

Exploding the Myths Plain Canary Seed

By Brett Doran

I read an interesting editorial in Budgerigar World, October 1998 issue by Terry Tuxford discussing some of the common held beliefs, which are passed on from generation to generation and remain unquestioned. I will expand on some of the issues he raises and others in this and subsequent articles.

Sharon and I began to question the belief that exhibition budgerigars require a diet based on a high percentage (50% plus, year round) of Plain Canary seed. We questioned whether they ate high quantities of Canary based on preference or through necessity as the diet provided little else. The only way to test this dilemma was to feed each seed in separate bowls. Our dry seed includes Plain Canary, White, Jap and Panicum Millets.

I have noticed in recent years that as the percentage of Canary seed in the mix had increased, the vitality and fertility of the birds had decreased. Since feeding the seeds separately in the flights the vitality and activity of the birds including the hens has been remarkable. This of course may be coincidental, but I don't think so. Long term results based on a scientific basis will prove or disprove the theory.

We have had a number of poor breeding seasons with listless birds in the flights, youngsters unable to fly due to lack of muscle strength in the wings, nests of infertile eggs and worse still, full clutches not hatching.

Sharon made the decision after the 1997 breeding season that the mix must be contributing to our poor results. As of December 1997 the seeds were separated. The following points have become apparent since then:

1. Non breeding birds in the flights eat a diet consisting predominantly of Millets with a small amount of Canary approx. 25%.
2. During the breeding cycle this changed as chicks began to hatch, the majority of the pairs switched to a diet built on 50-60% Canary. Once back in the flights after breeding the adults reverted back to their original predominantly Millet based diet almost immediately.
3. In the youngsters flight Canary accounted for 60% of the diet.

Our results indicated that while feeding chicks Canary intake peaks, and once pairs are split up, reverts to non-breeding levels. Canary usage is also high in the young bird flights during the early growth period up until the second moult at about 6 months. It is becoming obvious to us that force feeding high percentages of Canary seed to our birds year round is having an adverse affect on them. With choice the birds take in this high protein diet only when it is needed, logically during the initial growth period as youngsters and as adults when feeding chicks.

After these changes what results have we had? A very successful year in fact which will see 250+ chicks rung. All chicks capable of flying (no weak muscled birds produced) and showing a vigour not seen in the youngsters for a number of years. A vitality not experienced in recent seasons including many older birds which had appeared listless and disinterested in previous years. I know we won't be going back to a year round high protein diet. How often do we read and hear about birds that don't breed and just get fat and disinterested in the flights. Perhaps the exhibition breeder in his attempts to increase feather production and bulk with year round high protein diets is in fact producing lethargic and weak muscled birds which produce poor breeding results. Horse breeders will know that continual high protein diets will produce a condition called "Tying Up Syndrome" which results in horses being unable to perform even the simplest of tasks without it causing pain and discomfort. This syndrome effectively puts a horse out of action and to return the animal to peak performance is not achieved overnight. This condition also has an effect on the kidneys. Doesn't this sound similar to flightless birds and listless poor performing birds. Perhaps any readers with a medical or scientific background can advise us as to what a long term high protein diet

If at any time you decide to modify the birds diet in any way remember to do it after the breeding season so as to give your birds the maximum period to adjust to the change. The other benefit we have experienced is less wastage and therefore a reduction in seed costs.

Footnote:

This article only deals with our dry seed usage. We also supply a soaked seed mix as well as a variety of vegetables to provide a balanced diet to our birds.