

BREEDING QUAKER PARAKEETS

by Linda Greeson

For a first time experience in breeding birds, for a step up for the Budgie breeder, or for anyone looking for a new experience, I can wholeheartedly recommend Quaker Parakeets. They are exceptionally hardy small birds, are very prolific, and make excellent parents. There is a continuing and ever increasing demand for this species in the pet market which helps to maintain a stable price. Since the life span of a Quaker is 35 to 40 years, the investment made in them is a long term one.

One reservation in this enthusiastic endorsement is the amount of noise even a few pairs of Quakers can generate. A large flock would certainly destroy the peace and quiet of a residential neighborhood. Even in attics, garages, and basements sophisticated soundproofing mechanisms will be taxed. Kept singly, or even as one pair, they are not exceptionally noisy at all.

Unfortunately there are at present ten states with restrictions placed either on breeding, keeping as pets, importation over state lines, or varying combinations of these restrictions. These regulations seem to change rather frequently and are enforced with widely varying degrees of severity. Before embarking on any program of breeding Quakers it is wise to contact the Department of Agriculture in your state for current local regulations.

The Quaker, or Monk Parakeet, *M. Monachus Monachus*, has a total length of eleven to twelve inches. It has a stocky, sturdy build. The soft green of the body is relieved by gray in the chest, cheeks, and throat. The flight feathers are blue. Their distinctive, mischievous personalities and strong bonding to their human owners contributes to the ever increasing popularity of this species. Their ability to talk clearly and perfect large vocabularies is surpassed only by a few of the larger parrots.

ADEQUATE PLANNING

In addition to providing housing for your newly acquired Quakers, thought needs to be given to other aspects of their care. Practical consideration needs to be given to the amount of time required to care for the birds and to hand feed even a few babies. In addition to the owner becoming familiar with the hand feeding process before the first egg is produced, someone able to perform this task has to be available at regular intervals. Not all employers look kindly on buckets of baby birds being kept in the rest room for feeding during coffee breaks, although this has been one solution to the problem.

Breeding birds of any species is a seven day a week, year round job. They require the same care on holidays and vacations as they do other days of the year. Finding a substitute care giver in your absence often proves difficult.

CHOOSING BREEDING STOCK

Many novice breeders start their careers by searching for proven pairs. With birds as prolific as Quakers who mature sufficiently to produce at one to two years, this is not at all necessary. The search for bargain prices for producing pairs is quite often fruitless anyway. Unless there are unusual, and verified, personal problems forcing the sale, the owner is not likely to be offering you his good producing birds at any price. With Quakers, problem parents are a rarity, but these exceptions to the rule may well be what you are purchasing.

In Quakers the visual differences between the sexes is very slight. The male is usually a little broader in the head and the beak a little wider. The only certain way to determine their sex is by either surgical or DNA sexing. DNA sexing by using just a drop of blood from a toe nail is so simple and safe I now use this method almost exclusively with all species. I only resort to surgical sexing if it becomes important to check on the condition of the reproductive organs as well as the sex of the bird.

If you are fortunate enough to have the space, buy several extra birds, put them in a large flight together, and allow them to pair off naturally.

Their pair bond is very strong. It soon becomes obvious by their loving behavior just who has decided to be married to whom.

A healthy Quaker is active and bright eyed with smooth, attractive plumage. As with any species, careful inspection of your prospective purchase for indications of illness is all important. Many new enthusiastic breeders start collecting birds from various sources without the ability to recognize symptoms of illness. In their eagerness to get started they are too impatient to wait out a reasonable isolation period for each new bird. Catastrophe can be the result of introducing disease to the entire flock. For this reason we maintain a fairly strict policy of keeping a closed aviary. We raise new breeding stock from our own babies, holding back from sale the largest and healthiest as future parents.

BREEDING PET BIRDS

All too often providing a mate for a pet Quaker is offered as a solution to every problem from feather plucking to biting. Not true! The assumption that a frustrated urge to breed is causing your bird great unhappiness is false. These misconceptions are probably based on our tendency to think of our pet bird's behavior as being similar to that of our pet dog's. It is true that the same instinctive need to procreate exists in both. The devoted dog who never leaves your side will not hesitate for a moment to take off after a strange female canine in heat. His sexual needs have no relationship to his bond to you.

