

## THOSE CHARMING LITTLE QUAKERS

by Linda Greeson

I do not know who is out there counting beaks to come up with statistics on birds. When I read that Quaker Parakeets are second only to Budgies and Cockatiels in popularity as companion birds, I have no doubt that they are counting accurately. Within my own experience the demand for baby Quakers and information about the species keeps increasing, year after year.

The Quaker Parakeet may also be referred to as the Monk Parakeet, the Gray Breasted Parakeet, the Green Parakeet, or the Montevideo Parakeet. There are four recognized subspecies in the Genus *Myiopsitta* to which they belong. *M. Monachus Monachus* is the sub species most familiar to us and the derivation of the name Monk. This is a medium sized bird, about eleven to twelve inches long, a little larger than a cockatiel. The upper parts of the normal green 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 grey white tipped breast feathers and a grayish olive green lower abdomen. The feather edges on the chest are very distinct, giving the gray area a scaled appearance. There is a suffusion of yellow on the thigh and underparts. The flight feathers are blue, edged with black. The underwing coverts are pale gray and pale bluish gray.

The tail is long and narrow, green slightly tinged with blue. The bill is horn colored and the eyes brown. In the immature birds the greens are not so bright and the flights are more green than blue.

These normal Quakers are not as flashy or striking as some of the exotics, but they are chubby , chunky, and just plain "cute" little birds. Their gray bibs, with a little imagination, are like the old fashioned robes of the Quaker ladies.

The colors of the mutations are quite striking. The blue, with which I have had considerable experience, is a soft Wedgwood blue, except for the cheeks, throat, and upper breast which are silver. The bill is horn colored. The top of the head and lower rump are a deep turquoise blue.

This mutation is now well established in aviculture but still not generally available and considerably more expensive than the normal greens.

The Lutino mutation is a pure yellow with forehead and underparts a grayish white, Flight feathers are gray and the underside of the tail is bluish green. This mutation as well as the cinnamons, piers, and albinos are all very rare and most difficult to find in this country.

Quakers are the only psittacines who build their own nests. Some love birds fill their nests with twigs, but only the Quakers actually build a complicated structure from scratch. In the wild they usually build large nests at the ends of the highest branches of tall trees. Each pair of birds builds its own separate chamber within the main nest structure, similar to an apartment house. Each chamber consists of three separate areas - an inner living room, a bedroom and a front porch.

The birds lay their eggs and incubate them in the back bedroom and as the chicks grow in size they move into the living room. More eggs are then laid in the bedroom section. The parent birds spend most of their free time on the front porch, guarding their eggs and babies.

The adults constantly re-construct and enlarge the nests until they become huge. Some, found in their native habitat, have been found which weigh a quarter of a ton.

For our breeding Quakers we place a small wire shelf in front of the nest box entrance to be used as a foundation for their nests. Given a good supply of twigs, vines, shredded paper, grasses, and just about any safe building material, they will work industriously until the nest covers the wire shelf and the entire front of a cockatiel size nest box.

My Mother's breeding pair of blue Quakers have been keeping her entertained for weeks with their antics over where to build their nest. Apparently one of the pair (Mr or Mrs - no way of telling male from female without checking their bands) could not agree. One would carry a twig up to the small shelf, and immediately, with much chattering, the other would throw it down to the bottom of the cage. The argument became quite heated at times. Often there was an angry, stubborn Quaker tugging away at each end of a twig. They finally compromised by

building from the floor up and over the small shelf. This has proved to be a monstrous project, taking up a large part of their cage, requiring a large handful of twigs, palm fronds, and other building materials each morning. They continue to ignore the nestbox. My prediction is that their nest will finally encompass the whole front of the box and they will then decide to lay their eggs inside. This has happened before to birds in the aviary. My philosophy with any breeding birds is to indulge any of their whims when ever possible. The objective is to make them happy, no matter what it takes.

I have heard from several pet owners that single, companion Quakers will industriously build nests variously placed around the house. They use stolen pencils, tooth picks, shredded paper, or any material that they can find. Many single Quakers, although not actually building nests, enjoy weaving various materials through the bars of their cages.

Since 1978 feral Quakers have inhabited the same one hundred feet high fir tree adjacent to Long Island Sound in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Over the ensuing fifteen years this fir tree became home to more than forty Quaker Parakeet nests and more than one hundred and fifty Quakers. These nests ranged in size from thirty four inches in length by twenty three inches in width to nine feet in length by five feet in width. Three nests had three separate entrances and one nest had five entrances. These were truly multiple dwellings.

Although this fir tree in which the Quakers were nesting had survived one hundred years of gale force winds, it just could not hold up against forty Quaker nests and a passing funnel cloud. The aged fir was uprooted and laid at about a forty five degree angle against a neighboring tree.

This was in June, and the nests were full of nestlings. The average clutch size was five to six, and one contained twelve nestlings. Bird loving volunteers rescued 81 live babies but 71 died in the accident. The parent birds dispersed to new locations and within days new nests began to appear. Quakers really require only a few days to construct housing if material is available. The blueprint is in their heads, remaining there even after generations born in captivity.

Quakers are exceptionally hardy birds. In the coldest climates they survive snow and ice with only the shelter of the trees. In open aviaries they do well in even our coldest climates, only requiring that shelter from the wind and rain be available to them when needed.

