

MY FAVORITES - THE QUAKERS

by Linda Greeson

Over the years many species of parrots have found their homes in our aviaries. I am constantly falling in love with yet another variety, but the place my Quakers hold as my all time favorite has never been threatened. We still today have one of our first hand fed Quaker babies presiding over our family room, and he is absolutely charming. His talking ability rivals that of our pet African Gray. He is a happy, sweet little bird, always ready to play or lie upside down in the palm of my hand, laughing and talking all the while. Fortunately, a Quakers' life span is twenty five to thirty years, my grandchildren can grow up to enjoy this little fellow as much as my children did.

SPECIES

The Quakers are also referred to as Monk Parakeets, Gray Breasted Parakeets, or Green Parakeets. Their Genus is *Myiopsitta* and there are four recognized sub-species. The differences between them are mainly in size and variations in intensity of color.

M. Monachus Monachus, the most commonly available species, is a medium sized bird about eleven to twelve inches in length. The upper parts of the bird are almost all green, medium green on the back and brighter green on the wings and tail. The lores, cheeks, and throat are grey, merging into pale gray, white tipped breast feathers which merge into a grayish, olive green lower abdomen. The feather edges on the chest are very distinct, giving the grey area a scaled appearance. There is a suffusion of yellow on the thighs and under parts. The flight feathers are blue, edged with black. The under wing coverts are pale gray and pale bluish. The tail is long and narrow, green slightly tinged with blue.

The bill is horn colored, and the eyes brown. The immature birds are not as quite a bright green in color, the head is a dull green, and the flights are more green than blue. The native habitat of this species is extreme south eastern Brazil, through Uruguay to north eastern Argentina.

M. Monachus Luchsi - the Bolivian Gray Breasted Parakeet resembles the **M. Monachus Monachus** except that the forehead and fore crown are a very pale gray, almost white. The breast is uniformly pale gray without any scaled appearance. The upper abdomen is a purer yellow and the outer webs of the primaries are a pale blue without the green margins. The tail is dark green with blue down the center of each feather and is grayish blue underneath. The bird is over all a little smaller and narrower with a more pointed bill. It is found only in central Bolivia, the Cochabamba Province.

M. Monachus Callita - the Mendoza Gray Breasted Parakeet is like the **M. Monachus Monachus** except that it is a smaller bird with a smaller beak. The breast color is more white and the abdomen is paler. The head is a darker gray. This species is native to western Argentina in the provinces of La Rioja, Mendoza, and San Luis.

M. Monachus Cotorra - the Paraguayan Gray Breasted is like the **Callita** except that the underparts are a brighter green and the abdomen is less yellow. This species is native to south eastern Bolivia and parts of Argentina and Paraguay.

MUTATIONS

The Lutino Quaker, a beautiful yellow mutation, is extremely rare. The first of this mutation occurred in the Berlin Zoo before World War II. To my knowledge, they are not widely available even in Europe. These birds are a pure yellow, with their forehead and underparts a grayish white. The flight feathers are grayish and the underside of the tail a bluish green. The bill is a pinkish brown.

The blue mutation, although not as rare as the yellow, and well established in aviculture, is still very hard to find and very expensive. Most blue Quakers descend from birds bred by M. J. Bruyneel of Steenokkerzeel in Belgium in the mid fifties. They are one of the most beautiful of the Quaker mutations. Their shade of blue can best be described as a powdery soft Wedgwood. The cheeks, throat, and breast are a silvery gray. The top of the head and the lower rump are a beautiful deep turquoise blue. The bill is a pale orange tinged horn color.

A Pied mutation has occurred in several aviaries recently but is not well established in aviculture. It is inherited as a simple recessive trait. In these birds the green feathers are mixed with yellow, other characteristics remaining the same as the normal green.

It has been reported that several Albinos have been bred in Cuban aviaries, and Cinnamons have been produced here in our country. The Cinnamon is a pale, diluted green with cinnamon on the flights and tail. The inheritance is sex linked.

In theory, all the colors found in the Budgies - violet, cobalt blue, gray - are possible to produce in Quakers. The exciting possibility of an entirely new mutation is an inspiration to many devoted Quaker breeders.

NESTING IN THE WILD

Quakers are unique in that they are the only nest building parrots known. Some love birds fill their nest cavities with twigs, but Quakers actually build the entire nest structure from twigs and small branches. They are extremely gregarious and whole colonies will work together in this activity.

The nests are built up very high, at the ends of the highest branches of a tall tree. The birds add to the nest all year long, roosting in it at night as well as making use of it for breeding.

