

## The Colin Flanagan Story



### **An interview with Colin Flanagan**

Colin Flanagan is in a very successful partnership with Bruce Sheppard and resides in Victoria, represents that State at the National show every year. Commenced breeding budgerigars in 1970 and began the partnership in 1990 to

share the costs associated with the importation of birds from the UK. They are both senior panel judges in Victoria.

Colin and Bruce have won approximately 10 National classes between them and in the last two years have placed as follows, all of which should make for very good reading.

I interviewed Colin a number of years ago and once again have found him to be more than willing to answer my numerous questions and pass on to our readers some of his valuable knowledge. I caught up with Colin in February 2002 when he was working in Queensland and asked him a few questions.

*Q: Colin, you were telling me that you have been away from home for over three months now.*

Colin: That's right. My aviary Manager has been looking after the birds. I don't employ this aviary manager – the services are free. Her name is Leanne (Partner). I was home for a short period over Christmas and for a couple of weekends in between but by in large Leanne has been doing all the work.

*Q: Did Leanne have much to do with the birds before you went away?*

Colin: Yes definitely. I tend to be away from home a bit with work. This is improving and is much less than in the past with the only exception being the current three-month stint.

*Q: So has Leanne bred all the good birds? Does she pair them up?*

Colin: During the long weekend in June Bruce and I pair up my birds one weekend, and then we take some spares to his place and pair up his birds the following weekend. I have just watched the Harry Bryant tape and I was very interested in what he said. That the lesser brother or sister of a champion bird is often the one to watch.

Bruce has had a few bad seasons in a row and what we found we were doing is taking the lesser brothers and sisters to his birdroom and using them to fill up cages, this has proven to be very successful.

In particular there are two Dominant Pies cock birds that you could not sell to another breeder as the quality was more like pet shop quality, however they are related to the Grey hen that won the hen class at the Nationals last year. She is such a big solid hen and the chances of breeding from her were limited anyway so you have to go to her lesser brothers and sisters. You should see the quality that we have bred from these related birds at Bruce's now, "all I have to do now is get them back". Out of two rounds, the Grey hen has only had one fertile egg, which did not hatch, but the two lesser brothers have had twenty chicks between them. They are good strong fertile birds. You probably should never consider selling a lesser brothers or sisters anyway without test mating them first.

*Q: If a pair breeds well this year and produces some outstanding progeny, would you mate the same pairing again or do you feel you are just standing still doing this.*

Colin: That is a really difficult question but I suppose that would be dependent on your stud conditions. We are finding quality improving quickly at the moment and because the quality is improving quickly I will probably mate the pair up again this year as they young are more advanced than the average for the stud.

*Q. Why is your quality improving rapidly*

Colin: We began to outcross our birds with great success, that is why I am interested in this importation that may or may not be coming up shortly. In hindsight I am sure that Bruce and I made a huge mistake about ten years ago. In 1990 we imported from the UK about sixteen birds into our aviaries these were mainly Peter Sanderson birds. We put them all together we were a bit paranoid about mixing them up with any of the Australian stuff, as they were as different as chalk and cheese. We line bred and line bred and line bred for a long time and had success on the bench especially with a Yellow Faced Grey a Dominant Pied and a Double Factor Spangle which was a magnificent bird.

However, these birds were really few and far between, as we had a lot of other birds at home as well and it is only recently that I have been out buying a few birds at auctions and making a pig of myself from time to time, but these outcrosses have been just fantastic.

*Q. Have you stuck with one line for your outcrosses?*

Colin: I have been looking for those elusive pieces of the puzzle that make an exhibition Budgerigar. As long as the owners stud has a bit of depth behind it and the features are in the bird I will buy it. I had the opportunity to go to the auction in Sydney last year and there were Kakoscke birds on sale A long necked Skyblue caught my eye, as I always want a bit more length in my birds.

I think some of the birds that have been brought into this country have been very short in body length. Whilst they do have a beautiful face I think the birds are simply not long enough. Anyway there was this ridiculously long necked Skyblue; it was almost exaggerated in body length. If I recall correctly he only cost me \$35 or maybe \$65. This bird is the one that has bred this Grey hen and in the following year a Skyblue cock bird, yes he has brought an extra piece to the puzzle that we all strive to put together. It is just a jigsaw and you have to find the right compatible pieces to complete the puzzle.

