

GETTING THE BEST FROM YOUR STUD

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Introduction

I began breeding this marvellous Australian Grass Parakeet at the age of 12, immediately after the Second World War 62 years ago. I am still as fanatical today about breeding top quality exhibition budgerigars though I do not claim to be so obsessed to the exclusion of my family and gold - the latter modestly. Over the years many hundreds of Australian and New Zealand fanciers have visited my home in Virginia Water and all have been welcomed. With my administrative background I was also privileged to have been the UK Co-ordinator for the nine Australian shipments of some of the UK's finest budgerigars to Melbourne, before a ban was instituted as a result of infected ostriches arriving from Canada at the Spotswood Quarantine Station in Melbourne. That ban has not been lifted for budgerigars, but I believe pigeons were permitted until the avian flu outbreak arose. Luckily, 4500 budgerigars did pass into the Australian hobby which has helped enormously with head quality improvements and many fine birds are to be seen these days on the Australian show benches.

The Attack Principle

The title of this article could be summed up in three words - "attack", "attack", "attack". It applies to every Country where the desire to breed super exhibition budgerigars is the ambition of every fancier. I am well aware of the fact that the Australian Show scene, and its structure and administration, is different to the UK. That aside, we all have the same aim as it is the finest birds on display that we wish to breed and own for the simple reason of pride in having achieved something that money cannot buy. That said, there always comes a point where you have to "speculate to accumulate" to buy the essential outcrosses to avoid losing size as well as quality. Sell ten birds and buy one has always been my philosophy.

By the Early Years, I mean the first ten years, perhaps even longer. There is much to learn from each breeding season particularly, the establishing of a feeding regime that really works well and breeds many budgerigars each seas from the best birds you possess. I cannot stress enough how important that is. Two consecutive bad seasons can destroy a stud. That is the danger we all fact as it brings you to your knees and so many leave the hobby at that point. If t

happens there is only one person to blame - you! This is the point where the strongest characters refuse to give in and "attack". In "The Challenge" I have listed in depth many proven successful diets, including Australian diets, that have stood the test of time. Those diets should be unchanged in their entirety and not added to with something that so and so is feeding at your Club. If you do then the stud as a whole is rocked and as budgerigars object to change, it will show adversely in the breeding cages later on. Once you have your proven diet working well may I suggest you write it down and place it on the file because it is so easy to forget an item(s) from the daily routine and then trouble arrives and your memory for what has gone wrong will fail you. Get the feeding right and you can progress to look elsewhere if another problem appears. Remember, you need to produce quantity as well as quality from a nest so that you can select the best two and sell the rest.

Establishing the Basics for a Stud

Like a great house, your stud has to be built on very solid foundations. Your initial problem may be financial. If not then you may be lucky, but if you are financially strapped you may well be better off in the long term, so do not despair. This is the way I began as a boy, but I learned the hard way and was the better for it. The hobby is filled with a cross section of characters. Happily, most are honest and will help beginners in a constructive way, but a few are depressing. I clearly recall my first attempt at buying from one of the top ten UK fanciers when I was fourteen years old. It was my first lesson. I travelled a long way by train to this "famous" fancier. He asked me before I had even seen any of his birds, how much I had to spend. I had saved all my pocket money and said (this was 1948) I had twenty pounds (£50). His reply was stunning to a beginner. He said "You won't get much for that young man". My father having taught me well about the world being full of good and bad people, prompted me to say "No problem, but I am not interested in your birds and I left immediately. He never forgot me and always came up to me at shows after that, obviously ashamed. A lesson learned regarding buying and selling and how to treat people decently and fairly. By contrast, you can have the odd well of fancier who likes to enter the hobby with a bang. He knows little but thinks money will get him to the top. They rarely last the distance and every country will have such examples. They might win for a while but their lack of experience results in their quality dropping with poor results and out they go. So be encouraged that if you have a small pocket, as I did then, that you will make a better fancier if you attack at all times as best as you can. If you are patient and sensible, it is a valuable lesson not to spend anything for 12 months, but in that period visit all manner of studs and shows to get your "eye for quality" (see below) well established. You will also see all manner of aviary designs and that will give you a good idea on construction of your own aviary. Remember that an

aviary has to be designed for what is the best for the birds, not necessarily for what is best for you.

Have you "the Eye?"

