

## Interview with Dail Cameron

Editor: Dail, I remember you in the Gympie Budgerigar Society years ago, can you tell me how you got into budgies please?

Dail: My first year of club rings was in 1987. My Dad used to colony breed hundreds of Lutinos every year and I remember I was about 4 or 5 years of age and seeing all these Lutinos flying around so the birds have always been in our family.

I remember going to the Gympie Pet Shop in 1986 and whilst there we ran into Hartley Ruskin who became my mentor in my early years. I remember in those early years the Gympie Club had some magnificent breeders like Neville Donaldson, Tom Parker etc. I remember going to a meeting and having eighty or more people there it was great. Actually Nev Donaldson even in the early 90's was trying to get me to do the judging course back then but I was going to university and just didn't have the time to devote to it. Looking back, I probably should have done the judges course back then.

Editor: Yes but then you moved to Toowoomba – what prompted that move?

Dail: Work. I was Head of Nutrition for a stock feed company that specialised in vitamins, minerals, probiotics, and protein production. I started off just being the technical manager just purchasing and overseeing a few things and after a couple of years I moved into the Head of Nutrition which I did for almost 12 years. Towards the end of that I was Project Manager and saw the construction of a lot of new mills for the company which I found quite interesting. It was a little different as we had that long drought and there was a lot of the bigger stud cattle customers which I had to look after directly. Dealing with 4 years of drought was hard so the construction side of things came as a nice change.

Then another company poached me from there and offered me a very good deal to project manage a very large Soya Bean Processing plant for human consumption products. So that was 3 years of project managing one factory with a budget of \$28 million. It was good but an 80 hour week was a short week and a lot of that time was spent in board rooms arguing with people who didn't know what they were talking about. They offered me a full time job but the company wasn't right for me so I resigned and Fiona my wife asked me what I was going to do and I didn't have a clue.

Peter Jeffry and I have been mates for a long time and he used to see all the retaining walls I built round our gardens and told me his customers would kill for those stone walls so I was offered a few other jobs which included a move to Melbourne but I didn't want my birds being shown in a Victorian team for the Nationals and I wanted a break from the Project Managing so I accepted Peter's offer of the landscaping and seven years later I am still enjoying it.

I don't make the money I used to, but if the kids are crook or playing up and Fiona has a night shift I just stay home a little longer. We have had two children since changing jobs as we now have the lifestyle that suits us.

Editor: With your birds, what varieties are you flying at the moment?

Dail: My favourite is Opaline followed closely by Clearwings. I was sorting out a few things and back in the old Gympie days in one year around 1992 I bred something like 400 chicks and there was 380 Opalines. I do have Normals, Cinnamons, Opaline Cinnamons, and a few Lutino's and Violet Recessive Pieds for some colour. I used to have a large number of Spangles – in fact a few years ago I bred an exceptional Spangle which I probably should have shown at the Nationals but it was the only bird I had of that quality so I bred with it. I am very particular about my birds, like if he is important for breeding or not 100% I won't show it as there will always be another show. That Spangle cock bird has bred a wonderful line of hens and luckily I have still got a lot of them in the aviary. I did breed Crests but a group of them were stolen last year and what was left I gave to Peter Cox who has come back into birds to kick him off a bit. The Crest that represented South Queensland was stolen but his younger brother was in the middle of a moult and did not look that good at the time and was left in the aviary.

Editor: We will get onto these thefts now as I think they play a major part of your story. Can you tell us what happened as I believe five aviaries have been hit which includes you being hit twice since the Nationals in Toowoomba in June 2013.

Dail: One was the end of August 2012 where I had 146 birds stolen which left a major hole especially seeing I had just completed a cull as I knew I was going to be busy organising the Nationals in Toowoomba so I cut back the numbers quite a lot and had left myself just a bare number. I have been lucky receiving a lot of help from Henry George– you see four years ago I lost a lot of birds in

the Toowoomba floods and a group of the better birds I took them down to Henry's ~~his~~ place and he paired them up with his birds, looked after them etc. He let me go through his aviary and pick out whatever mates I wanted for my birds. I was lucky as I finished up with a lot of very nice sky blue cock birds and some very powerful greys. Most of those went in the theft last year and about 8 weeks ago I was done again.

You see mostly I didn't have my aviary door locked as I live out on 40 acres and we have a long windy driveway, you can't see the aviary and people would have to know my schedule and Fiona's schedule to know when we are away from home. So after last theft I put extra mesh on the windows and put a better lock on the door itself but they prised the door open. Again they took a group of very nice birds which included joint pairings with Henry, some very powerful Cinnamons and Opaline Cinnamonwings went, Sky blue cocks as well.