Your Quaker is entirely different. When this species of bird bonds to a human it perceives that person as its mate. It does not need another bird; it is satisfied with its relationship with its owner. On occasion, when nature starts its hormones percolating, the bird may try to act out the actual mating procedure. This behavior can readily be discouraged by reprimanding the bird, immediately diverting its attention, and not permitting a habit to form by repetition. When a Quaker hen lays an egg she is not indicating her desire to have babies. This is just a normal result of ovulation; no emotion is involved.

The pet who has been receiving much love and attention and is closely bonded to a human will not instantly become a happier bird when placed in even an ideal breeding situation. It may or may not ever bond with

another bird, and if it ever does the delightful relationship with the owner is lost. The bird becomes territorial, viewing humans as a threat to eggs and babies. They will often bite the hand that feeds them. There may be an occasional exception, but the old saying that "You can't have your cake and eat it " applies here. Your Quaker is either a breeder or a pet - you can't have it both ways.

COMPATIBILITY

Placing a hen and a cock together does not automatically insure that baby birds will be produced. When young, recently weaned birds are raised together in the same cage there is rarely, if ever, a problem with their acceptance of each other.

With older birds who have been separated from a mate, problems may more often arise. If the newly paired birds do not bond after three to six months in the same cage, it is improbable that they ever will. If at the start of their relationship they are placed in a cage new to both they are not likely to fight, but can successfully ignore each other, refusing even to share a common perch. The former mate must be kept not only out of sight but out of hearing. Again, three to six months is a reasonable estimate of the time required.

CAGING AND NEST BOXES

Breeding cages should be constructed of at least 16 gauge wire. Quakers are strong chewers and will work their way out of such materials as chicken wire or aviary netting. Half inch by one inch welded wire is the strongest, but wire as large as one inch by two may be used.

We make our breeding cages of 16 gauge one half by two inch welded wire. Each cage is 24 inches wide, 24 inches high, and 48 inches long. They are set up in our aviary four feet or higher from the ground. For nesting birds, height equates to security. We use one by two untreated pine studs for perches and supply a cement perch in each cage. Natural branches ranging in diameter from one inch to two are an even better choice but require frequent replacement.

A twenty four inch cube is the very smallest size I would use to house a pair for breeding. A larger cage is much preferable. Although I prefer individual caging, many breeders have been successful with colony breeding Quakers. They do well with their own kind but will gang up and pick on other small birds. If there is an odd hen or cock in the flock, after the others have paired off they may pick on the odd bird. When setting up a colony it is best to set up an even number of pairs and provide extra nest boxes for them to choose from.

At the sheltered end of the cage, near the top, we place a twelve inch cube Cockatiel nest box. In front of the box entrance there is a twelve inch wide wire shelf. Some pairs happily breed and raise their young with only the addition of a few inches of untreated wood shavings to the box.

Others follow their nest building instincts from the wild. They use sticks, twigs, fibrous vines, or just about any safe material we provide to construct an elaborate nest around the box. They leave only a small opening for entrance. They both work industriously at this task, cooperating in interweaving the material to produce a basket like structure.

We leave their nest boxes up year round, not disturbing the creations of the nest builders, as the birds use them for sleeping even when they are not breeding. If frequently supplied with new material they will constantly enlarge and repair their nests between clutches.

DIET

Experience has proven to me that the best, easiest, and least expensive way to supply our birds with adequate levels of protein and calcium is with a good quality pelleted food. At present we are using Exact Breeding Formula for parrots by KayTee. We offer other foods only occasionally as treats and under special circumstances. With the pelleted foods the birds are not limited by their habit of first choosing their personal favorites with essential parts of the seed mix being discarded with the daily replenishing of their food bowls.

When we wish to stimulate breeding we add vegetables and sprouted seeds up to about twenty percent of their food intake. For parent birds who are feeding babies, we assist them in their difficult task by the daily additions of soft foods. We give small amounts of whole wheat bread, cooked corn, and powdered egg food such as Petamine. These foods can be consumed more quickly.

BREEDING

Here in Florida, breeding season seems to occur twice a year. Late summer and fall are when our Quakers seem most prolific. This pattern varies with different birds and in different parts of the country with different climates.

Usually four to eight eggs are laid, usually one every other day. Incubation usually starts with the laying of the third egg and lasts 26 to 28 days. In the wild the female is reported to do most of the nest building and incubating. I do not think that this is true with our domestic birds.

Every time I observe our birds everybody is busy. Both the hen and the cock are often in the nest box together. Both seem equally involved in the whole process.

