

## Cec & Brenda Gearing Story

*As told by Cec*



My love affair with budgerigars began just after I was married in 1952. I was living in a little country town in the UK, where there was a sudden craze to own a pet bird in a cage. So I purchased a couple of breeding pairs of blue series birds from a bird farm advertisement. My breeding room, believe it or not, was just inside the back door of the house, underneath the stairs. The only natural light came from a 400X400 glass panel in the door itself – a far cry from today's bird room. Although I can't explain it, infertility was unknown, and I don't ever recall any sickness.

In 1958, my wife, two sons and I, took up the "ten pound Pom" migrant offer and came to Australia. After 7 months on the Graylands migrant camp in Perth W.A., we moved to Kalgoorlie, in the Goldfields. The house we lived in had an aviary in the back yard, and I have never been without budgerigars since.

It was, however, not until 2000 that my second wife Brenda and I found ourselves within striking distance of Perth, and began to seriously show our birds. On the day of the 2001 Preselections, I received a very strong reprimand by telephone from the WABC chairperson for not presenting birds. So, from 2002, our budgerigars have represented WA in the National arena. Blackeyes and Fallows are the only varieties that have not carried the Gearing name for WA.

Our birds are fed a Premium seed mix, to which extra white millet is added. Mornings they receive a soft-food composed of a commercial Budgie Starter, Quick Oats, hard boiled eggs, carrots, horse-racing formula, calcium powder and the all-important Dr Rob Marshall's Turbo-Booster. These ingredients are put through a blender to produce a palatable mix. In the afternoon, we feed hulled oats and Finch mix that have been pre-soaked for 24 hours in Vetafarm's Breeding Aid. Remember that the more frequently you feed your birds, the more often they will eat and consequently keep the babies' crops full.

Eucalyptus branches are an essential part of the budgerigar diet; besides keeping them active, they provide ever-changing foot exercise. These branches are replaced at least once a week – fortunately Brenda and I live on an 8 acre forest block, so there is no shortage of supply. Lemons are cut in quarters and are always in the flights, beetroot is given once a week, corn-cobs when in season. Chicken necks, in an attempt to increase the animal protein in the diet, are served boiled in a solution of iodised salt. Of all the green feed which is available, it is my understanding that grasses surpass all other sources in nutritional value. In spring, of course, plentiful amounts of seeding grasses are fed, but the main stand-by throughout the year is Kikuyu grass, particularly the succulent stem portion.

We do have a preventative medication programme; we treat for lice and worms 4 times a year, and before our main breeding programme a 10-day course of Doxycycline is administered, because psittacosis can be contracted via air-borne spores at shows, etc. The faintest of odours from a breeding cabinet warrants a 3-day course of a sulpha drug. The above practice, plus water-soluble supplements, has resulted in a family of birds with a very strong immune system.

Having come from a racing family, I was repeatedly told that “a good horse cannot be a bad colour”, so I guess my favourite variety has to be a winner.

Yes, we have been very successful on the show bench, having won every major state event several times, and have been lucky enough to achieve 5 Firsts, 9 Seconds, 11 Thirds, 12 Fourths and numerous other placings at the Nationals. Our most memorable win, apart from the first, of course, would have to be the Hens’ class in 2011. The sire of this bird was purchased from Malcolm Hinde of WA. Malcolm, an Intermediate Grade fancier, has never offered birds for pre-selection, and it was as a judge that I was drawn to the exceptional density of face feather of this Opaline cock, which, needless to say, went on to become Champion of the show.



Brenda and I had for several weeks been pondering a suitable mate for a particular hen, and this proved to be the ideal pairing. Despite the wide gene pool, the ten young – affectionately

known as “the Grandchildren” – were all incredibly even in quality, and all have won at shows at some level. The reason we are so proud of this National winner is that we can share it with Malcolm, who has beaten cancer on more than one occasion, and who seems more cheered by the progress and success of these birds than by any treatment. Currently, of course he now awaits the prospects of the Great-grandchildren.

We have in the past carried almost every variety. This was born of the necessity to see WA represented right across the board. We see ourselves as team players, rather than individuals, although perhaps concentration on fewer varieties might have given us more wins, but would

have deprived us of a lot of challenges. However, my dear wife insists that any additional varieties would constitute grounds for divorce!!!

Our mainstream family comes from Lutinos, which were given to us by the son of a gentleman who brought them with him to Western Australia in the '90s. These were Kirby Mason birds from the U.K. It was these birds that produced our first Albino, a hen with 11 flights on one side and 12 on the other – a fault she never passed on.

In fact in her first nest she produced both 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> National winning offspring. A yellow face grey hen, paired to one of these, produced a National-winning grey the following year. This is the family that runs right through our stud; outcrosses have been put in (and taken out) from time to time, to improve certain features. The photos of our greys are an example of this family. Although we do not carry many albinos at present, having in the past – because of their quality – only paired albino to albino, this year we are about to pair to greys to produce splits, in an effort to elevate them to a new level.

