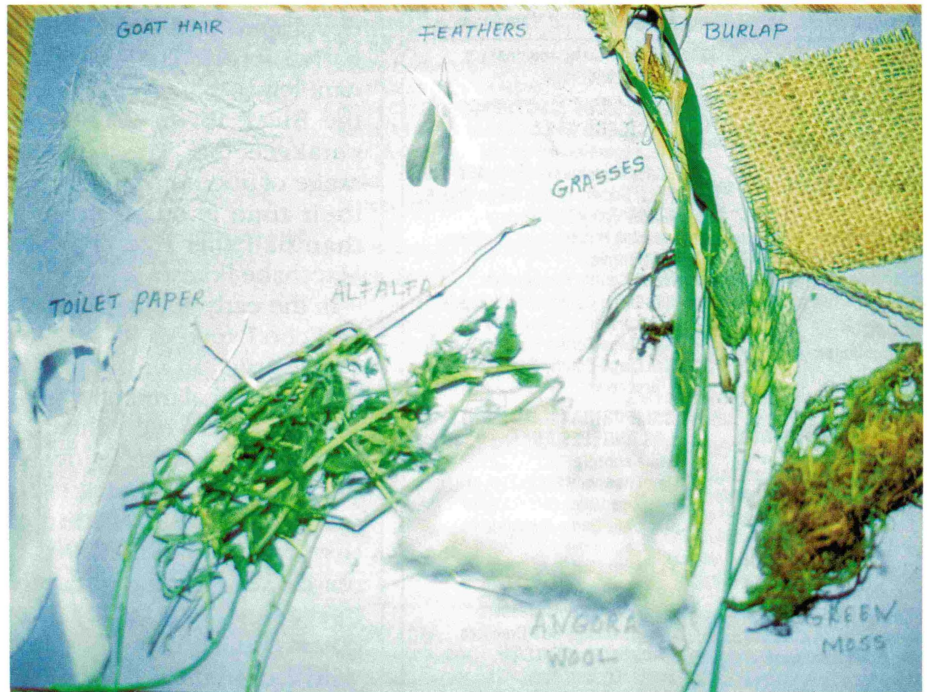


*Roller youngsters
two weeks old.*



Mr. and Mrs. Roller (male on right).



*A variety of canary
nesting materials.*

Photos by Alicia McWatters



*Small flight aviary for
young canaries to exercise.
This flight is shared with
other finches such as
Lady Gouldians, Stars, etc.*

The German Roller Canary

(Its history, song, training, and breeding)

*by Alicia McWatters
Oceanside, California*

History

This article was written for those who have asked the question, "What is a German roller canary?" In the canary world, they are known as the "song canary," a bird specially trained to become a canary of exceptional song quality, famous for their outstanding and superb ability for tone, range, and depth within their song vocabulary.

The roller canary is an old breed, measuring about five and a half inches and can come in a variety of colors, such as white, yellow, green, gray, variegated, and occasionally red-orange. Among the song canaries, the German roller is the most frequently heard of within this group. The other, lesser known song canaries are the Belgian Waterslager and the Spanish Timbrado which deserve recognition and attention in their own right.

Centuries of hard work have been put into developing and sustaining the roller song, and I think you'll find its background quite fascinating. The German roller canaries originated in the Harz Mountains of Germany, particularly in St. Andreasberg between the 1700s and 1800s. Hundreds of working class German families (many of them coal miners) raised and trained these birds to be the wonderful songbirds that they are; with the males in great demand, there was much profit gained. This was an important additional source of income for the miners with their low wages. Their goal was to create a canary without the shrill and loudness of your common canary. Many canaries were bred for color and type but they cannot give us the richness of song desired. Focus must be made on the song alone in order to develop perfection, just as anything which is specialized and studied, given much time and nurturing, will become a product of excellence. Initially, color was an unimportant factor in raising these birds with the predominant colors being yellow, variegated, and green as

of the wild canary. All concentration would be placed on improving the beautiful song. Much later, after securing the song, other colors would be incorporated to create variety. The canary business began to boom in European cities and then in America toward the mid 1800s, with literally millions of them being exported out of the Harz Mountains. The early rollers were tutored by magnificent songbirds such as the mockingbird, then later a roller organ was developed, a musical instrument specifically for song training. Over the generations, those canaries who easily learned to pick up the song were selected for breeding and the less gifted ones were culled and sold as pets. Their ability to learn was so great as to establish this special breed of canary with its operatic, sophisticated song.

