

The Cockatiel!

by Nancy A. Reed

General Description

Nymphicus hollandicus, is lone member of its genus as well as the subfamily Nymphicinae, and one of the smallest Cockatoos in the family Cactuidae, order Psittaciformes, class Aves. Pretty fancy nomenclature for this rather small and somber feathered bird from Australia! In their native land one would be more apt to hear the name "Quarrion" or "Cockatoo Parrot" in reference to this bird we call the "Cockatiel" (our name coming from the Portuguese word "cacatelho" meaning little Cockatoo). In short, a very popular cage-bird by any name!

Bearing the more streamlined body and long tail typical of the Australian parakeets, yet having the erectile crest of the Cockatoos, he is considered a possible link between these two families of parrots.

On his native continent he inhabits the open country of Australia's interior; ground feeding on seeding grasses, herbaceous plants and fruits; and congregating near water. Nomadic in habit, flocks will follow the rainfall, which, when most plentiful in the spring (September through December), initiates their breeding season and assures a plentiful supply of food for their young nesting in the hollows of trunks and limbs of trees. A curious trait is observed in the wild as they avoid alighting on live foliated branches, preferring dead limbs where, as often as not, they perch *lengthwise* on the branch rather than in typical bird fashion of crosswise to it. I have observed my own birds occasionally taking this characteristic position on the larger perches in their flights.

The Cockatiels we see today have all been cage-bred. Many generations have come and gone since their original ancestors were captured from the wild and exported to foreign continents. In 1939 Australia put a ban on any further export of their native birds. Had the Cockatiel not proven to be such an eager and generous breeder, fewer people could today have the pleasure of their company.

I find it truly descriptive when someone had the imagination to give the Cockatiel its last name "hollandicus". A Cockie with his bright orange cheek patches does, in fact, look like a Dutch doll whose porcelain cheeks display identical markings. However, a verbal description of any bird



Comparison of cockatiel chicks at various stages of development, top to bottom; 2-3 weeks old (Normal), 10 days old (Lutino), 24 hours old (Lutino), cockatiel egg. This photo was entered in the 1978 AFA Photo Contest and was selected 1st place winner in the Black and White Category.

is second-rate to a good picture, so I shall be brief, preferring that you "see" for yourself.

The total bird is approximately 11 to 13 inches in length, his tapering tail comprising almost half of that measure. His characteristic crest can be raised and lowered at will. His feet are typical of all parrots, having two toes forward, and two back, designed for climbing and grasping. Form follows function also in his hooked bill which is strong and pointed for crack-

ing hard seed coverings (and biting fingers in defense).

The original wild Cockatiels, what we call "Normals," show sexual dimorphic markings on adult birds, i.e., males and females sport different colorations. Note the duller cheek patches of the female, lack of yellow mask, and the black-barred yellow lateral tail feathers. The depth of grey varies in individuals. Some approach almost black, which has caused a few breeders to believe they have a new

“black” mutation. These birds are only extremes of the original grey. This makes a very striking and handsome bird in contrast with the yellow, white, and orange accents.

Although the predominantly grey plumage of the “Normal” Cockatiel is hardly competition to more colorful, and some downright gaudy parrots, his endearing personality and prolific ways have caused extensive breeding of this species, which in turn has triggered mutations. These mutations have been a boon in increasing even further the popularity of the Cockatiel — voila, some fancier clothe to match his super personality.