Quakers will often start another clutch going when the oldest babies are about four weeks old. We pull babies for hand feeding at three weeks, and the parents are usually back to nest very shortly after this. They have their two clutches, rest up about three months, and then have two more clutches. Once you have your pair started, you can be assured of continued production.

Quakers, like most birds, like to be left strictly alone while incubating and nesting. My advice is to peek if you must, quickly and not too often, but do not touch until you are ready to take the babies for hand feeding. I once removed some babies from the nest to take some pictures,

When I put them back the parents killed them all. They had never done this before - an expensive lesson for me.

The babies are born with soft yellow down. (Blue mutations have white down instead of yellow.) Even at a very early age they are chunky, active little birds. Their eyes will start to open and they will become aware of their surroundings at ten to fourteen days. We band them at about 18 days, usually when their eyes are fully open, using a size 9 1/2 closed band. With a little experience you will be able to choose the stage in their development when the band is not too difficult to apply and yet not loose enough to fall off.

Baby Quakers have lower mandibles like little shovels which they open wide for hand feeding. They stand on their toes, flapping their little wings up and down while begging for food. They are the easiest to hand feed and have the cutest mannerisms of any baby bird I have fed.

If not hand fed, the babies will fledge at six to seven weeks. If hand fed they are usually weaned by eight weeks with a minimum amount of trouble. They will try any new food offered to them.

For hand feeding we use Exact Hand Feeding Formula for Parrots by KayTee. This is immediately ready for use in any desired amount merely by mixing with hot water to the consistency of cake or pancake batter. The commercially prepared feeding formulas available now have certainly taken a great deal of the drudgery out of the chore of preparing feedings, and I have to admit that we have far fewer problems than we did with our own elaborate concoctions.

Very early in their lives, the babies are offered varied foods to eat on their own. In addition to the pelleted food which will later be the mainstay of their diet, we give them spray millet, bits of fruit and vegetables, bread, cereal, or any wholesome food available. For some time they play with this food, getting very little of it down into their crops, but offering a large variety at this stage means no fussy eaters as adults.

MUTATIONS

There are known to be Blue, Cinnamon, Lutino, and Pied mutations of the normal green Quaker. The Blues are becoming more widely available in this country but remain high in price. In order to produce visually blue

birds in the first generation, you must have blue in both parents, either visually or as a split. Although they are not quite as prolific as the normals, their housing, care and feeding is just the same. In fact, except for the difference in their plumage, and in their price, the normals and the mutations are just the same in every way.

Patience and an optimistic attitude are requirements for any successful breeder. Keep in mind that your birds do not read the books and articles that you do. They are not aware of the average expectations the authors write about. Your pair of Quakers may be ready to breed early in the first year or perhaps not until late in their third year. An average figure is after all a mid point between highs and lows. It refers only to what can generally be expected. There is nothing wrong with the bird whose performance may be a little different.

First time parents often do not perform their duties well. Eggs may not be fertile, and the bird may not sit tightly enough to hatch them if they are. They may be negligent in their feeding duties, requiring early pulling for hand feeding. Do give these parents a second or even a third chance to settle down to their customary devoted parenting. With birds this prolific, we can afford to grant the time needed to gain experience.

It is the tendency of many novice breeders to be concerned over every small detail of their breeding situation. Although I work constantly to provide the best possible conditions for our breeding birds, I am increasingly inclined to believe the theory that if they want to breed, they will in spite of any situation.

Some time ago we here in Florida experienced what was called The Storm Of The Century. Our new aviary was not completed and many of our Quakers were housed in outside cages that would not withstand strong winds.

In providing temporary emergency housing in the garage, one pair was placed in an eleven inch square cage on the floor, underneath the shelf of a large cage. In an attempt to provide the poor birds with a little more room, I attached a Cockatiel nest box to their cage. The garage was poorly lighted and full of birds of several different species, all noisy and very unhappy with this situation. I felt badly over the

Quaker's plight, especially each time I ran the old and noisy washing machine which clanked away right next to their cage.

After two to three weeks in this worst of possible conditions, when I moved the pair to the new aviary, I was amazed to find that they were sitting on six eggs. These all hatched into nice healthy babies in spite of the additional disturbance of the move. The lesson in this true story is for us not to become too absorbed in providing every last detail we read and hear about. Clean, healthy, happy Quakers will breed in many different conditions. They do not demand perfection.