Song

The song of the German roller is nearly always sung with its beak closed and a true roller is marked by this characteristic. The song is sung in a soft manner, very pleasant to the ear and relaxing to listen to. While reaching their wide range of notes, you'll notice how the feathers of the throat rise forward with a vibrating motion as they adjust from one tour to another. The song covers nearly three octaves and rollers are trained to excel in the musical passages known as "tours," which consist of hollow roll, bass roll, flutes, and hollow bell, with a series of supplemental tours, each with a variation in tempo and resonance. There are 13 tours which are sung in a rolling fashion, hence the name roller canary. Youngsters should preferably be trained by their father, but a tape may be used as the next best thing and is commonly utilized. Individual birds will tend to be outstanding in a few favored tours, with each bird being unique. Commonly heard are the hollow roll, bass, and flute notes as compared to the water notes, gluck, and schockel which in these days are

heard infrequently; with improved clarity and expertise in the former notes. Rarely, would you find a bird which is accomplished in all of them.

Development of song in youngsters (as young as six weeks of age) begins with a few shy, twittering notes, first sung in fragments. Eventually, after building their confidence, they will progress into the structuring and the lengthening of their song into the various rolls or tours. It is a gradual process which can take up to 18 months to fully mature into the more complex stages. Although, much earlier than this, one can judge the future potential by closely listening to each youngster audition, as later described. A lot of the roller song is thought to be inherited. There are those who believe the roller needs no formal training at all in that they will develop the song all on their own. The majority of others believe in tutors, as birds who remain isolated at a young age usually do not develop their song to their full potential, while those who have had the guidance of their father or another proper substitute will, indeed, have an edge over one who does not. Using a tape or "live" tutor, as long as it is in the pure roller song, certainly can do no harm and probably does more good in enhancing their natural ability. Keep in mind that birds which hatch early in the season have the advantage of hearing their father and other neighboring males sing for a longer period of time. Those from later clutches will develop the song a little slower, be farther behind the others, and will benefit greatly from a regularly played tape when the "live" song may no longer be available. Rollers generally are excellent mimics, but their capacity for learning is directly related to the lineage of both father and mother birds. Care should be taken to allow only quality tutors in the room with your young males, so they do not pick up any undesirable notes or faults. For example, you must watch out for high frequency and



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harshness in the bell tour and water tour. Look for proper delivery of the consonants and vowels within each tour; a continuous blend, with smooth flow from one tour to the next. Also, of equal importance is that the song taught be of the same strain of roller or disappointment could occur. By mixing two different types of roller song, you may miss out on the quality of each and therefore the song would lack the much sought after clarity and good tone. As you advance in the hobby, you may find a need to experiment. After much knowledge has been acquired, this would be less risky.

The roller song is broken down into three main categories:

REGISTER — the range of high, medium, and low, with the deepest notes being the most prized. Rollers are generally classified as either "deep singers" or "high singers"

FORM — rolling, beating, and waving

TONE — gluck or non-gluck

High pitch - Bell Roll, Bell Tour

Medium pitch - Hollow Roll,

Hollow Bell, Schockel, Flute

Low pitch - Bass Roll, Gluck Roll, Water Gluck, and Gluck

The Tours

*(for the advanced
roller canary breeder)*

Hollow Roll

Register - medium low to medium high (broad range) rising and falling, ever changing, fluctuating, in the end an increase in intensity.

Form - rolling (ro ro ro ru ru ru) if the r is dropped it then becomes (hoo-hoo-hoo) non-gluck.

Tone - fluctuates up and down, "A most melodious tone, always look for good hollow roll as a basis for the song".

Bass

Register - low.

Form - rolling - purring quality (rour-ourou).

Tone - very deep, non-gluck.

Water Gluck

Register - low to medium.

Form - bubbling brook (bluk-bluk-blok-blok).

Tone - the deeper the better.

Gluck roll

Register - medium low.

Form - rolling, usually followed by the gluck notes.

Tone - deep.

Gluck

Register - low medium.

Form - beating, clucking sound (gluck gluck gluck).

Tone - deep, preferably in slow motion.

Hollow Bell

Register - high medium.

Form - beating (lu lu lu lu) open beak using whole body, forced sound.

Tone - high pitch, but no shrill tones, non-gluck.