Editor: Who else has been robbed?

Dail: Len Baartz the President of the Toowoomba club has been hit where they took 60 hen birds. Peter Jeffry was also hit and he had three brothers taken.

Editor: By the sounds of things the thefts are being carried out by people who know exactly what they are looking for.

Dail: To know Pete's lines and my lines, these people are very selective.

Editor: In my opinion they are nothing but Scum Bags. To steal at all is terrible but to hit one aviary twice sets you back a lot. I know during January this year we lost 14 hens and we know how that set us back let alone you losing as many as you have.

Dail: It sets back your breeding dramatically. So now I have an armed steel bolt that goes into the concrete and security cameras plus other precautions. I was lucky in one instance in that they took cock birds out of breeding cages and Peter Jeffry had 45 pairs up and I was able to put eggs into some of his boxes. Also I was lucky in the fact that I had a group of birds that were moulting and looking like nothing much at all and now they are looking pretty good.

Editor: Well let us hope the rogues are found and punished.

Dail: Everyone keeps asking me if I have the police involved but I keep saying no because if I find out who it was I will sort it out myself.

Editor: If someone wants a bird all they have to do is ask and I am sure you would offer a helping hand.

Dail: You look at now, Peter Cox has come back into it and you give him a helping hand. Some people spend a large amount of money on a bird and they keep it all to themselves. If I have a bird that doesn't do anything at my place I bring it down to Henry's or over to Pete's and share the nest. We have been doing that for years now.

Some birds will not breed in your own aviary and you give them to someone else and they breed like rabbits. It betters the fancy by sharing rounds.

Editor: Getting onto your feed mix – what do you feed your birds?

Dail: A lot of the time I use Golden Cob Supreme mix but having a nutritional background I have the benefits of that, and I have a lot of contacts in the industry where I can pick up some cheaper seeds. If I am getting the standard grain mix which consists of 1/3 each of Canary, Jap and White French. To every 20kgs of that I add ¼ kg the grey striped sunflower seed, garlic oil and if I want to ready hens for breeding I sprinkle some Murphy's minerals on it to bring their mineral levels up to par. I put 20mls of garlic oil into a 50kg batch of seed. I find the one thing I really like about the garlic oil is that you get no moths around or in the seed if you have to store it. The benefit of that is that if you can buy seed when it is on a cheap cycle and store it with low moisture levels than the cost levels are good. If the seed is not nice and clean there are too many issues that can arise with bacteria. I mean I know the Golden Cob mill and it is a very clean seed with no extra shells etc. which is where the bacteria forms. Keeping a nice clean seed is the real key to storing it and maintaining the goodness.

Editor: I take from that you would not be a fan of giving soaked seed?

Dail: The only soaked seed I give is just before I am getting ready to pair up. My hens go into a holding cage and they get the soaked seed, carrots and greens. The cock birds I keep leaner as it is proven in all animals basically that overweight males have poor sperm activity so you must keep the males conditioned but not over-conditioned.

With the hens a little bit extra condition doesn't hurt but not over conditioned as you start getting low fertility and egg binding but I don't mind putting a little conditioning on. I feed the soaked seed, carrots and greens all through the breeding cycle as they know they get some nice treat whenever they want it.

With the seed I use Titicale which is a rye/wheat cross and its general digestibility is much higher. It looks a little like a longer thinner barley and when I can get it which is difficult at times, I get a couple of bags so it will last me the whole season. When you look at oats and barley they sit on around 60% digestibility, wheat sits on 70% and Triccale is in the high 80's so they are getting so much more out of it straight away because of the digestibility. The protein level is similar to oats, wheat and barley in the mid 13's so there is nothing special in the protein and energy levels but the digestibility is good. You know when you talk about the budgie crumbles you are still only talking about 90% because it is cooked but Triccale is so much cheaper.

Editor: So, you soak some barley and Titicale – do you add bleach to kill the fungi?

.Dail: I used to soak with a few drops of bleach and then rinse, dip and rinse but just before I left my last job I had to do some extra studies in Microbiology and food practices and we studied heat treatments for controlled bacteria. At 65 degrees every general bacteria we have is destroyed – I know there are some very powerful ones that we don't see in Australia that will live after that but E.coli and Steph etc. is gone after 65 degrees. So what I have been doing is putting the seed I want to soak in a jar of water in the fridge over night to start softening it, in the morning I put it in a Pyrex container in the microwave for 15 minutes and I swear it looks like you have soaked it overnight.

Editor: 15 minutes full on? How much are we talking about?