Overall outcrossing have also given our birds some hybrid vigour and now I am getting up to eight fertile eggs in some nests so it has been a good investment for many reasons.

*Q: Do you take much notice of feather width when you are pairing up or do you just go by the visual outline of the bird?*

Colin: Yes when pairing up the birds we pull feathers and study what feather is being paired to what however this is not our primary consideration. I don't think that budgies are any different to any other livestock.

Leanne and myself own, operate and live on a dairy farm where we have a quality Holstein dairy herd as well as two other pure breed beef herds. There is no doubt in my mind that irrespective of what animal you choose to breed overall conformation is the first priority and in some breeds accounts for a large amount when judging that breed.

After breeding budgerigars for over thirty years I still find myself looking to enhance bone structure and conformation (yep still not happy). I work to improve conformation and bone structure first in every mating and after that it is nice to have the feather length in the mating

*Q: Do you think that is why the shorter birds are appearing more and more? Breeders have watched a lot of videos from overseas where feather length is the main topic and I feel not enough importance is placed on the bone structure.*

Colin: I think that must be right because we have all got a bit carried away with the feather, it is very attractive and something we didn't have before in Australia, we have been sucked in a bit by a pretty face and conformation has been left behind. Mind you there are a number of breeders around at present that have achieved significant bone structure and overall frame in their birds any you do tend to focus on these style of birds when judging. This in it self will go a long way to get the masses on the right track as these types of birds will hold you in good stead for the future.

*Q. Do you feel the English birds have gone down in quality since we imported them? If yes, do you feel we have lost the nice thick down on the birds and if so is it due to climate?*

Colin: In our aviary, quality has gone down definitely but outcrossing is improving addressing this decline. My theory is not so aligned with the climate of Australia eroding the down, but rather that Australians only imported a small amount of birds when compared to the number of birds already in Australia (ie the total domestic flock). The Australian domestic flock is significantly smaller than that of Europe, and the Australian domestic flock is dangerously genetically closer to the wild bird.

If a U.K. breeder choses to outcross he will probably go to a much stronger genetic bird than we could in Australia and there is no chance of them inadvertently introducing any wild bird type genetics.

My theory is based on the wild bird being very dominant for type and in to many instances people who imported birds could not afford to keep these birds pure and must have outcrossed to birds that have questionable pedigrees.

*Q: I think some Brisbane breeders are silly in that they don't appreciate the quality of Henry George's stud of birds. Henry can have birds in an auction here and he is flat out getting a \$100 or in some cases even a bid. The same birds can go interstate, people buy them and improve their birds dramatically and people here can't understand why the other states beat us at the National Championship shows.*

Colin: I was speaking to an Ex Victorian exhibitor on the phone recently and one of the things he reminded me of was how competitive the bird scene is in Victoria when it comes to exhibition budgerigars.

The Victorian fancy is all the better for Henry and others putting their birds in an auction it is a true win/win because they know they are going to be sold for a reasonable price as there are people buying at the top level, the middle level and the beginners.

Always remember there is much truth in that you don't need to buy the champion bird but rather the lessor brother or sister and our Victorian members understand this principal very well. So for reasonable prices they can purchase nest mate or related stock to top quality birds, that might not look the same but genetically the pool behind them is strong. It is fantastic for our beginners and others to have the opportunity to have the likes of Henry's birds made available to them.

For whatever reason bird auctions have been well received in Victoria and I would think that in one season you can go to about eight properly conducted bird auctions, where there are heaps of genetics and real opportunities (pieces to the puzzle).

*Q. Unfortunately we have one or two clubs who always seem to win the club challenges here and the other clubs don't view it as a challenge anymore. Some have even asked for second*

*place trophies. Instead of striving for first, they give up and say that certain clubs can't be beaten.*

Colin: That is a shame. I too consider this to be really negative thinking but it does depend on the time that people have for the fancy. My club Mountain Districts started some twelve years ago with only a hand full of exhibitors, we have had moderate success until late were we are clearly now the club to beat in Victoria winning two shields in a row, and you should see the internal drive to make it three. It can be done it takes dedicated time.