Schockel

Register - low medium.

Form - beating - (ho-ho-ho-hu-hu-hu-ho-ho) laughing quality, beginning with a slow beat, then with a quick raised tempo reaches its peak, then gradually fades away softly and slowly, reducing in force. Does not have the broad range in register as does Hollow Roll.

Tone - non-gluck.

Flutes

Register - low medium to high (broad range).

Form - beating, (do du du) sobbing or weeping quality, dovelike sounds.

Tone - mostly non-gluck.

Low to medium flutes are most valued, flute notes are one syllable, flutes generally are expressed between other tours and should not be over-used or repetitive. Some are used at the beginning of/or at the end of the Schockel tour. Two or three notes at a time are best.

Water Roll

Register - low medium.

Form - waving, vibrating, moving up and down quickly and repeatedly. Oscillating motion, repeatedly and regularly fluctuating as sound waves.

Tone - non-gluck, deep rising and falling.

DBWT (Deep Bubbling Water Tour)

Register - low and deep.

Form - bubbling, slow rolling and beating, generally sung along side water roll and bass.

Tone - non-gluck.

Bell Gluck

Register - high, broad range.

Form - combining rolling, beating, and waving.

Tone - must be sung in clear controlled tone, not ear piercing. Has chopper quality, can be a problem tour if not delivered at its best.

Bell Roll

Register - high, about an octave above hollow roll.

Form - rolling, (ririririri) forced with

open beak.

Tone - non-gluck.

Bell Tour

Register - high, above hollow roll.

Form - beating, (li-li-li) look for balance in the beats and clarity in vowels.

Tone - non-gluck.

The elements which make up a quality German roller are; clear consonants and vowels, smooth flowing tone and a balancing of the song. It takes quite some time to learn to identify all the various notes; along with the ability to judge both good and bad. Anyone with an interest in music and the willingness to study the roller song will be rewarded. After gaining knowledge and the basic understanding of the song, your hobby will then become more valuable and add much pleasure to raising these joyful songsters. Keep in mind that learning this song is an ongoing process of first defining the tours, then refining the quality of your birds. Read and talk with as many people in the hobby as you can who will advise you in purchases and learning the song. If possible, try to buy or borrow an audio tape of a true roller or, better yet, a team which has won at the shows so that you may be sure to hear the quality of the song. Then, if you choose to train and show your birds, you will have a solid foundation to work with. At the end of this article I will list the literature and publications which will help to assist you along the way.

Training

Basic training strategies are as follows: during the early months of life, leave all young males in flights with their fathers. During this sensitive period they are particularly impressionable and easily pick up the song. By early October they should be well through their molt, with most adult males beginning to show signs of perkiness and lively song. You would then be ready to set them up for training practice. Place them in individual cages, enclosed on all sides but kept slightly open in front, (or in special made roller training cabinets). Arrange the cages side by side so that the birds can see one another for a couple of days until they settle down and are used to their new enclosures. Then place partitions between each cage, or stack them in columns of four or columns of two. Always separate teams

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accordingly, “deep singers or “high singers”. The birds are placed in an isolated room where the lighting can be gradually subdued, allowing the birds to see only their food and water. This quiet environment will cause little distraction from the prospective goal of producing fine singers. The next step is to select your best roller “tutor” (of the same strain) and place him in the room to coach your young listeners. The principal objective here is to train four birds to sing in unison. Periodically opening their cages to the bright light and allowing the young an audition for about 30 minutes per session gives them the chance to practice what they’ve heard. This should be done three times daily, as your schedule permits. If, as they are learning, you find one who becomes over zealous and begins to sing notes too high, you should then place him back in the darkened cage for a day without audition time. You may also find that certain birds sing better depending on their position in the stack. In other words a bird on the bottom could display signs of laziness, yet putting him on the top instead may bring him forward in his achievement. So you should rearrange when appropriate. Remember you are helping to create the best possible song in your birds and your efforts will make a difference. Once you have four canaries with near equal potential you would continue with this rigorous training for up to a month. Eventually, after selecting four of the most skilled student canaries, they could then be shown as a quartet in the annual roller song contest, hopefully with results you can be proud of.

Breeding

Breeding the roller canary is no different from raising any other kind of canary. The general guidelines are the same, but I will try to describe my way, which may differ somewhat from others. I will emphasize nutrition, as little quality will be gained if the birds are not raised on the proper foods.

