

FERTILITY & FEEDING

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Fertility

A common question put to me is "how do I achieve a good fertility so that I do not have two poor seasons that can easily put me out of the hobby?" Firstly, let me address a depressing scenario. Here we have the enthusiastic fancier who has, we can say, 20 breeding cages into which he can drop perhaps 30 pairings over a normal season. If he has small birds, he may not have many fertility problems, but with the larger big birds, especially hens, it becomes more difficult in at least 80% of the nests. Easy to breed with the "mice", but not with the "rats."

Our fancier may well be feeding a number of items over and above the standard see mixtures along with water and some vitamins that he has heard about - but doesn't understand. In some cases he's not really interested and this is very true as I have found that in my book "The Challenge" fanciers love to read the "juicy bits" but when it comes to the two most important chapters in the whole book - the ones on feeding - they gloss over them. They are the vital chapters because without taking them step by step and understanding what is required, then a failed breeding season is very likely. Next stage is depression and that can be followed by "exit stage left" from the hobby. Two consecutive seasons like this, and it's a certainty.

Here in the UK is a classic case of one such fancier who approached me for help. He was just not breeding birds of any consequence. You may know him. He is Geoff Bowley, who is a quality judge and whose father won Best in Show at our biggest event some years ago. His fertility was appalling. Geoff is but one of hundreds who have called me over time with just this problem. My reaction is immediately to request every single item that goes into the husbandry of the stud in a nutritional sense. I write them all down as they list them. I can then assess what is going wrong quickly and I can say that 90% of the cases are solvable instantly. This is based on having studied nutrition in Zoology at school, added to all the mistakes that I have made myself in the hobby. In my case, and I appreciate that the UK feeding methods are unlike Australian diets, I was searching for a diet that would stand the test of time, year in, year out.

Searching for the perfect diet

After the Second World War in 1945, the UK hobby just survived with a few dedicated fanciers with relatives who were fighting being pressed to bring home seed in their kit bags whenever possible. Forget the kit - just bring the seed!! The birds were terribly small but bigger than the wild variety. Head qualities were non-existent. I visited Australia in 1975 and experienced the warm hospitality given to a mere "Pom." I lectured at Adelaide University and, of course, attended the large show there at the time. By 1975 however, the British had forged ahead with the massive improvement in head qualities, including depth of mask, spot size, back skull, but until recently, not width of face with directional feather. Therefore, when I saw the Australian birds I could see within minutes that for style and type, Australians were miles in front of us with the deportment and show preparation of their stock, but we had the heads!! I said at the time that if we had what you had, or vice versa, then we would have a real show class exhibition budgerigar. A decade ago I was the UK co-ordinator for 4500 budgerigars that went from the UK to Australia before the import ban came must as a nation down at Spotswood Quarantine in Melbourne. Some great birds went out as I saw every one of them prior to their export. They revolutionised the Australian fancy to what you have today, but you must as a nation, badly need outcrosses after all this time.

So, how did the UK, now joined by Europe, improve everything? The answer lay with two areas. Nutrition and selection and thinking what exactly could be ahead in time but not yet achieved. You had to know a budgerigar's features to the millimetre to be able to do that. The credit for these forward stages goes to names such as Harry Bryan, Angela Moss Frank Wait, Maurice Finey, Joe Collyer, Doug Sadler, Alf Ormerod and Margery Kirkby Mason, to name a few. Binks was around but no more than that. Progress depended, they all agreed, on nutrition and everyone had their own haphazard ideas. All sorts of vitamins and mineral sales were thrust into the birds. Everybody had a biscuit tin full of seed mixture to which was added 12 teaspoons of Cod Liver Oil, and then a product called Kilpatrick's Pigeon Minerals was added. This contained a multiplicity of minerals but mainly salt and carbon. The tin was shaken and the blackened mixture was given after 24 hours. That was THE most successful post war diet and into the 50's that still existed, but it was dead easy to breed budgerigars by the bucket load. I never forgot it but in the 60's new products entered the markets which looked better. After a while I realised that even though they looked good, they were made by "chemists" who understood their chemistry, but they didn't know anything about budgerigars and what they really required to make them highly fertile and far bigger than their ancestors.

Now, I come up to the year 2000 and beyond. Size, feather growth and directional feather, is all the rage. Few fanciers have the latter and to obtain them requires a big dip in the pocket. For many years now I have gone back to basics with a high Vitamin A & D inclusion in the diet and this is where the Geoff Bowley's of the world go wrong. Their birds look fit when you see them, but the big birds of today demand

this high dose to give them the vital energy to reproduce instead of just sitting there or laying infertile eggs. I personally still use cod liver oil but in a lesser quantity at two teaspoons to twelve pounds of seed. I also use the Kilpatrick's Minerals and it has shown me how important minerals are over and above grits and cuttlefish bone. "Binks has, I suppose, bred a fistful again" is something I hear occasionally. So Geoff Bowley was given my diet in full. He applied it fully and after a few months on it, his birds were put down to breed. The results were terrific and he wrote it up in a magazine. However, two years later I heard he was doing badly again, which I found astounding. When I found out the reason it was Geoff who said "I really couldn't get on with the cod liver oil so I dropped it." I was staggered but it proved my point 100%. Today I find that if your birds have the right diet balance there is little need to trim the vent area. Think feather there doesn't matter if the birds are bursting with energy.

The importance of grit

This is a subject that is a bit obscure to many fanciers, especially when they read articles by a few veterinarians "that grit is not necessary." I find this point of view bizarre. Nature has provided birds with a toughened muscular section of their digestive tract, called the gizzard. It will only function if given grit in both soluble and insoluble forms, eg, sharp granites and shell grit. No grits and the gizzard lining becomes ulcerated and breaks down and another distressed bird is found on the floor soon to die. Take shows for example. What is the first thing the birds go to on return home, especially in your country where they are away from home for a longish period? You know they go immediately for the grit pots. The grit not necessary brigade is very wrong in my personal view for giving out such bad advice. Birds do not have teeth so that is replaced by a gizzard and its contents. No "teeth" no proper digestion and nutritional conversion.

Let me turn to the presence of grit in the aviary. Ask yourself, how often do I top it up or replace it? Chances are you just see the grit there and think the birds turn it over, except they do not! What they do is choose the particle they want from the top surface and the smaller particles are rejected and a dust accumulates. You will have seen this, I feel sure, but have you replaced it regularly enough? In flights it is so easy to overlook this important management practice. It also extends to every grit pot when the birds are breeding. They do the same and the bowl looks fine and full, but the birdbrains only take the top layer. Remember, the swallowed good grits are expelled once they are worn down in the gizzard, and require replacing. If none is available, then the chick rearing process is affected and dead or scrawny chicks may be the result. You are the sole provider for your stock. Any failing will be reflected in your breeding or health conditions. There is no substitute for quality husbandry.