Until a few years ago these birds were imported by the thousands. Those who survived the trip and their stay in the quarantine station were sold to the pet trade at very low prices. It was common to find a normal green Quaker for as little as \$35.00. At present prices are considerably higher, but only closed banded, domestically bred birds are available. Making a loving and devoted companion of a hand fed, socialized baby is an entirely different situation than working with a wild caught, adult bird. The hand fed baby becomes aware of a human as the all important source of food. It bonds to humans more readily than to another bird. I strongly suspect that the hand fed, well socialized baby bird grows up to not really knowing that he is a bird - he considers himself a human.

Quaker Parakeets are an excellent choice for the novice breeder. The visual differences between the sexes is very slight, so having the birds sexed by surgical sexing or DNA is almost mandatory. They are sexually mature at about a year or a year and a half and will usually bond closely with the mate provided them - rarely a problem there. During their second year they can usually be depended on to produce two clutches of four to eight babies.

We use breeding cages 24 inches wide by 24 inches high by 48 inches long and ordinary cockatiel sized nest boxes. Once started the birds produce with great regularity and usually make excellent parents. In large numbers, when not occupied with nest building and caring for their young, they can be very noisy.

The chief reason for their rapidly increasing popularity is the distinctive Quaker personality. They are completely devoted, bonding closely with the human owner. They are bright, inquisitive, mischievous little birds - completely endearing. Their antics are a constant delight. One lady reported to me that her Quaker, Buddy, loves her husband. When she comes into the room Buddy will immediately go into his cage, closing the cage door behind him. Many owners report that when their birds are

told that it is bedtime, they go into their cages and roost on the usual sleeping perch. It is not unusual for them to be potty trained.

Most Quakers learn to talk at about six months. I often have babies, who while being hand fed, will say "mm, good" and "Want more?" very clearly. They are the easiest of all the species to hand feed. They have beaks like little shovels which they open wide while standing on tip toe looking for food, eager eaters indeed.

Many Quakers sing songs with several verses without a mistake. Many have extensive vocabularies, picking up new words and phrases daily. They speak quite clearly and use their skills most appropriately. I have one little Quaker

hen set up in my aviary for breeding. When I open the cage door for servicing, in the sweet little voice of her former owner she says "Be careful now!" She then laughs, with a perfect imitation of my laugh.

We depend on pelleted food as the mainstay of our Quakers diet - breeders and pets both. Seeds are only given as an occasional treat. We offer supplements of fruits and vegetables as treats only. Favorite fruits are apples and grapes, and they all love corn. Whole wheat bread, cooked corn, and other soft foods are given to the parents daily to help them with feeding their young.

Quakers love their toys. Their reaction to a new toy presented to them is amusing to watch. They will approach it much sooner than the average bird, with just a short period of cautious investigation. They do become bored with toys more quickly than most birds, so a frequent change is needed to maintain their interest. They are endlessly curious and will investigate any new object made available - and make a toy of just about anything. They are strong chewers and can rapidly demolish even rigid articles, a fact which must be kept in mind for their safety.

It is unfortunate but true that there are nine or ten states having some sort of regulations controlling Quakers. The reason given for this is that when released to the wild these birds are so hardy and prolific they quickly multiply into large flocks. They are then considered a danger to agricultural crops, descending on orchards and farmlands.

These laws and regulations vary considerably from state to state and are ever changing not only in their content but in how strictly they are enforced.

Last summer, in Ohio, for example, many pet owners and breeders were sending their Quakers out of the state in fear that they would be confiscated and destroyed. The ruling of the Ohio department of Agriculture was that these birds have both wings pinioned (surgical removal of the terminal section of the wing) or be neutered and sterilized. Failure to comply would result in confiscation and euthanizing of the bird as well as a large fine. This shocking situation resulted in such barrage of letters and calls of outrage some second thoughts were given to the rulings. The decision was made to change the requirement for keeping your pet Quaker from pinioned wings to clipped wings. This has not gone through the required legal channels as yet, but friends in Ohio promise that getting it on the books is just a question of time.

In Georgia ownership is discouraged but not really prohibited. Importation of Quakers into the state is forbidden. Even a pet owner formerly living in Georgia cannot legally return to the state with the same pet.

In Virginia only Quakers with closed bands can be bred, bought, or sold. California and Wyoming at the time of last inquiry forbid Quakers completely. I am told that California even refuses entrance of the birds to the state at check points along the borders.

In New Jersey Quakers are designated as potentially dangerous and permits for their ownership reluctantly issued only after strict criteria are met.

The situation in some of the other states leads to complete confusion when an attempt is being made to summarize existing regulations. If you are planning to either move to another state or do extensive traveling with a pet Quaker, it is advisable to check with the Fish and Game department of the state you are interested in. Information from the United States Fish and Wildlife regulations does not include state regulations.

In spite of what we who love them consider unjust regulation in some areas, these charming little birds continue to win the hearts of increasing numbers of new owners. Unless you are prepared for a lengthy recital complete with photos, never ask about a pet Quaker. The devotion and pride shown by the owner of each special and individual bird will amaze you. These Quakers are truly unique in the world of birds.