The construction of the nest is very interesting. Each pair of birds builds its own separate chamber within the main nest structure, apartment house style. Each chamber consists of two separate areas, an inner "living -bedroom" area and a "front porch." The parent birds spend a great deal of time on the front porch when incubating eggs and feeding chicks, watching for danger and closely guarding the precious contents of the nest.

They lay their eggs and incubate them in the back bedroom and as the chicks grow larger they are moved into the living room area. More eggs are then laid in the bedroom.

As the babies increase in size the adults constantly reconstruct and enlarge the nest until it becomes huge. Some have been found that weigh a quarter of a ton.

AVAILABILITY

Until the new laws restricted their importation, Quakers were brought into this country in huge numbers. At present, almost all of those available are domestically bred and closed banded. Because they are so prolific and hardy, they still present one of the best bargains in the pet shop. Depending on the time of the year, and local availability, a young, hand fed bird can usually be found in the \$150 price range. The more rare mutations are considerably more expensive and not generally available.

PERSONALITY

Quakers are cheerful, active, happy birds. They are very vocal by nature, rapidly picking up the words and phrases that they often hear. They love to whistle and will work industriously at perfecting short tunes, achieving an excellent reproduction of either the good or bad tones being taught them. Even when being hand fed, at a very early age, my baby Quakers will imitate phrases like "Umm, umm good!" or "Want some?" which I repeat while feeding them.

Some Quakers bond very closely to one individual and are reputed to be nippy and unfriendly to anyone else. This has not been my own experience or that of the many owners I have contact with. As in all birds, personalities within the species are bound to vary. There are bound to be exceptions to the general rule.

Quakers are not dimorphic - that is the plumage of male and female does not vary to any appreciable degree. Some educated guesses turn out to be accurate, but surgical sexing, or other recently developed scientific methods are the only reliable means of determining the sex of the bird. Unless they are to be used for breeding, the sex is of no importance. Males and females are equally good talkers and are both equally satisfactory as pets.

CAGING

The pet Quaker requires a minimum of 18" x 18" x 18" of cage space. If the cage is used only as a place of refuge, that is, a sleeping place and a feeding station, this minimum size is adequate. If the bird is to be confined to its cage for long periods of time its requirements for space will be greater. The active Quaker needs room for moving about without running into perches or the many toys they so dearly love to play with. The bird should be able to fully extend and flap its wings without interference in some position in the cage. It should not be forced to perch in the exact center of the cage in order that the tail does not rub against the bars or be limited to spreading only one wing at a time. When in doubt when making your selection, larger is always better. The cage can never be too large for the bird, only too large for the owner's home.

Quakers are very clean birds, all enjoy a daily bath followed by careful preening of each feather. To allow them to keep their plumage shiny and smooth, in addition to the usual water and feed cups, they should be provided a shallow dish of water for their daily bath.

DIET

The Quakers curious nature and enthusiasm for eating results in their readily accepting almost any food you may offer. We use a good brand of pelleted food as the mainstay of their diet. We feel that this assures us that each morsel of the food they consume offers a balance of the required nutrients. There is no picking and choosing of favorite seeds with the probability of some essential part of their diet being discarded with the uneaten food.

We offer supplementary foods only as occasional treats. Regular feedings of soft foods are given only to feeding parents to assist them in their difficult task of filling all those hungry little mouths. All Quakers love to eat, and it is difficult to resist overdoing the treats with pets. We strictly avoid giving sweets, salty foods, or anything containing caffeine. They enjoy vegetables, fruits, or a bit of left over corn muffin just as much. They will attract a piece of whole wheat

bread with as much enjoyment as the cookie they begged for, and be all the better for the healthier choice.

CARE OF WINGS AND NAILS

It is important to keep your Quaker's wings clipped. observing them frequently as the feathers grow out. They need to be protected against the disastrous results of flying into windows or mirrors, or worst of all a ceiling fan. Unlike many other species wings are not to be clipped too short and only six to eight of the flight feathers clipped. They are compact, stocky birds and need to be left some lift from the wings to prevent crashing to the floor, but yet not enough to be able to take off in free flight.

As with all birds, toe nails need to be clipped at regular intervals. We find that providing perches with a rough surface, such as natural branches with the bark left on, or the cement perches now available, keeps this chore down to a minimum. Most cages come equipped with plastic perches all of the same diameter. Replacing them with perches of varying thicknesses also helps to provide exercise for the bird's feet and legs.