Dail: Probably about 2 litres water and you want it to boil for 5 minutes so you can change your time depending on the volume you have. What happens is that it softens the seed once it is boiling and once it is boiled you take out the bacteria and improves the digestibility. Cooked grains go up to that 90% once it is cooked. So if people who soak their seed just put it in the microwave and boil it for 5 minutes it is more beneficial to the birds as it is more digestible and the bacteria has been killed off.

I also give the birds silverbeet and I am lucky I am on a few hundred acres so I actually have green panni grass with fresh seed heads on. I feed a lot of

Eucalypt leaves in the flights and I chuck some branches in. I have a lot of overhanging branches in the flights and you see the birds playing between the branches and eating the leaves. They have a ball chewing on them and the place smells of eucalypt and since doing this the birds have not had a problem with mites or anything like that. I have even looked at feathers under the microscope and they are clean. I spray with Coopex once a year by wetting all the birds and spraying the aviary as a precautionary measure but I think having so much Eucalypt there is getting rid of all the mite.

Editor: I was told years ago that the Eucalypt flower is one of the most natural antibiotics you can give your birds.

Dail: There is a lot of work being done on honeys and pollens for all sorts of bacteria control with the different enzymes so I can understand that. If you put in a branch with a few flowers on it, the birds go all out for it. Even the young birds fight for it so it must be in their genes and they know it is good for them.

Dail: Anything else you give them?

Dail: No, but I believe the consistency of the mix of seed is important. If I can get enough Triccale to go through the whole breeding season I will but if I can't get enough I won't start it. The worst thing you can do nutritionally for any animal is change things all the time. If you have a feeding programme and you can go right through the season on it, it is better than feeding something really good for a while and then changing to something less nutritional as that is a big No No. It upsets the whole digestive system – keep it simple for something you can look after. You don't want it where it is going to take you hours of work as it then becomes a chore and then you try to find an easier way and that leads to you not looking after them properly.

Editor: Now you give this soft food mix during the breeding season, do you slowly taper it down when the birds are finished breeding?

Dail: The hens go into a holding cage that has Nestfeathers I have weaned off the parents. These birds get the soft food mix for a couple of weeks after they have started to break then go into a flight. If there is any soft food left over that goes into the young birds as they require more protein than the older birds. I find again with the hens that are used, they have two or three weeks

of having access to the soft food and free access to Murphy's Minerals before going into the main flight. Once the cock birds are matured they don't require as much minerals. Just general access to mineral mix will suffice.

Leading up to breeding season the mature cock birds can benefit from green feed from the increase in vitamin B levels as this helps with the whole reproductive system and increases the quality of the semen.

Editor: You said you give your hens' free access to Murphys Minerals. – can I ask why?

Dail: Nutritionally it covers all the good based elements. When I can find it in a health food shop, I buy some kelp granules which I mix into it but I find with Murphy's it covers the general basis of all your general minerals. I use Ornithon vitamins (yellow powder) but the only thing you have to watch is that the level of B group vitamins is great for birds but you have to be so careful when B group vitamin is mixed with water because bacteria love B group vitamins. You see scientists growing bacteria in agar dishes that purple stuff is B group vitamins as it grows bacteria so well. When you have a vitamin supplement that is high in B group especially B12 you have to be so very careful.

Editor: So if you are giving a vitamin B supplement over the weekend you are saying you would have to replace the water and supplement daily? You couldn't make it up on the Friday or Saturday morning and leave it there until Sunday afternoon.

Dail: No I wouldn't in our weather. In a Toowoomba winter I would say it wouldn't be an issue, in a Brisbane winter if you had a colder time it wouldn't be an issue but definitely not in the warmer months.

Editor: Actually I must agree with you because we have been giving a vitamin B supplement in the water and we mix it up on Friday and leave it there until the Sunday and I have noticed the drinkers feel a bit thick and filmy.

Dail: Yes that is bacteria just starting to develop. They congeal water quite well. In summer I would take the water containers away on Friday afternoon. On Saturday morning I would mix up the vitamins and give it to them and take it out again on the Saturday afternoon and scrub out the vessels.

Editor: We started giving Vita Boost which is high in the vitamin B group five years ago after suffering from dropped tails and flights and losing chicks a few days old. Veterinarian Ron Woodhead told us to give it to them every weekend regardless. We have been free of the problem for years now until this year when we have brought birds in that had not been having the vitamins but we do mix it on Friday and leave it there till Sunday.

Dail: What I would do in your case is to acidify the water. Most of your bacteria likes slightly alkaline conditions like six & a half to seven & a half. Yes there will be some bacteria growth but you can limit it by adding Apple Cider Vinegar or Megamix or similar items.