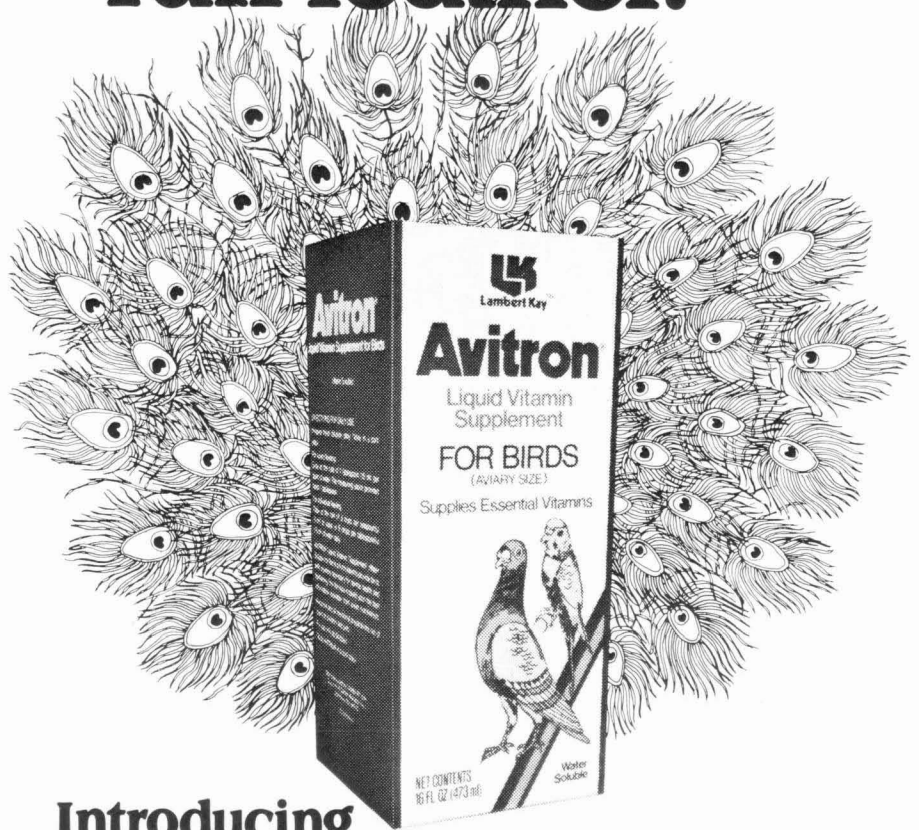
Mutations

Five “standard” mutations are recognized by the American Cockatiel Society at this moment in the U.S. With time we shall see many more and at an accelerated rate, as has been the case with Budgerigars, Zebra finches, and Lovebirds. These established mutations are: the Pied, Lutino (Albino), Pearl, Cinnamon (or Isabel), and Fallow.

PIEDS: The Pied and Lutino mutations both originated in the U.S., I believe the Pieds evolved in the 1940's in California, and can best be described as a “patchwork quilt” of grey, white, and yellow. No two are the same, therefore a few pictures cannot begin to cover the possibilities. According to the new American Cockatiel Society's Show Standard, a pleasing balance and symmetry of the markings has precedence over the degree of Piedness (which should be 40% to 60%). Ideally all wing and tail flights should be clear, i.e., yellow and/or white.

Pieds are the most difficult of the mutations to sex. Usually one must rely on telltale behavioral mannerisms like the male's more melodic and varied whistling. On *adult* birds whose flights are *not* clear, the dark feathers will be either solid grey for males or barred on females, as in adult Normal Cockatiels. It is generally agreed that Pieds are somewhat shyer in breeding than the other mutations, but they are fun to breed as each nestling is unique in coloration. Eventually it is our aim to breed Pieds that will be consistently symmetrical in markings and heavily pied, thus more often favorably predictable. Pieds are a straight recessive mutation.

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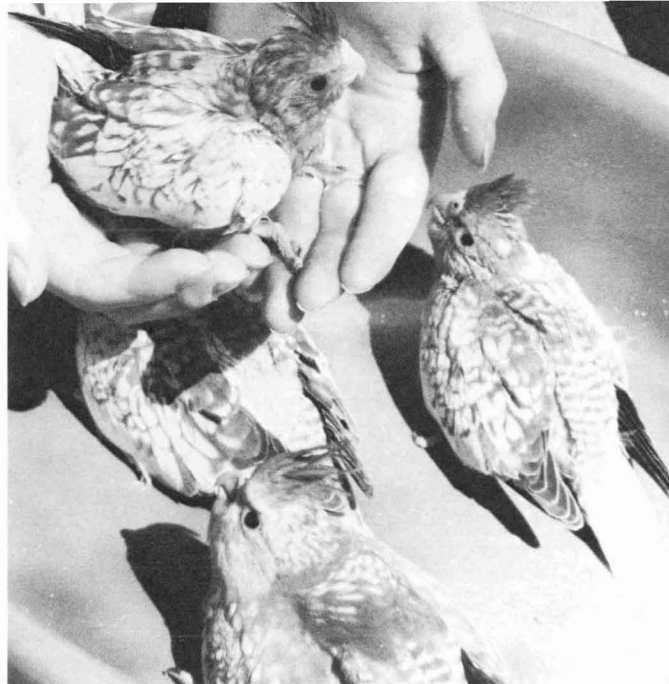
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LUTINO: (Albino, Whites, whatever): A standard name for this mutation is a national dilemma, as we have neither a true Albino (which would be void of any orange or yellow) or a true Lutino (*solid* yellow with orange cheek patch). Then, too, there are breeders that prefer this mutation be as white as possible, and others that wish to enhance the yellow pigmentation. Meanwhile we toss the names around, knowing eventually a *true* Lutino and/or Albino will evolve (as has been rumored in Europe). In this article I will refer to them as Lutinos.