BREEDING QUAKERS

For the novice, Quakers are an excellent choice. The initial investment necessary to start the venture is considerably lower than with many other comparable species. They are exceptionally hardy birds, withstanding extremes in temperature well. The demand for them for resale remains constant over the years. It seems that no matter what the economic situation, you can always sell the Quakers.

Here in Florida breeding season occurs twice a year. Late summer and early in the winter are when our birds are most prolific. Four to eight eggs are the usual clutch and a second clutch started when the babies are about a month old is the norm. Young birds are usually ready for breeding at about two years of age. Quakers almost invariably make devoted parents, sitting faithfully on the eggs and keeping their chicks' crops bulging with food. We pull the chicks for hand feeding at about three weeks.

Breeding cages need to be constructed of at least sixteen gauge wire as Quakers are strong chewers. We keep our pairs set up in cages 24 x 24 x 48 inches long. At the sheltered end of the cage, near the top, we provide them with a twelve inch cube cockatiel nest box. We add a twelve inch wide shelf next to the nest box to provide a support for their nest building activities. Given a supply of straw, twigs, vines and similar materials they immediately set about weaving an intricate nest, using both the box and the shelf for support. We keep a crop of cherry tomato vines growing just for the Quakers; their fibrous branches are a favorite for nest building and they enjoy eating the tomatoes too. They work full time at the nest, constantly rearranging and repairing it, even when feeding their chicks.

I have had Quakers go to nest in a Cockatiel nest box with only the addition of pine shavings. Some are so determined to reproduce they will do so almost anywhere.

When you observe how happy they are following their natural nest building instincts, you just cannot deprive them of the necessary materials.

The babies are born covered with a soft, pale yellow down. They are chunky little birds, even at birth. Their lower mandibles act as little scoops, making hand feeding them an easy chore. They have a unique begging posture, jumping up and down, flapping their wings, and stretching the head and neck up as far as possible. For the novice starting hand feeding there is no better species to practice on.

The chicks are usually weaned by eight weeks. If not hand fed they fledge at six to eight weeks. Their natural curiosity and unfailingly good appetites make weaning a comparatively easy process. Spray millet, cooked corn, whole wheat bread, and even the pelleted food are readily tried and eaten in small amounts at an early age. Hand feeding needs to be continued only until you are assured that they are eating in sufficiently large amounts.

There are some negatives to be considered before starting a breeding program with Quakers. Kept singly, as pets, they do a great deal of chattering and whistling, but the amount of noise they generate can in

no way be rated as objectionable. When kept in flocks, or in groups of adjoining breeding cages, they become very noisy. If space permits sufficient isolation from your home and neighbors to mute the loud, shrill chattering this need not be a concern. It is wise to take the expected volume of noise into consideration when making your plans.

There are some states which forbid either the sale or possession of the Quakers. California, Georgia, and New Jersey have these laws and others may need to be added to the list. The reason for these arbitrary regulations is that in the past free flying groups of the birds have rapidly reproduced and formed large flocks which descend on orchards and farm lands, destroying crops.

BREEDING MUTATIONS

My only experience with mutations has been with breeding the blues. About six years ago I was fortunate enough to obtain two pairs. Although these lovely birds are not as prolific as the normal greens and not quite as hardy, I am very happy with the success of my breeding program with them.

The blue mutation is a simple recessive. In order to produce visually blue birds in the first generation, you must have blue in both parents, either visually or as a split. A split bird is one who is visually green but carries the recessive gene for blue.

The best matings to produce blue Quakers consist of one blue bird paired with a green split to blue bird. Most of the chicks resulting from this mating will be visually blue, with any visually greens being split to blue. Breeding a visual blue to a normal green will result in all green split to blue chicks. Breeding a green split to blue to another green split to blue will produce 25% visual blues, 50% green split to blues, and 25% normal greens. There is no way to identify which of the greens are split to blue except by the results of subsequent breeding. Surprises, either happy or disappointing, are not unusual.

Our original blue quakers were bred to our best normal greens to obtain strong, healthy splits. After several generations of carefully controlled breeding, we are producing beautiful visual blues and large, sturdy

greens split to blue. Birds are all individually cage bred to insure the accuracy of their pedigrees.

The blue chicks are born with down more white than the pale yellow of the normals. The final decision as to their color cannot be made until pin feathers start to appear at about 21 days. I delight in spotting the emergence of the little blue tail feathers, eagerly counting the number of visual blues I have been lucky enough to produce.

The blue babies are just as easy to hand feed and just as quick to wean. They show no marked differences in personalities, are just as vocal, and just as endearing as pets. As adults, their powdery delicate blue and soft silvery gray plumage makes them strikingly beautiful. They are superior to their normal green relatives only in this respect.