*Q. What are your hopes this year on the show bench"*

Colin: Unfortunately hawks have already knocked over Bruce's Dominant Pied Dark Green hen that I we had a lot of hope for. The hawk's talons went straight through the top of her head and she was a real Champion. You will never know now but at the right time on the right day I feel she would have done very well. There are a few Dominant Pieds, Cinnamon Opalines, Double factor spangles and Black Eyes in Bruce's aviary while in my birdroom there are a couple of Light Greens, certainly one or two Skyblue, and the others are Cinnamons and Lacewings. When we first bred with the Sanderson birds, we bred some nice Cinnamon Opalines and we are both on the way back into this variety.

*Q: So how many other colour varieties do you breed?*

Colin: Definitely too many but it is a bit easier as both Bruce and myself have significant birdroom establishments we would have in excess of a hundred breeding cages between us. We often consider it easier to state those breeds we don't fly, such as Recessive Pieds, Greywings, Fallows, Albinos and Lutinos. You should remember our club variety challenges in Victoria are exactly the same format as the Nationals. The State Trophy is well sought after and to have the club at that level you must score good points in all of the varieties. "Now for a political statement" but now we have to breed those "bloody" Cresteds as well. It is going to rob breeding cages and Normals in both aviaries but to win the State Trophy we have to cover all classes. Of course this will have some flow on effect to the Nationals in time.

*Q. Have you noticed a fall in membership numbers in Victoria?*

Colin: Definitely. We have a few juniors but not enough coming through, the drop off is due to a combination of things. It is very hard with council restrictions as to what pets can be kept in our own backyards; in fact having birds in cages is even questioned from time to time. School is far more demanding these days. There are many competing hobbies for children and perhaps some less lifestyle demanding than breeding budgerigars. Nobody has as much free time as in the past, even peak hour on the highway lasts until seven o'clock every night. We do tend to spend more time at work and lots of conflicting pressures and simply not as much leisure time.

*Q. Do you think politics (within the fancy) has played too big a role in the fancy?*

Colin: It is disappointing with declining memberships that you say politics gets a mention, we do have to look at the way we manage the bird fancy today and for the future. I expect there could be

a small percentage of people leaving the fancy due to politics but this is probably only about 2%er we should not blow this out of proportions.

Some people are very passionate about the birds and I suppose I'm pretty quick to talk about the silly decision that impact the bird fancy as a hole. And the general fancier can be cruel it is a shame that we don't always support our judges and our Council only need to ensure the up and coming judges are equipped with the knowledge, skills and importantly the attitude to do the job and how hard is it to find these people.

*Q: Judging is very difficult though because a number of birds, depending on the bloodline fall away after judging. The Binks birds, for example, look super at the beginning of judging but afterwards, fall away shockingly. Do you feel the changing birds have a negative effect on people's opinions of judges' decisions?*

Colin: There is a small window of opportunity for each bird as it is being judged and if a bird presents well during that window than it has done its job. It doesn't matter what happens after judging. I suggest they Grey hen I mentioned earlier is typical of this category. It accepted its window of opportunity at the Nationals. I am pleased that we have come to our senses by having the National show over two days. This means that the birds are not caged for too many hours prior to judging as used to happen with the latter numbered classes in the format of the one-day show.

The birds are at their best between 9 am and noon on the show bench, after that they have had enough. I felt sorry for the poor "buggars" who bred Lacewings, spangles and others down to the Hens class, as it was very difficult for some of these birds. The birds would often not perch nor show themselves to their full potential.

*Q: Do you think some judges spend too much time judging birds and wanting them to stay showing for too long?*

Colin: I have been accused of judging birds too quickly naturally you don't need much time to assess a bird. Especially if it is sitting when you first access the bird it doesn't have to be sitting for the duration of the class being judged. At the end of the day you have to make the right political decision and you must see the bird on the perch remembering the birds conformation and type is not going to change just because it is sitting on the floor. You can judge the bird on the floor but they do have to spend a certain amount of time on the perch, as there are a lot of attributes you can't pick on the floor After all the real job is not judging the birds but it is educating the exhibitors to understand what we are looking for on the bench.

