

Beginner Breeding Problems

by Bill Panter, Champion Breeder

In discussion with a couple of Beginners recently, the talk turned to some difficulties encountered in the bird room during their second season of breeding budgerigars. The problem which concerns me the most is the misinformation about what is commonly called "splayed" chicks, the condition where a chick from just a few days old is found to be lying flat on its belly with its legs stretched (usually) straight out sideways, or sometimes out behind it, instead of the regular position under it.

The Beginners had all the usual answers to this condition. They had been told by "more experienced breeders" that the problem was the result of the hen 'sitting too tight'. Well maybe, but why only one chick in the nest affected and the others ok?

My observation of the "[splayed chick syndrome](#)" began when I was also a Beginner and I too received similar advice from so-called "more experienced breeders". The advice given then was to leave in the affected nest unhatched eggs or put in glass marbles or imitation eggs or switch in larger chicks to "keep the hen up". Then of course you must bind the "splayed" chick's legs together to rectify the problem.

All this advice would be reasonable if the problem was indeed caused by a hen sitting too tight, but that is not usually the cause. In fact it's a condition found in many other birds and animals which is known simply as rickets, caused by a lack of calcium in the system or an inability to absorb it.

Just because there is cuttlefish bone and shell grit in the cage does not mean that the hen (and thus the baby) will get sufficient calcium from it. There is also a requirement for vitamin D3 to assist in the absorption of calcium into the chick's system.

The earliest sign of the "splayed chick syndrome" is a dark red discoloration of the knee joint noticeable at about 5/6 days of age. Later, both the knee and the hip joint are discoloured, followed by the chick lying flat and being under developed. In the most extreme cases feather formation is also affected - if the chick manages to live long enough.

If you observe the condition at an early enough stage (4 to 7 days) the only treatment needed is the addition of liquid calcium to the water plus a suitable source of vitamin D3. Birds treated in this manner generally completely recover, even to the extent of making it to the show bench.

The problem birds are those not noticed until 10 days or older. Treatment is as above, plus the need to tie both legs of the chick together for about two weeks. This can be achieved by putting a ring on both legs and tying the rings together with a piece of nylon thread. The baby will complain noisily at first and sprawl awkwardly around but soon get used to the discomfort. It's also best to minimize the number of chicks in the nest to reduce competition for the hen's attention.

I have in the past used Elliot's Calcium Supplement (which contains calcium lactate) at a rate of 8 ml per 30ml of water for six days, then reverted to clean fresh water without further trouble in the nest. Another product which is proven effective is Calcivet which is a calcium,

magnesium and vitamin D3 mixture in a readily acceptable form. It may be used in drinking water, over green food, on soft foods or given directly via crop needle in cases of rickets.

While on this subject of calcium deficiency, it should be noted that hens laying soft shelled eggs do not have or are not converting enough of their body calcium for the shell making process. Just add liquid calcium to the water in that nest box and see the improvement.

Egg binding in laying hens is often as a result of calcium deficiency too. Although this is not the only cause, a deficiency can be prevented by a little forethought. Why not put a small amount of liquid calcium in the drinking water when the birds are first paired up? It's a worthwhile and harmless precaution. And remember to always follow the manufacturer's instructions when giving medication of any sort to your birds - just because a little is good, more is not necessarily better! In fact, the exact opposite is usually the case.

Budgie News 2nd Quarter 1995