

Raising Canaries

by Nancy Vigran
Studio City, California

Traditionally, Valentine's Day has been the time for canary fanciers to set up their birds. Canaries, domesticated since the early nineteenth century, have remained spring season breeders, as they go through a heavy molt in the summer. Young birds start showing their maturity in the fall; males start bellowing out full songs which were only inconsistent warbles just after weaning. Females start flitting about looking for nesting material to carry to a potential nesting site.

Generally, canaries raise young best when caged as pairs. Many fanciers will utilize one male with more than one hen, thus leaving the family rearing duties to the hen alone. Colony breeding, for the most part, leads to disappointment and heartache as males fight and hens destroy other nests while trying to work on their own.

Canaries build nests in open, cup-type containers. Often a liner is used to provide a good, sturdy base. Dried grasses, ripped burlap and cotton string can be offered for nest building. The hen will often sit in the nest during the building time, appearing to check for necessary adjustments.

Three to six eggs are laid, the average being three to four in larger types (such as Yorkshires or Norwich) and four to five in the smaller types (such as Glosters or Fifes). Most breeders will remove each new egg laid and replace it with a plastic "dummy" egg until the clutch is completed. In this way, the babies all hatch around the same time (13 to 14 days later) and have equal chance at survival. The eggs are blue with brown mottled spots and usually the last egg laid will differ in coloration with less mottling.

Eggs and sometimes babies can be transferred to other hens for fostering when necessary or when only small, fertile clutches appear.

Young canaries grow quickly and one great pleasure is to watch their development in the open-type nest. Usually, for the first week or so, the hen sits tight allowing the male to feed her and she, in turn, the young. Some hens will get off to feed on their own and many males will hop on to keep eggs or babies warm. After the first week the hen will spend more time off the nest and the young can be more readily observed.

Depending upon the type, young canaries should be close-banded between five to seven days of age. Some hens may try to remove these bright objects from their nests, so some breeders smoke the bands to make them less shiny (before putting them on, of course!).

The young will start climbing onto the edges of the nest at about 18 to 19 days and will take to fledging at 21 days of age, sometimes returning to the nest at night.

It is at this stage that the hen may become anxious to go back to nest. A second nest should be provided with a lot of extra nesting material. If the male has been with the hen, he can be partitioned off with the young, while the hen gets her nest ready. During this time the male should be allowed to visit with the hen for short periods to ensure fertilization of the new eggs, and then returned to feed his weaning chicks.

If fledglings are left in with their mother, there is a fairly good chance that she will pull feathers from them to add to her nest, especially from the lighter colored babies (yellow or white).

Canaries can easily and successfully raise two to three clutches per season depending on the number of babies per clutch and whether the hen has been left to feed the young on her own.

Their diet should consist of a good canary mix offering canary seed, small millet, rape and a little niger seed. In preparation of nesting, hens should be offered calcium in the form of cuttlebone, mineral blocks, dried, cooked eggshells and/or liquid minerals added to the water, or powdered, mixed in soaked seed or soft food.

Some breeders start offering egg food and/or other soft foods such as whole wheat bread, corn bread or vegetables as the hen is preparing her nest, thus encouraging her by letting her know there is plenty of good food to rear a family. These rich foods should be limited during her incubation, since she is so inactive during this time. A day or two before the eggs are due to hatch, these foods should be increased to ensure feeding when babies appear. Green foods can also be offered, such as romaine lettuce or kale.

When babies fledge, a low, flat dish of soft food can be offered on the bottom of the cage, to encourage the babies to eat on their own. Another useful tool for weaning is spray millet, as babies are curious about this and will pick at it.

Young males can often be identified at this early age, as they will try to sing, letting out a funny little warble. A plastic open band in a particular color (such as blue) can be placed on these birds for identification. These birds should be confirmed, however, when they are older, i.e. six to eight months.

Canaries love to bathe and should be offered bath water several times a week in warmer weather to encourage preening and help them through the molt period. Hens like to bathe just before eggs are due to hatch and this will increase moisture for hatching. Remember to check water often and/or offer drinking water in a tube, which won't be all splashed out by the end of the day.

Whether you prefer specialized song, fancy colors, crests, tall and thin or chunky birds, or even funny-looking hunch-backed birds, canaries are a delight for every bird fancier and breeder. These small gems of the bird world will worm their way into any heart. ●