Editor: So in layman's terms, you are suggesting getting your bucket of water, adding some Apple Cider Vinegar and then adding your vitamins.

Dail: Basically yes. I do boil all of my drinking water anyway because we are on tanks so it is the easiest way for me. I like the PH level of the water to be about five & a half to six. You can get a water testing kit for \$12 from Masters or Bunnings and that does 100 testings. We bought one for Henry's aviary as the bore water is changing all the time. We tested the water at Henry's and it was reading 8.2 even after mixing with the Megamix. Just straight bore water was 10 plus.

Editor: So we have covered the water and we have covered the food, branches.

Dail: Yes I am one for lots of Eucalypt.

Editor: what about Grevillea.

Dail: I used to give grevillea quite a bit in Gympie. I put in a large Grevillea garden for Mum and I used to use the flowers as well. Hibiscus is great for them. Actually all Australian natives are good and a large number of people do not know that Hibiscus is an Australian Native plant. The birds get into the dark green leaves which have a lot more iron and Vitamin E content. The same with the flowers. There are some varieties the birds don't like e.g. the Bloodwood gums they don't like and just won't touch. They like the spotted gum etc. They are so sweet.

Editor: You said you are breeding Clearwings – do you breed Clearwing to Clearwing or split to splits?



Dale: All of the above. I use Clearwing to Clearwing to keep a nice line of clearwings. I generally only pair clean Clearwing to Clearwing. The Clearwings that are a bit dirty in the wings I usually use them to breed my splits. Every now and again I will breed a split to a split if they are exceptional just to try to fluke another exceptional split.

Editor: But you wouldn't know which of these normal offspring are split clearwing or not

Dail: No but the families I use for those are not closely related to my main group. You have to be patient and take the time to test mate the offspring to see which ones are split.

The reason I love my Opalines so much is because going back to the late eighties, I saw some Nev Donaldson Opalines, a sky blue and an apple green cock birds. There was no markings on the mantle at all – they had lovely black on yellow or black on white wings - they were just magnificent. They had long masks and big round spots and I found that if you are breeding Opalines with smudgy markings to another bird with smudgy markings the chicks will produce dirty markings and dirty mantles. If you can keep putting clean Opalines to clean Opalines the markings look brilliant on them.

Editor: What about the Opaline Cinnamons – they seem to be very dirty with unwanted markings.

Dail: They are. I don't know why. I have been looking at the Cinnamons on the show benches whilst judging and I have noticed they are getting more and more ticking through them in general. There seems to be a lot of Cinnamon Grey Greens out there and if you take a close look you will see the flecking or ticking coming through. I think it has something to do with the mask because I have noticed the masks have more spots on them and the exhibitor has to really hack into them to bring the bird back to having six spots. I am thinking there must be a link between the heavier spotted mask and the flecking. The mask shape is different too. I have found that the birds with the rounder mask shape, the spots are more spaced out whilst those with the squarer shorter mask have the tendency to have the multi spots and flecking.

Editor: So what made you become a judge after all this time?

Dail: The challenge. Like I said to you before Nev Donaldson was onto me in the early nineties to do the judges course but I didn't have the time. To be honest I love judging. I thoroughly enjoy it. This years Future Show was great as I started off with a class of 18, then a class of 24 and then a class of 32. To go through and sort those birds out is a real challenge. I would love to see 50 people in the judges association. I think they could really enjoy it once they got over the initial nerves of someone watching them. IT adds another dimension to it.

Editor: Years ago, we used to have 44 judges but through natural nutrition etc. the numbers are now dangerously low. Also, a few years ago, we went through a stage of all judges copping a lot of criticism and that did the fancy a lot of harm

Dail: Yes it did. The whole thing also even went across the selection of the SQBBA zone team which was absolute rubbish. I mean I have had nineteen birds selected for the zone and I am still to gain a point at the Nationals because something has always happened prior to benching and that is the way it happens. My Crest at Toowoomba I thought I had a chance with. I was checking the teams of birds in and I would look at the birds and say "gee that is a good one" or "that won't beat my Crest" and when Neale Love told me my birds tail had been bitten off, I just thought "oh well, that is the way it goes".

I have known Henry since 1989 ~~and Kevin O'Callaghan are the two people I have known in birds since way back then.~~ Henry he is one of my best mates. I would have no problem with Henry judging every class of the SQ team regardless of if he had birds in the class or not.

Editor: Well to be honest with you I have been a selector in the past with Henry and I can honestly say I have seen him go for the other person's bird over his because it was superior.

Dail: It really annoys me in general the criticism of judges and how the SQ team is selected. The fact is that we can keep changing the process and you will not keep everyone happy. The preparers are doing their best to get the most points for our zone.