Opalines are very dominant here. I laughed at the theory that pairing flecked opaline to flecked Opaline, because of their genetic make-up, would result in offspring with cleaner heads and mantles, but – and maybe it is only coincidence – some pleasing results have forced me to retract my mirth.

Our 2011 winning albino has been paired up, but only hatched 2 chicks, which are about to leave the nest now.

Cock birds as young as 6 months have been successfully used in our breeding programme and, although with our bigger buff hens we have on occasion mated them at 7 months to mature partners, I would recommend waiting until at least 10 or 11 months.

Brenda and I both believe that the image one carries in the mind's eye is the secret of success, and even this must change by degrees, as soon as we get close to achieving it. The main attribute of an exhibition bird should always be carriage of 30 degrees from the vertical when standing on the perch. From this centre line you should then build your ideal. The present trend for all of us is, as always, face and head. We look for skeletal formation, so that, even if your bird pulls in at the moment of judging, it hasn't lost everything. Today it is most important to breed for directional feather- described as "Buffalo-faced" – with a deep mask. One very desirable feature, so often lacking, is depth of back-skull. Length of feather is also very important, but not to the extent of some European birds, that appear out of proportion and grotesque. Remember, even a lot of international WBO judges acknowledge that Australia has the best pictorial standard.

Because our birds are generally one family, we endeavour to pair visually, looking to either accentuate or complement each other.

Being a dinosaur, our records are still written, firstly on the nest-box cards, and then transferred to a register. Looking back at the cards further down the track, we are often surprised by comments like, “should be disposed of now” or “will win Nationals”, but invariably good birds are noted before leaving the nest.

Our aviaries are of steel construction, un-lined, with a second roof composed of 90% shade cloth. There are 2 air-conditioners, which are used only in the breeding room, and only when the temperature exceeds 32% in the room itself. We have 4 outside flights, which are 8 M X



1.5 M each, with a “Pop-out” at one end to allow birds access to the elements. Our bird room has 40 breeding cabinets, built of melamine-coated plywood, to provide an impervious surface for ease of cleaning. The nest boxes are attached to the outside, and are all inter-changeable. Remember, the larger the cabinet, the

greater your chances of avoiding chicks being attacked by their parents. Also in the breeding room are 3 inside flights, each approximately 2.5 M X 1.5 M. These enable us to keep a close watch on weaned babies and show teams.

Yes, we always trim around the vents of our breeding birds – not excessively. Hens are often bare in this area after the first round, but always check the cocks. Remember that a heap of stubble can be quite a deterrent!! Nest boxes are in place from the beginning; overly aggressive hens are introduced to the cock bird in a 1.2 M long holding cage and left until they are at least sharing a perch.

We start National preparation 10 weeks prior, primary tail feathers are removed only after consulting our moult records of possible candidates. For example, if a bird has not shed these feathers for at least 6 months, it is reasonable to assume that some time soon they will drop, so remove them. On the other hand, if a bird has recently moulted them, it is best to leave well alone. We require our best birds to be shown at least 3 times before the National. They

are brought into the inside flights to monitor their progress, and washed once, 3 weeks prior to the event.. They are sprayed daily up until the Pre-selections. We limit housing them in holding cages to 1 week only, and spread our de-spotting over 3 days.

WA has only 3 clubs, one of which is a rares specialist one. The number of top exhibitors can easily be counted on both hands, but we do have several promising fanciers on the horizon. Because of our geography, it is very difficult to have, or even expect, a big turnout at shows. The Preselections, of course, bring everything out of the woodwork, and it is not unusual to see birds benched for the first time. Nevertheless, within our limitations, the National scene is very competitive.

As far as judges are concerned, I honestly believe WA's are as good as you could find anywhere. This is depicted by the number of birds available to choose from, and their consistent high ranking at the Nationals.

You are quite correct, it is difficult to maintain a 7-year interest due to our isolation and not being able to just pop over the border to check out the opposition, and of course the problem of finding carers each year and the expense of travel, etc.



I endeavour to pass on such experience as I have by being president of the SWBC, chairperson of the WABC and judges' panel and Colour and Standards coordinator. Magazine articles, club activities, trying to support the rarer varieties, and instigating a Golden-Face Group of WA are examples of my efforts in this direction.

Although I acknowledge that it is a numbers game, quality must always take precedence over quantity. In addition to hygiene and nutrition, I would emphasise above all observation. As an example, in the 70's, one of my sons, at the age of 10 years, when watching me pair birds,

repeatedly said, (despite the threat of a clip in the ear), “You’re not doing it right, Dad. “ At the end, in exasperation, I asked “Why?”, and was told. “You should be using the ones with the Chinese eyes”. This was his observation of directional feather, even back then. (:If I’d known then what I know now” as the song goes) Never persevere with weak birds, no matter how good.

On a personal note:

My favourite food is steak and chips, accompanied, under protest, by salad and followed by chocolate.

My favourite drink is anything but water

My favourite sport is fishing

My favourite team is, of course, the WABC

My favourite music is Australian Country