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Beginning Breeding Budgerigars

PART 1

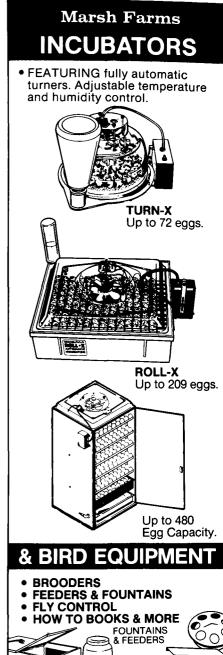
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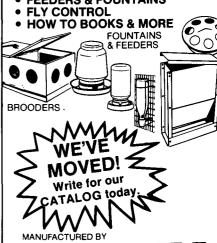
Introduction

The Shell Parakeet (Melopsittacus undulatus), more popularly known as the Budgerigar, or Budgie for short, is one of the most popular, colorful, and easy breeders of the entire parrot family. This fascinating little Aussie bird of some six to eight inches, has not only endeared the hearts of millions, but continues to provide valuable lessons to aviculturists at all levels.

Not to be underestimated, many of us who started out breeding Budgies learned such valuable lessons as basic breeding and husbandry techniques, colony breeding vs. selective breeding methods, species specific nutrition, fostering and handfeeding techniques, not to mention a wealth of knowledge to be gained in the areas of line-breeding, outcrossing, color breeding and genetics. Indeed, a valuable education may be gained by anyone choosing to work with a number of these delightful, dependable birds.

The first record of living Budgerigars imported from their native Australia into Great Britain, occurred in 1840, by world famous naturalist and artist John Gould. Mr. Gould's brother-inlaw, Mr. Charles Coxen, was credited with rearing the first Budgerigars in captivity. It was no wonder that the Budgerigar grew swiftly in popularity from Britain to Europe, and eventually other countries around the globe, with their relative ease and willingness to breed, plus the many color mutations which erupted to fascinate fanciers. Eventually, the U.S. imported Budgeri-





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Cobalt Blue Australian Banded Pied hen.



Exhibition and pet hens in flight.

Photos by Linda S. Rubin

gars during the early 1900's and their popularity continues to prevail even

According to C.H. Rogers, there exists two subspecies, M.u. intermedius from the north, carrying a paler neck and back color; and M.u. pallidiceps, from the west, which is primarily paler on the head. Rogers further comments that all three races are represented today and are probably the mixed result of the tens of thousands of wild Budgerigars imported into England. This is apparent by the depth of color and variable shades (e.g. dark factors) which exist in the many color varieties currently seen all over the world.2

Today, the Budgerigar maintains its popularity as an excellent aviary bird, frequently providing the financial support (or "seed money") to maintain less reliable breeders in the aviary; it is a superb family pet with its natural curiosity, sociability, and propensity to talk; and it offers perhaps the widest selection of color mutations of any member of the parrot family. Its following in exhibition circles is as strong as ever, with societies formed



Normal Sky Blue exhibition ben.

all over the world, including specialties in many varieties and colors. In the U.S., many Budgie clubs can be found at the state level, in addition to the national group to which they belong, the American Budgerigar Society, Inc.

Selecting Stock

Beginning Budgie breeders should decide before selecting their foundation stock, which area(s) of the fancy they wish to pursue. Fanciers refer to the larger show birds as "English," or exhibition size Budgies, versus the smaller "American" or pet stock variety. In the U.S., the term "English" has stuck for show birds, perhaps because it was England from which we had imported the first specimens. In any event, the size difference does exist and fanciers do have a choice.

When choosing foundation stock, top priority should go to the selection of healthy birds. Individuals which appear "puffy", with fluffed out feathers, may be masking an illness and eating less, while they expend their remaining energy to keep warm. Likewise, birds with soiled, stained, or

dirty feathers, discharge from nares (i.e. nostrils), eyes, or beak, straining or continuous pumping of the tail (e.g. possibly indicating a respiratory condition), dirty or stained vents, or those huddled together in a group, should be avoided. Select only healthy, vigorous, active, sleek, and fully feathered individuals. Remember, these birds will be your foundation stock, and there is no room for illness if you wish to be successful in breeding.

In general, Budgies have the advantage of being sexually dimorphic which will enable the fancier to tell cocks and hens apart at a glance. Usually, hens of most varieties will retain a tannish colored cere (i.e. the fleshy area above the beak surrounding the nostrils) which will turn brown when in full breeding condition. Depending upon the color variety, males sport a blue to purple colored cere which may somewhat deepen in intensity when in condition.

