or a small, pinched one will lose its grace. A Goldfinch with a long tail will look misshapen. The whole bird should be “of a piece” and appear well balanced within the realm of its kind.

Line Assuming that we've come this far and taking into account that some Parrots in particular are naturally cross-winged, especially when nervous, the next step is relatively easy. Starting at the top of the beak and running to the end of the tail, is there a continuous, unbroken flow of line? The head should not flatten suddenly, but should gently curve to the rear. Where the neck is prominent, the line should flow to the top of the back without abrupt changes. Example; Thrushes, Starlings, Cardinals, Grey and Amazon Parrots. In the opposite case, the line should continue from the

head to the upper back without a distinct nape. Example; Ringnecks, Gouldians, Bullfinches, Chlorophonias. The back should be either straight to the base of the tail or slightly convex. No hollows should appear, especially between the shoulders. In almost every case, the set of the tail should be a direct continuation of the body line.

Now start at the chin and look for smooth lines right to the under tail coverts. Most common faults are bulging breast and pinched weak belly, usually near the thighs. In some birds, thighs are prominent, in others, not. The judges knowledge of the species plays an important part here.

When it is possible to view the bird from front and rear, look at the lines of the side of the head to the neck and shoulders. Commonly this line is broken by jutting wing-butts; most often when the bird is tense.

All of this depends on the bird sitting solidly on the perch or moving about the cage confidently. Give it its due chance and prepare it well in advance of the shows.

Color and Pattern Abrupt changes of color tend to fool the eye and unless the lines of a bird are carefully observed a fault may appear that isn't really there.

All birds have color of some sort and likewise they have pattern. Colors should be clear and as rich as possible. Exclusive of pideds, no odd colors or shadings should occur in areas that ought to be pure.

Pattern should be as definite as possible. Even streaky birds in top shape show clearly defined patterns. Much of this falls back on condition.

Rarity and Difficulty Rarity counts for nothing with me if the bird is in bad shape. On occasion this has been a source of some temper on the part of the exhibitor. Fortunately, once over their initial mad, most have taken it in good stead and I have had the pleasure of seeing their birds back on the show bench the following year properly prepared.

Difficulty of maintainance should be taken into account. Difficulty in steadying certain birds is more important. Some birds always seem to be ready for the Countess's soiree. Plumheads, Gouldians, Java Sparrows, Bullfinches, Cockatoos and others just seem to come that way. It's easier to have a good looking Plumhead than a good looking Painted Conure. The final count sometimes falls here and, all other things being equal, I think it justified.

As a Foreign Bird judge, I am required to make a decision about which is the better of widely divergent birds. All of the following is intended to help me decide if

this is a better example of a Paradise Whydah than that is of a Chaffinch.

Hybrids Here's where the fun (or work) begins. All of the above apply. In addition, there is one criterion by which *all* hybrids are judged. To wit: How clearly does it show a 50% blending of BOTH parents? Since hybridizing is my game, I can recognize a fair number of them on sight, but even when this is not the case, I must be able to call to mind a clear and concise image of each kind of parent in order to judge the merits of the hybrid. Can I tell the difference between a Slaty-head × Ringneck and a Mustache × Ringneck? Do I know a Song Thrush, Coal Tit, Redpoll well enough to determine if it is the most probable parent of a given hybrid? Great fun for me!

Cocks and Hen Classes versus Single and Pair Classes I have long been in voluble favor of cock and hen classes and opposed to single and pair classes. It is very difficult to get a pair of birds into identical condition and keep them that way throughout the show season. Assuming, of course that they are of equal quality to start with. I was very disappointed at one show to have two pairs of Gouldians come before me. The red-head cock was outstanding but the hen was decidedly poor by comparison. The black-head pair were good solid birds, evenly matched but not outstanding. Because they were shown as pairs, I had to give the class to black-heads on the strength of their uniformity. Later, when the section was being judged, a very beautiful pair of Cutthroats came up and they naturally beat the Gouldians. The Cutthroats went no further. The shame of it is that had the red-head cock been shown alone, he would have placed very high in the Foreign Bird divisions. Recently, I saw two Goldfinch cocks shown as a pair. Had I been the judge, I would have had to disqualify them on the spot. They are not easy birds to sex, but I have worked with them a great deal and usually spot them. On the other hand there is no way that I could assure that two Nuns, Silverbills, Spice Finches and the like are a pair. No way, that is, short of laporotomy which is strictly forbidden.

Anyway, there it is. Much of the foregoing applies to Canaries, Budgies, Zebra Finches and Cockatiels for which there are existing standards. Look your birds over. If you find some that meet the above, you will know that you have birds of show quality and they may have the stuff of winners.

Footnote I have to agree with Janice Pritchard and deplore the current craze for SIZE. Don't be fooled. A big bird is not necessarily a good one.



**Nov. 30, Dec. 1, 2, 1979
Orange County Bird Breeders
3rd Annual Open Bird Show**

Orange County Fair Grounds
Bldg. No. 14
88 Fair Drive, Costa Mesa, CA
Open to Public—Dec 2, 1979
10 am to 4 pm
Contact: Show Treasurer,
Finest Van
c/o Orange County Bird Breeders
P.O. Box 644
Garden Grove, CA 92642

**November 10, 11, 1979
Columbia Canary Club
Annual Open Show**

Fowler Jr. High
Tigard, Oregon
Judge:
Greg Farina of Canada
Show Manager:
Glen Haddock
10495 S.W. Walnut
Tigard, Oregon 97223
(503) 639-7157

**November 23-25, 1979
Santa Clara Valley Canary
and Exotic Bird Club**

will holds its
18th Annual Bird Show
at the
Santa Clara High School
Cafetorium, cor. of Washington
& Bellomy
Santa Clara, CA.
Contact Show Secretary:
Delilah Quieto
1952 Beech St.
Santa Clara, CA 95054

**November 10, 1979
The Greater New England
Cage Bird Show**
sponsored by
**Connecticut Association
for Aviculture**

at the
Hotel Sonesta, Hartford, Conn.
Judges:
Cockatiels, Nancy Reed
Type Canaries, Gabe Dillon
American Singers, Russ Gallini
Budgerigars, Dan Gallo
Foreign & Hookbills, Tom Ireland
Variety Singers and Color Bred
Canaries, To Be Announced
For Information:
Show Secretary
Natalie Molaver
28 Piping Rock Drive
Waterbury, Conn. 06706
(203) 756-1753

**November 3, 1979
Greater Pittsburgh Cage Bird
Society**

presents its
**5th Annual All Bird Show
and
A.B.S. District No. 3 Regional**

Show Location:
Ramada Inn, Rt. 8, & McNeal Rd.,
PA. Turnpike Exit No. 4
Allison Park, PA.
Judges:

Ed Rogacki—Type Canaries
Adelaide Walow—Amer. Singers
Scott Ritchie—Color-bred Canaries
Dick Ryan—Foreign Birds &
American Budgies
Tony Mancini—English Budgies

For more information, contact:
Karen Kroshefsky
Show Secretary
406 Camel Drive
Aliquippa, PA 15001