This title means have you learned exactly what is wanted in order to win at top level? The next question if you want to save a great deal of expense is "if not, why not?" With long standing experience let me tell you that a top quality judge, and there are many of the, who also breed top quality birds and by doing so keep up to date with new features that are difficult to achieve. They can see faults to the millimetre and that isn't very much. If he/she cannot do so, they are second grade judges and there are even more of those. It is my contention that the top National Show, in any country should be judged by the former group at all times at such a Show of Distinction to which breeders have been striving all year to win and thus deserve no less a compliment. Officials just working through a list of "qualified" judges to please all the judges irrespective of their individual ability, is an insult to every fancier and indeed, any non exhibitor looking around the show I digress, but I make the point to illustrate how essential it is to possess the eye for every detail.

How width of face appeared

From the 1950's until the 70's the majority of us were breeding very good birds - or so we thought. Somewhere towards the end of that period a few fanciers realised there were far better birds around that were streets ahead of the so called "Ideal Budgerigar" as depicted in drawings. One fancier in particular, Ken Farmer, wanted to capture the look that the Norwich canaries possessed with their lateral feather over the head and eyes. Until that time the UK breeders had all their birds with their head feathers growing from front to back over the head. So now the hunt was on for any birds that possess what is now called "lateral directional feathering." By the 1980's the numbers of such birds had increased slightly. The late Harry Bryan was such a breeder who would scour the country for birds with "width of face" as well as not losing the quality features already established. Not easy. Today that feature has become somewhat more common but almost every fancier that comes into an aviary is looking for width and it is that feature that, by its very nature, is expensive to acquire. I called it the 2004 "buffalo effect" which is a descriptive wording that has gone worldwide as a result of "The Challenge" book. Everybody in the UK who arrives at my home wants "buffalos" but so do I, and it is a struggle to keep them.

Focusing the super bird in your mind

I will now assume you have progressed a little. So now focus on the finest bird you have ever seen - forget "The Ideal" - as it is probably behind what is actually being bred, but it has helped as part of your apprenticeship. Carry that image of the finest bird in your mind. It is vital as you are now going out to buy birds to build that bird yourself from hundreds of good birds that may be on offer. Even better, you may have the ability to see beyond the best birds ever seen, but such fanciers are rare. Exactly what financial level you enter the hobby is personal.

Buying the Foundations

Your two selected breeders for purchasing should have a common genetic denominator so establish where their original stocks came from. It is again important because otherwise you will be buying unrelated birds which all have hidden faults that emerge in droves by comparison to pairing related stock from which the super quality birds will suddenly appear. I also stress that you should get pedigrees immediately you purchase new birds so that you know exactly what you are doing over the coming years. My records go back to 1950, believe it or not, but in practice one never goes back that far of course. Another tip - when you go to buy on all future occasions, go alone. You are in a much stronger position to deal with your seller on a one to one basis, and you will not get distracted from getting what you want, bearing in mind what I mentioned earlier. You also have much greater leverage in the process.

Starting the Breeding Season

It is a fact that South African and Australian and NZ fanciers have it far easier to breed budgerigars compared to those in the Northern hemisphere. This is due to the sun and far better light that is available in the south. Reinhard Molkentin in South Africa confirms thus as he has bred in his own country and in Germany as well as in South Africa where he now lives. So, you all have a big advantage.

So, let me assume you have bought three cocks and four to six hens, as not all will be in condition to breed simultaneously. The cocks should have been selected on the basis that any **one** can be paired to any of the hens you have chosen. Watch the hens closely as it is the hens that have to be caught up as they rise up to peak of "itching to breed" and are chewing eucalyptus branches at every opportunity. I prefer to place the hens in the breeding cages with boxes open so they get used to their new territorial area for 48 hours before

the cocks are introduced. Then you get great fertility results. Your season has started.

Looking ahead

Assume you have now bred say 16-24 chicks. Remember to feed them as well as you did when they were still with their parents. So many fanciers drop off the vitamins and soft food intakes and wonder why their birds are not big after 18 months growth. You should be able to have big birds, certainly if they are normals, by the age of 10 months, and then you will know that by 18 months you will have a massive handful later on. You now have to select what to keep and what to sell and with the income go back to the original sellers and buy just one super bird, far better than any of the first group. You then drop this bird, a cock being the obvious choice, into the genetic pool you have started. Then, in the following season get him paired to as many of the best hens available as possible, while transferring the fertile eggs out to other less important nests. Now the excitement starts as the quality being produced suddenly shoots up and in next after nest some great chicks start appearing. Other fanciers now become aware of your stud and begin to come around and try to buy from you. A great time, but keep it going and refuse to sell what you want for next season, bearing in mind you need one third cocks and two thirds hens. You are on the way to the top!!!

Conclusion

Never forget that when you get serious setbacks you are in livestock and they have a habit of losing their breath - permanently. That is the time to forget it and in 24 hours, go back on the attack!