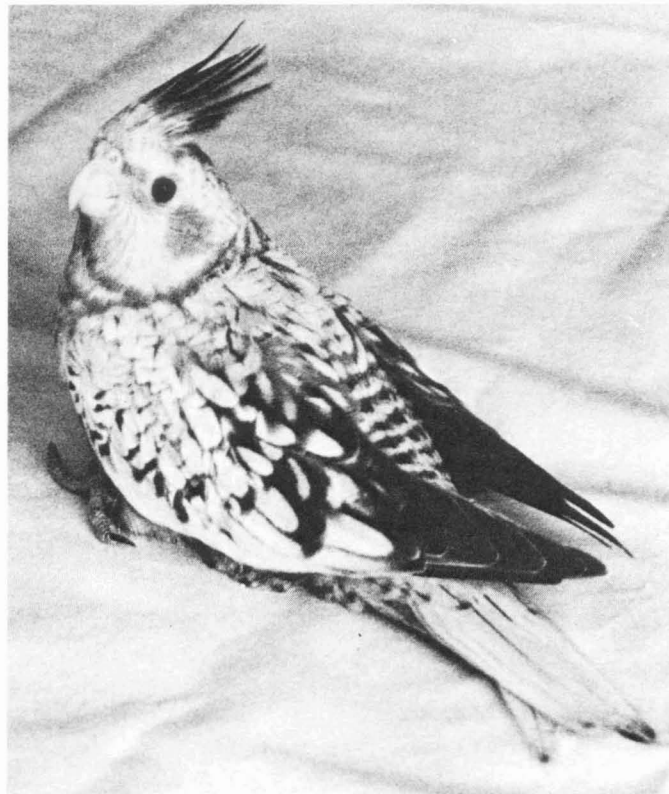
The first Lutino appeared in Florida in 1958. Mrs. Moon, who is credited with spending years in developing her strain of "Moonbeams", tells this story:

"... As I was talking to someone a girl asked if that Pied was mine and said, 'I've got one that is pure white.' I quickly excused myself to talk to her but she disappeared — melted into that crowd like snow in June! Later I found there was one Albino in Miami, property of an elderly man who was very ill in the hospital and she was caring for it... After a long search I found the old gentleman and got his story, also the parents of his little white one that he loved so. It slept with him every night and was so tame but died soon after he was home and I never even saw it. Its parents were quite old and the male died after the first nest — none white. He had been raising with them for years and his pet the only white — all his young were sold to a wholesale place here — another man getting a pair and breeding some — finally got a white one (hen, of course). It had such bad eyes — like a cold — watered continually. He brought it to me and I worked with it the whole summer and no help. So, as he had gotten another finally, he said if I wanted the thing for all my work and money spent I could have it and a nest mate. I was thrilled, of course, as work never means anything to me, if for birds.

"I tried everything I could ever think of or hear of. Eyes would clear up a little, then be bad again and that is the way it went all her life. She finally wanted a nest, so I picked the finest, biggest most beautiful Cock and they loved each other so and were devoted parents. I banded and saved all her little Cocks as all these would be splits, intending to mate the first one back to her the next year. I never did as I just couldn't bear to separate them, they loved each other so. This made my breeding far behind what it could have been. But I had punished the poor little things so with medications and all, I just couldn't do it, so as now white one to mate to her sons, it had to be a normal. *Every one* of the males from a *split* and a *normal hen* had to be



Three to four week old Pearl chicks.



Four week old Pearl chick.

'test mated', as *some* would be splits, *some not*, and of course all those baby hens — positively normal...

"Well, after I finally got growing white hens and mated them to splits (known males from white mother) with all the banding (I hate bands, but it was the only way) and recording...

"I have found since these ten years of hard work banding and recording to establish this strain, why there are not more Albinos in the wild. They just don't keep together this way. It takes real work and determination to make them."¹

(This is a first hand example of how a mutation is established.)

Lutino is one of the most beautiful mutations. All have dark red eyes, yellow head and crest, the bright contrast of orange cheek patches, and varying degrees of yellow on the rest of the body and flights. They are a sex-linked mutation.

Baldness is a unique fault on this mutation and seems to be a dominant factor in

¹Mrs. Moon, "The Albino cockatiel — My Moonbeams," American Cage — Bird Magazine, Vol. 40, (August 1968) P.31F

breeding. Our aim must be to eliminate this unattractive trait that varies in severity with individual birds.