German rollers are highly prolific if their needs are met and they are healthy and strong. Keeping your birds in good health *all year* by maintaining them on a nutritious diet and in a clean, fresh environment will certainly help you to raise quality babies year after year. The main seed mix consists of canary seed and sweet red



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rape with the addition of flaxseed and sesame seed. Petamine is also given but is normally only used as a weaning food for the youngsters when they are old enough to begin cracking seed. I frequently serve soaked or sprouted seed which can be easily doctored by adding vitamins. Along with the use of “Superpreen”, a bird vitamin, I also regularly add bee pollen, wheatgerm oil, or a calcium supplement as needed. Cuttlebone is always available with mineral grit provided on occasion, removed when babies are under a month old. The birds all enjoy the homemade cornbread I serve and it comes in very handy for weaning the babies from the eggfood. (Recipe given below). We also grow a large variety of greens in our outdoor garden, so we’ll never run out of these essential, nutritious, fresh-grown foods. Some of these include dandelion, millet sprays, safflower, sunflower, wheat, barley, mustard, comfrey, chicory, canary, etc. Any seed or grain available may be used, being sure they are of high quality and grown in a rich, organic soil. Greens are a wonderful source of many of the important vitamins needed in a bird’s diet; particularly beta carotene, which is converted into vitamin A, aids in many bodily functions. Vitamin A helps protect the

mucous membranes of the mouth, throat, air passages, and the lungs, reducing the chance of infection. It also aids in digestion, and in the growth and repair of body tissues while keeping their skin and feather condition at its best. These greens are provided up to three times per week. Other healthy additions to a canary’s diet are a piece of apple twice a week and a bit of orange once per week. These guidelines are recommended during the non-breeding season. Of course, these items would be provided frequently and in larger amounts during the period of feeding young. Small amounts of egg food should also be given periodically throughout the molting season for the extra protein necessary to help them through this stressful process. At this time, your canary will not sing as he is reserving his energy while the growth and replacement of new feathers (composed of keratin, a fibrous protein substance) is taking place. A healthy diet is a must, especially at this time! Birds should have plenty of flight space throughout the off season. Remember not to overcrowd. Also, a daily bath is greatly appreciated with fresh drinking water provided daily as well.

Choosing proper breeding stock should be placed high on your list of

priorities. The hens you purchase should be of no less value than the males, as they play an equal part in the end result of what you raise. If you can, try to select hens whose fathers were of exceptional song; only in this way can you expect good song in your offspring. Basically, the higher quality you obtain in both males and hens, the better chance you will have to pass on these traits. Of course along with quality song, you must seek vibrant health, clear, bright eyes, tight, shiny feathering, no wheezing or nasal discharge, meaty breastbone, clean vent, smooth legs and feet, good posture, activity, strength, and a good appetite. With all of this in mind, you are ready to begin your breeding plan.

Lighting and temperature adjustment is important in creating the proper environment during their breeding cycle. Raising birds indoors requires that we use full spectrum vita-lites, the ones which come closest to the natural rays from the sun. We maintain the schedule for lighting on a timer with the morning lights coming on at 7 a.m. until 6:30 p.m. during the off season, (as I have finches breeding in this room during that time of year). As the canary breeding season draws near (early January, although sometimes a bit earlier if I give in to them) the lighting is gradually increased an hour earlier in the morning and one and a half hours later in the evening. A small heater is used during the cooler months and the temperature kept between 60 and 65 degrees.

Prior to the breeding season, about two to four weeks in advance, you may test your hens for readiness by offering nests to each. If she is eager to build, she will readily begin flying about with the material provided, stuffed tightly toward the back of her beak. When ready to start a family, we place the hens in breeding cages measuring 16" x 14" x 24" and choose the proper mates. Nest materials used are: felt nest liners (dusted with a pyrethrin based powder to prevent mites), 2" x 2" inch squares of burlap, unraveled. You can also use bits of goat's hair, angora wool, or one inch strips of white toilet paper (unscented) for her to line the nest with (one square per nest). Adding one teaspoon of egg food (shell included) to the breeding pair's diet daily will also stimulate their nesting instincts and should be given until the third egg is laid, then