Editor: Thank goodness the criticising has backed off a lot.

Dail: I would love to see the system change to the top four birds in each class of our zone selection go to the preparer/carers aviary. Then before they are

due to fly out to the Nationals, a group of judges decide which three are going to be sent regardless of how they were placed the week before. Birds change so much in a week, they handle different aviaries differently, they handle the preparation differently, and I would be much happier thinking well I was #1 at the zone selection but the bird that ran fourth handled the conditions better and won the Nationals so my birds is still a bird to be proud off.

Editor: I think egos play a major role in the events.

Dail: Very much so has but the number has reduced in the past couple of years.

Editor: Now you have attended a few national shows, are you going to Perth?

Dail: I am not this year as we have a family thing organised for that time. I really love the Nationals and I think I have been to eleven of them now. I think they are a lot of fun. I have been to one in Tasmania, but I haven't been to a Western Australia one yet. I wanted to go next year but my family have some things planned for that time. Also two weeks after the Nationals next year I have a get together every two years where a few of the bird mates and close mates go fishing out the Swaines outside of Gladstone. So Perth has a miss next year.

Editor: Are your children interested in the birds.

Dail: Aiden, my five year old likes them. I have got him handling them now without being scared. Mind you I always put the quieter birds on the bottom rows as I don't want his finger being torn off and then being scared of handling them. Birds have always been in our family but Dad can't have the budgies anymore because of the dust so he has finches like the Ruddys, the Cordon Blues and a whole range of things up there. I am building a finch cage as my wife Fiona doesn't like the budgies because they bite. Not that she will do anything with them mind you, she just likes them.

Editor: What do you see is developing as a major problem on the show bench?

Dail: Bad wings – and combination breeds. There are some people I know who will pair any variety to any variety. There is one breeder I know who breeds Lacewing Dominant Pies and unless the lighting is very good they are difficult to pick up. All I can say to them is “where are you going to show them on the show bench?” They are not allowed in the Lacewing class, nor are they allowed in the Dominant Pied Class. They would have to go in the Any Other

Variety class and there is no class for them at the National level. So really you could breed the best ever budgerigar in the world and not be able to show it at National level.

Editor: What is your theory on the Yellow Face being a colour and not a variety?

Dail: I can understand their thinking behind it as the yellow colour does wash through and it is only us selecting to keep it on the face. However it is a dominant gene as it is either there or not as it cannot be split so I think where we used to show it was the correct class and where we show it now, no I don't agree. If you can't have a split thing, it is either visual or not, it is a dominant variety.

Editor: is there anything else you would like to cover?

Dail: I would like to go back to the floods I mentioned earlier - I live toward the top of the edge of the range and we didn't realise that in part of the paddocks behind us there was an old dam and an old spillway come out just above our house on the hill so when Toowoomba had the floods we had a constant wall of water coming down into my aviary. We had a good metre of water and it was churning around so much that it ripped the paint of the walls. It totally stunned me and I lost a lot of birds in that. Where the concrete slab of the aviary was, the water had chewed out the concrete slab. When I built the aviary there must have been a rock sitting about 8 inches below the slab. After the water had resided, the rock was holding the aviary and the water had chewed out about four metres of dirt under it. I have a picture of it where the water is still running chest high deep and you just have the rock sitting there with the slab on it. I had bred two magnificent cinnamon cock birds that year which probably would not have beaten Kevin O'Callaghan's Cinnamon Sky that year but would have given the judges something to think about and picking up their bodies was heart breaking. What birds were left somehow fitted into Peter Jeffrey's aviary, and then over the next few months Pete helped me build my new Taj Mahal

To counter that happening in the future I have built my aviary further away from the house in another direction. I brought home an excavator and I have basically built this landing out in the middle of the drop off. If my aviary floods again, Brisbane will be under 100 feet of water. In no circumstances can it ever be flooded again.

Editor: What would you like to see occur in the fancy ?

Dail: I would love to see more people do the judges thing. I would like to see people who are just remotely interested put their name forward, come along to a show and experience the feel of sitting there with a judge and saying right we have a class of eight birds let's see how we can promote the winner. Just to have some experience of a couple of classes and the judge will ask which bird they like and explain their reasoning. Just enough to get the interest in judging as it makes you understand the actual Standard. I am amazed at how many people breed budgies and they don't know what the Standard says. There is one person who tells me they are a specialist Lacewing breeder but when you ask them what is the colour of the cheek patch or the feet, they have no idea. It is amazing that when you go with the judge and look at the birds closer, you get to see exactly what the Standard is saying . Let's have lots more judges in the next two years – let's do it.