*Q. How do you prepare your birds and bring them into show condition?*

Colin: I get criticised because I am not a good preparer of birds. I didn't mention earlier that I have a lot of support and two of my best preparation team are Kevin and Margaret Bridgman. Just before the Nationals, they house the Victorian Team birds for the week and they do a fantastic finishing job on my birds.

You don't get many chances with these English bred birds as they have soft feathers and could drop spots, tail feathers etc very easily. We do however wether the birds are complete or not give every bird a run at a least two shows prior to the National pre selection and at these shows we let the judges and exhibitors train our birds.

*Q. What age do you pair up your birds?*

Colin: Although some hens come in very early (as young as 3 or 4 months). I never mate them until they are about twelve months of age. We pair up on the long weekend in June, which is traditional in Victoria as the days get longer and the birds start to come back into condition due to our weather pattern this time of the year. Any babies bred late say in November or December we don't pair up on the first round. We also pair up when they are in condition meaning good body weight, right coloured ceres etc or else we are just wasting our time. I also try to have all my birds back out in the flights by Christmas Day.

*Q. Do you feel the birds must have a break and not have the breeding cages utilised the full year?*

Colin: The birds, the breeder and the bird room needs a good break. So many times people say "Gee I had a lot of French Moults this year and I had to break up my pairs". When I ask them how long their season went they reply "that they didn't actually stop breeding from the last year" and I wonder when do they actually clean their aviary. I disinfect my bird room so strongly that it would knock you over. If you don't split up at all, you can't possibly clean the properly. Mind you I have sterilised the aviary and still got French Moults but maybe I wasn't as thorough that season?

I vacuum regularly in the walking areas but the inside areas have a lot of seed in them – the deep litter method, the outside gets a little weather so I scrape that down every weekend and probably every three weeks I go in with a vacuum cleaner and clean it all out. I prefer dry cleaning to hosing out. Speaking for myself I know that I need a break from breeding and I note that so do the birds.

*Q. Do you change the water daily?*

Colin. It is one of the key factors in maintaining bird health, you must change the water every day and I also have open bowls that I feel is essential. I have birds that can do backstroke they love the open bowls that much. I feel you must always have open bowls but it is vital you have a system of changing the birds' water daily. My water is pure rainwater of the roof.

*Q. What food, soft foods or additives do you use?*

Colin: Everything that has ever been fed to birds I still feed it, basically we have some fantastic Tonic Seed available in Melbourne that has everything in it. I am not game to throw the husks out to pasture because I am certain there would be some new weeds for Victoria to manage I would buy four bags of Tonic Seed to every twenty bags of budgie mix so they get a lot of it.

Hulled oats and grey sunflower is essential during winter or clod snaps but only to the breeder pairs and not the flights as the mature hen birds go to fat. They always have a tray of assorted grit, Limestone blocks, Calcium blocks, suet, cuttle fish bone, Millet sprays and Red multi vitamin powder available from the Vets in Melbourne. Also, sweet corn, apples, citrus as in oranges, lemons, and limes as the birdroom is located in the small orchard on the farm. Silver beet daily during breeding season and branches of young gum leave about twice a year in every aviary.

In the aviary I feel a lot of birds suffer from boredom, you must keep the birds working on something like fresh gum sticks, apple tree pruning, wheels, blocks or put simply they need something to destroy.

I like to build my birds up to the breeding season so from about March onward I start giving them soluble multi vitamins every second weekend and strengthening the solution leading up to the breeding season. They get small parrot mix as well. I don't think I do anything different to anyone else. I haven't changed my routine for about Twenty years and whilst it is working I am not going to change anything and this is the key get a routine and stick to it..

Special footnote:

Last breeding season when I got too busy with work, I was forced to rush to the local timber mill to get shavings for the nest boxes. Normally I would get well-washed Pine shavings for the nest boxes. However on this occasion I ended up with damp and very eucalyptus smelling timber shavings nevertheless out of 260 babies not one French Moulter, so now I have a theory about and French moult prevention using fresh damp Eucalyptus shavings. I will be trying this for a number of years to see if this continues, perhaps nature at its best.