PEARLS: Next in order comes the Pearls, sometimes referred to as "Opaline", "Scaly" or "Laced", and first bred in West Germany. They are a sex-linked mutation. Being a relatively new mutation, there can be quite a variance in degree of marking on individual birds even within a clutch. The "spotted" effect results from each feather's central area being "spotted" either white or yellow, and trimmed in grey. These markings are most evident on the head, shoulders, wings, and back of the bird, varying as stated in amount with individuals. Tail feathers on young and hens are predominantly yellow with a small and varying degree of grey spotting or shading. A photograph is the best description! This mutation is unique in that the male Pearl looses his spots as he matures, and, if not after the first moult, by the second year usually looks like a Normal male. This makes banding a *necessity*, as he is, of course, still carrying the pure Pearl gene when breeding. It is a future aim that we breed male Pearls to retain their original markings.

CINNAMONS: Chronologically I believe, the Cinnamon (or Isabel) is next, originating in Belgium, and again is a sex-linked mutation. I think this is a very attractive bird although my husband describes one (and somewhat accurately but decidedly not very flatteringly) as a Normal who has been in the sun too long. They are a pastel tan with grey overtones and the same dimorphic coloration of an adult Normal. Again individuals may vary slightly, but preference is for the lighter, truly tan color. whereas, on one hand, a deep grey-black Normal is striking because of contrast, I think the softness of the Cinnamon (the close blending of fawn, white, and yellow) a harmonious treat. (Much more poetic than hubby.) On close inspection, their eyes are a lighter brown than a Normal's.

FALLOWS: On the fifth and newest mutation in the U.S., there seems to be a bit of confusion as to whether the "Red-eyed Silver" in Europe and "our" Fallow are really one and the same, or two different mutations. I tend to sense they are separate. Both have red eyes and have proven straight recessive in breeding. Both exhibit sexual dimorphism in adults. In Europe the Silvers are described as "Silver" in color, whereas the Fallows in the U.S. are like Cinnamons in hue, but with a decidedly yellowish suffusion, quite pronounced on the *hens*. In Europe there seems to be a problem of blindness in the Silvers, whereas this has not become

apparent in our Fallows. Obviously more comparison is needed, but to my knowledge, we seemingly have no Silvers in the U.S.

CROSS-MUTATIONS: Then there are the "colors in between". Crosses of Lutino-Pearl, Pied-Pearl, Cinnamon-Pearl, Cinnamon-Pied, etc., can prove most attractive, giving breeders a further wealth of possibilities to work with, but are not in themselves "new" mutations.

To purposely breed for these cross-mutations entails some knowledge of genetics, as obviously things become more complex. Starting from "scratch", it takes two generations to achieve a cross-mutation. (First year: breeding to get a Normal split to two mutations. Second year: breeding the double split mutation to a suitable mutation mate). Within the past few years, many who have purchased imported birds have been pleasantly surprised to find a cross-mutation in a clutch. Obviously some of these imported birds are harboring double split factors and *by chance* were mated to suitable mates.

For instance, a novice may take say a Pied male crossed to Pearl hen and bingo, expect Pied-Pearls. What a disappointment when all young appear Normals! But these "Normal" appearing babies are of more value if it is realized that all hens are split to Pied, and all males are split to Pearl and Pied. It is from these double split Normal males that the Pied-Pearl may possible be produced the following season when mated to a Pied or Pearl hen.

Again, these cross-mutations can be quite beautiful, but *know what you are doing!* I recommend Chapter 9, "Cockatiel Genetics" in George E. Smith's new book "Encyclopedia of Cockatiels" (TFH Publications, Inc., LTD. 1978) which is now available at pet shops

Finally, Why A Cockatiel?

He is aesthetically a gracefully proportioned bird; makes an intelligent and easily tamed pet; is a good breeder, being a challenge to even the more experienced aviculturist interest in the genetics of mutations; and is longer lived than the most common caged-bird species.

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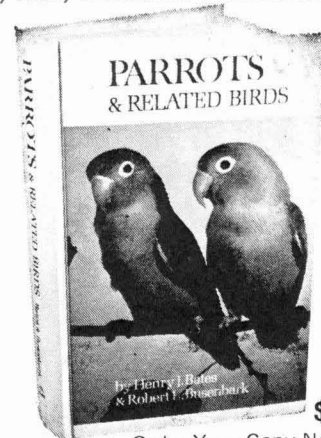
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