However, there are some hens who may lose their tannish/brown ceres which can turn white, usually with an outlining ring of light blue, when they

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are out of condition or feeling un-well. This latter appearance, coupled with any other symptom listed above, should signal that something may be wrong and perhaps another hen should be selected in its place. Such an appearance should not be confused with a hen at the end of her breeding cycle who will lose her deep chocolate-brown cere color. It tends to take a little experience to know the difference, and an experienced Budgie fancier may help the newcomer make the proper choices.

Since it is unlikely that all Budgie hens will be in breeding condition when the majority of cocks are, it is a good rule of thumb to have extra females on hand. The likelihood that only a few hens will be suitable for breeding at any given time can delay your breeding plans unless you overcome the registered code (usually one or two numbers plus a letter, e.g. my code was "33R"). Usually the serious breeder of exhibition or line-bred birds will purchase traceable, seamless, closed legbands from the national society and such breeders may be traced back by their band code. Beginners now also have the option of purchasing bands either through the Society of Parrot Breeders and Exhibitors, or the American Federation of Aviculture, which may be good options when first trying one's hand at producing babies, or before banding for more serious competition at future Budgie specialty shows.

When breeding exhibition birds, the fancier must become familiar with the ABS show standard and the requirements of the different color varieties. Such features as head size, stance, wing carriage, bib and mask depth, cheek flashes and throat spots, in addition to body proportions and size, are all important in exhibition stock. A familiarization with the standard, plus visits to Budgie shows and breeders' aviaries, should help beginning breeders to become familiar with the qualities sought.

One of the major points to keep in mind when selecting exhibition birds is to ask about the fertility and longevity inheritance from such lines. Both areas have suffered some setbacks in exhibition circles, and it appears to be a fact that exhibition birds, as beautiful as they are, may not live as long as the pet stock variety. If a fancier is dedicated, he may try to overcome

such problems by outcrossing with unrelated stock, and strictly culling any birds and their close relatives from future breeding programs, who fail in the areas of longevity or consistent fertility. Such a breeding program can be accomplished; however, it takes rigid adherence, superb record keeping, and constant monitoring.

Diet

Proper nutrition is essential to success when breeding any species, including Budgies. The old adage, "what you put in, is what you get back" is certainly true in avian husbandry and applies equally to Budgies. Fanciers are encouraged to find the cleanest, freshest seed for their birds and fortunately many good brands of feed, mixed especially for Budgerigars, are available today from commercial manufacturers.

If choosing to provide a staple seed mix, many breeders in the Budgerigar fancy prefer to offer a higher percentage of canary seed over millet, due to its slightly higher protein content. It has been found among some in the fancy that aggression and cannibalism may occur if not enough protein is offered in the diet.

A small amount of oats is permissible during maintenance or the resting cycle, but should be increased during the breeding season or whenever housing birds outside in cooler climates. Other seeds enjoyed include the various millets (e.g. red, Japanese, and especially *Panicum* millet or millet sprays), and limited amounts of high oil seeds (e.g. flax, rape, thistle, etc.) due to their higher fat content, as well as other varieties which are easy to obtain in many of the conditioning and breeding foods put out by commercial feed manufacturers.

As a breeder of exhibition and pet Budgies, I never failed to offer all my birds a conditioning/breeding food and, for years, have had good success with providing a separate feed vessel in each cage or flight of the commercial mash Petamine (also used for my cockatiels and other Psittacines), or Budgimine. The latter product contains some whole millet seed plus animal protein, and was specifically formulated for Budgies and other small hookbills. Other excellent conditioning and breeding mashes can easily be found on the market today and are all a great advantage to either

keeping or raising Budgies.

Due to the arrival of avian pellets, crumbles, and extruded diets in recent years, coupled with some studies and the belief that Budgies are in need of higher protein levels than previously thought, some breeders are now offering such diets to their flocks. Years ago, it was learned that soy was a cheaper source of protein which may be offered Budgiergars; however, today many of the extruded or pelleted diets which include additional vitamins, minerals, amino acids, and other nutrients, may be the easiest and most effective method to provide for the species' nutritional needs. When feeding such products, manufacturers' instructions should be strictly followed. Although Budgies in general are usually cooperative about trying most new foods, especially when introduced to them as youngsters, care should be taken to check that they are actually ingesting, and not just playing, with the new food item.