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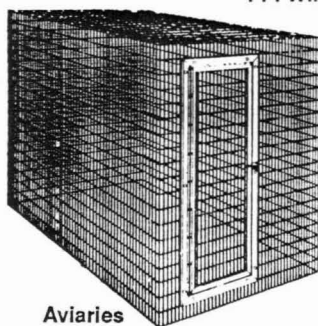
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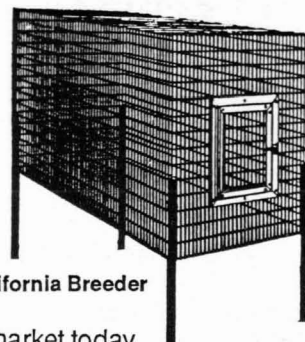
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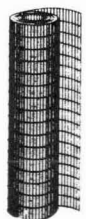
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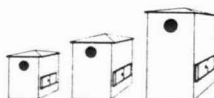


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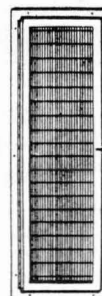
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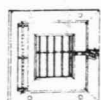
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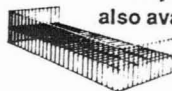
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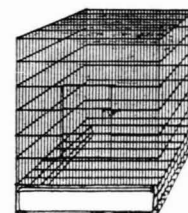
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not again until the hatching day. The parents will be eager to feed this egg food throughout the rearing period along with fresh greens, apple, orange, and the soaked seeds with a sprinkle of vitamin. At this point, chances are good that she will lay the first egg of the clutch in one week, with five eggs in a typical clutch. It is common practice to replace the first egg with a blue dummy egg. Remove each egg in the morning as it's laid and place each one carefully in a container of seed (to prevent rolling). Cover these containers with a kleenex to keep dust out and eggs clean. Then, on the morning the fifth egg is laid, remove the dummy egg and place all the eggs back in the nest. If less than five eggs are laid, you would follow this procedure on the morning of the last egg laid. The benefit of this procedure is to allow all chicks the same equal chance for survival, as they should all hatch on the same day. If you forget to do this I have discovered one solution to the problem of losing the fifth chick due to crushing. Normally only four chicks make it in the typical size canary basket, as there is just enough room for four comfortably. Last year I tried a new thing. I placed a second canary basket along side the first one with only a felt nest liner inside. The first three hatchlings

were placed in this second nest and the last two were left in the first one. I was pleasantly surprised with the father feeding, warming, and nurturing the three, while the mom stayed and fed the younger two. You must have an excellent father for this to be accomplished. I have always left the father in with the growing family as he is helpful in feeding and can give the hen a short break for eating and bathing, and just generally stretching out after all the confinement of incubation, etc. Normally on the fourth day, the hen will allow the father to assist in the feedings and general care. It is very touching to see a father gently caring for his young.

Banding is a very important part of raising birds and I wish more people would take the time to do this as it shows professionalism as a breeder and pride in the offspring you produce. It not only identifies the breeder, but will inform the buyer of the age of the bird as well as give the new owner a chance for showing the bird if he so desires. This procedure is usually done between four and six days of age, before the young have fledged. Generally the hen will be ready to go back to nest if a male is in with her. By providing her with a new nest and placing it at the opposite end of the cage, and giving her plenty of

Photo by Alicia McWatters



Important nutritional extras for raising canaries—and many other birds, for that matter.

nesting material, she is less likely to pluck her babies' feathers to line the nest. Soon you will have a new clutch of eggs. Most babies are beginning to eat on their own at around 18 to 22 days. These older babies will be ready to be removed to the "weaning" cage (a small cage) at about 30 days of age with or without their father, depending on how independent they are at this time. As soon as they are eating well and have been on their own for a couple of weeks, they may then be placed in a large flight to develop and become strong. It won't be long before you will separate the hens from the males. Then you can identify the beginnings of those shy twitterings which will develop into what we all look forward to in the raising of the roller canary and what keeps us going year after year, "the power of that glorious song!"

Cornbread Recipe

Ingredients:

- 1 cup whole wheat flour
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar
- 3 teaspoons baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon iodized salt
- 1 cup yellow cornmeal
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 1/4 cup vegetable oil
- 1 cup milk
- 1 tablespoon soybean isolate
- 1 tablespoon brewer's yeast
- 1 tablespoon powdered vitamin (Superpreen)
- 1/4 cup raw wheat germ.

Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Grease an 8" x 8" x 2" baking pan. Mix all ingredients in a medium bowl, and bake for 25 minutes. It may be cut into squares and frozen for future use.

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