

THE MATING GAME

By Linda Greeson

The breeding seasons are what make it all worthwhile the feeding and cleaning and all that goes into the care of a flock, or even a few pairs of birds. With the larger species, the Macaws, the Amazons, and the Cockatoos, we eagerly await those precious few eggs. We watch carefully for increased food intake, courting, and additional time in the nest box. We make our presence as unobtrusive as possible as most of them like their privacy at this time. Decisions as to whether to incubate their eggs or allow the parents to complete the process and raise their own chicks are not too difficult to make. Most of our large birds have been paired off for years. Past experience with them gives us fairly accurate signals on how to manage their breeding programs. Their behavior is quite consistent from year to year. Only new additions to the flock make judgements more difficult.

The breeding of the smaller varieties, for me especially my Cockatiels, presents daily challenges. The many choices to make and the ever changing factors involved make their breeding a completely absorbing and exciting hobby.

Early in my experience I felt that a detailed knowledge of genetics and careful review of pedigrees was sufficient to make good breeding choices. My decisions were largely made at my desk. I soon discovered that there were many variables not covered in the books and that matings planned on paper did not always work out as expected.

In setting up my birds for breeding I have three main priorities to keep in mind. In order to improve quality I want their physical characteristics to compliment each other. For example, if one of my hens is satisfactory except for her small crest, I mate her with a cock who has a nice, large, swooping crest. I also try to choose birds whose pedigrees complement each other. This is the easy part of making the decisions.

The birds themselves may not agree with my choice of a perfect mate. Compatibility, the third priority, then takes first place. Many have minds of their own about accepting a mate. The hen may be more

interested than the cock, and give up on her attempts to be fertilized. She goes about nesting as usual, but lays and tries to incubate clear eggs. Some males are intensely territorial and concentrate on defending their cage space rather than on the hen.

More often an eager cock finds himself with a reluctant female. The male may be so insistent and tired of his mate's "having a headache" that he drives her into the nest box and keeps her there without food or water. Occasionally a female is badly plucked by an aggressive male. I have one cock whose mate routinely stays stripped of feathers about the head and back during the entire breeding season.

We also encounter the "next door syndrome." The cock ignores his own hen and spends his time actively courting the hen in the adjoining cage. In these cases wife swapping is often effective.

I have a big Cinnamon Pearl hen I have mated "on paper" four times. For months at a time she totally ignored the first three husbands I chose for her. On the fourth try she immediately fell in love and went right to nest with fertile eggs. I plan to keep these two together indefinitely.

One pair, whose nest box card I had marked "apparently incompatible," and was about to give up on, surprised me with nine eggs and a clutch of six babies. I had never observed them preening or courting, or to be even on friendly terms. They had gotten together at some time.

The obvious primary consideration is to be sure that your birds are of the opposite sex. Usually this mistake in pairing is made with the Pieds whose sex is more difficult to judge. Two of the same gender will often bond beautifully with a promising affectionate relationship, but no babies.

I try to find an experienced bird to mate with a young, first time parent. A seasoned cock who fertilizes, sits, and feeds well will teach his hen just how things are done. A mature hen, with previous experience, will also patiently train an eager but clumsy cock in the mechanics of fertilization. One of the many causes for clear eggs is the

result of the cock mounting the hen from the side. The mature hen will help her mate until he gets it right.

Most cockatiels can be considered ready for mating at about eighteen months but this can vary considerably. Some settle down to the duties of parenthood at either an earlier or not until a much later age. Many remain flighty and inattentive to their duties until after they have had the experience of one or two clutches.

The great majority of cockatiels are good parents, devoting themselves faithfully to the chores of sitting and feeding. A few are repeatedly poor at their job. Again, one good parent mated with a poor one will often compensate for the mate's indifference by doing a larger share of the work.

There are hens, termed indeterminate layers, who will continue to lay eggs and never sit. Having twenty five eggs from one of these hens to either foster out or hatch in an incubator is not unusual. I find the easiest method for identifying the chicks from fostered eggs is to choose adoptive parents of different color. When this is not possible I mark the fostered eggs and chicks with a spot of gentian violet until final identification by banding is done.

In spite of extensive study and care in making breeding choices by pedigree, the unexpected often happens. Some rules of genetics such as those for sex linked colors give very accurate results. When working with mutations and splits the results are less predictable. I recently bred a Fallow cock to a split to Fallow hen. Genetically I could expect 75% Fallows and 25% splits to result. Of the five chicks produced there were no Fallows; all were splits. From one hundred chicks, 75% would probably have been Fallows as the tables predicted, but unfortunately my five fell into the 25% group.

In making breeding choices for improving the quality of stock many factors need to be kept in mind. I first consider over all size, also looking for large heads, big eyes, and good length. I look for full crests and good wing set. Personality is another major consideration. Color is important only in developing rare mutations.

Line breeding is often effective in reproducing the desirable traits we are looking for. Before breeding a bird to closely related relatives, careful study is required. This type of selection is limited to very high quality birds with no notable defects.

It is often a surprise in reviewing pedigrees to find that your best stock is out of one particular blood line. I had an exceptionally large Cinnamon Pied hen with a beautiful, crest that I named Grandma. For ten years Grandma showed up regularly in the pedigrees of my best stock. She never disagreed with my choices for her mates and was an excellent mother. I really mourned her loss and treasure her descendents.

When we have chicks at various stages in the nest boxes, here in Florida with unheated aviaries, the weather presents another variable in our program. Parents usually stop brooding their chicks at about nine to ten days. Their built in time clocks seem to control their decision to get off the chicks rather than the outside weather. Very few will extend their protection of their babies during a drop in temperature. When a cold night is predicted I check the nest boxes of the older chicks in the early evening. If I do not find the babies safely protected under the hen's out spread wings I take them into the warm house for an early start on hand feeding.

Evaluating your own breeding successes in young chicks is often difficult. There is just not enough room to keep them all until maturity. I use the gram scale a great deal to make early decisions. A chick who does not weigh 115 Grams at twenty one days is not considered show stock unless it has an exceptional pedigree. Most outstanding birds can be identified at three to four weeks, but some prove to be late bloomers. I have more than once sold a bird as a pet, and then, seeing it later, regretted my decision. A final judgement as to overall quality cannot be made until eight or nine months of age.

Each year I add ever more cages to house my ever increasing flock. I spend ever more time at the desk studying records. When a friend comes looking for me the family automatically directs them to the cockatiel aviary because that is where I am most likely to be. My enthusiasm for producing bigger and better cockatiels grows even faster than their numbers in my flock.