While we have learned that some individual species require specific dietary items, such as the African Gray's need for extra dietary calcium, or the Conure's need for vitamin K, so does the Budgerigar exhibit a special dietary need for iodine. If iodine cannot be provided for naturally in the diet, it is best to add it as most fanciers do, by obtaining Lugol's Solution and providing it once a week in the water. This should prevent the condition known as goiter or hypothyroidism, which will result in birds falling off their perches, turning in circles, experiencing difficulty in breathing, and will eventually result in death. Consult an avian veterinarian to determine the proper dosage for any affected individuals, or for flock maintenance.

During the breeding cycle, some fanciers choose to provide homemade soft-foods which include hard boiled egg (boiled a minimum of 20 minutes to remove any salmonella), with either whole wheat bread, crackers, or commercial mashes, and perhaps grated carrot. Care must be taken to replenish and remove any traces of old eggfood which will spoil in only a few hours. Soaked or sprouted seed is another popular favorite; however, such items must be rinsed several times a day to prevent bacteria from building up.

Another favorite adjunct is corn on the cob, which is eaten with great relish, or even the popular corn/rice/

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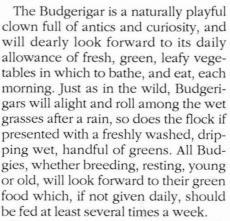
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bean (e.g. legumes) mix typically fed other breeding members of the parrot family. Any of these soft-food mixes can be topped off with a light salting of a good multiple-vitamin mineral supplement designed for avian species, to be certain that a majority of nutritional needs are being met.

Whole grain bread soaked in milk was popular for a time until studies showed that cage birds do have difficulty digesting lactose, a milk sugar, due to the lack of the enzyme lactase, which can result in diarrhea. Whether providing a commercial or homemade conditioning food, such offerings should commence at the start of the breeding cycle, or as soon as birds are paired, so that the resulting embryo receives the beneficial nutrition prior to the formation of the shell around the fertilized egg. The amount of softfood should be increased as the chicks continue to grow.

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Examples of such dark green leafy favorites, ranked highest in carotene, a precursor of vitamin A, are listed in the following descending order: dandelion greens, carrot tops, kale, turnip greens, spinach, broccoli, mustard greens, Swiss chard, chicory, beet greens, and parsley. The majority also contain a moderate level of calcium plus other nutrients. Other excellent vegetables high in carotene (converted into vitamin A in the liver) include: carrots, sweet potato, pumpkin, squash and peppers.3

Generally speaking, the seeds and flowers of a plant life contain more phosphorus, while the leaves contain more calcium.4 Other good sources of calcium include oyster shell, or cooked eggshells baked in the oven at 350° for at least 45 minutes. Calcium should also be administered in the diet by providing either cuttlefish bone or commercial mineral blocks. Be certain such articles are fresh and replace them once used up or if they become hardened or too dry to be of any use. The soft side of the cuttlebone should be facing the birds and a good way to encourage chewing is to scrape a few ridges across the surface with a clean knife.

Although Budgies can be trained to eat a little fruit and will certainly enjoy such edibles as apple, orange, pear, banana, cut grapes, berries, and others, they are not dedicated fruit eaters as are most members of the parrot family. Many pets are encouraged to eat table foods at the breakfast or dinner table and can do very well eating healthy choices in moderation such as cooked eggs, toast, pastas and other starches such as rice, noodles, potatoes, etc. (all without the added fats or sauces), cooked vegetables, plus proteins such as peanut butter, cheese, cooked chicken and meat.

Unless birds are breeding, special treats such as millet spray, bird bells and pies, and others should be fed sparingly as Budgies tend to put on extra weight very easily. This can be counter-productive not only to successful breeding, but to maintaining a healthy, long lifespan. While it is permissible to "fatten up" pairs prior to introduction to the breeding pen or show cage, since they will undoubtedly lose weight by the conclusion of such activities, it is quite another to allow a bird to remain obese and endanger its longevity.

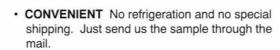
Clean, fresh water given daily is a must for good health and the prevention of disease. Fouled drinking water contaminated by bacteria or foreign substances is one of the quickest routes to a flock's demise. Such contamination can encourage disease to spread through the flock rapidly, and breeders in warmer climates may want to change the waterers more frequently. When breeding, it is prudent to check on waterers often, as the parents require increased amounts which they use to regurgitate food to feed their young.

Part II of this article will continue with a discussion on colony breeding versus individual cage breeding.

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