

GETTING OUR NEW BREEDERS OFF TO A GOOD START

Bob Wilson

Many newbies to the hobby start by buying and reading every book on Budgerigars they can find. While the basic information in most books is sound advice I find that most are very repetitive and have little new to offer.

By far the greatest wealth of knowledge in this hobby is stored in the minds of our senior breeders and exhibitors who have been doing this year in, year out, often for 30, 40, 50 years or more. These folks have enough knowledge stored away to write a multitude of books on our favorite subject but the problem is, with a few notable exceptions, most of them are quiet unassuming people who only share their knowledge one-on-one when they really get to know you.

Too often we see folks who have only been in the hobby a few years setting themselves up as authorities only to lead many folks who follow their lead down a path of disappointment and frustration.

Your challenge, if you really want to learn the hobby, is to seek out one or more of these “old time” fountains of information and use them as your mentors, and in the process act like a sponge to soak up as many of these gems of knowledge as you can.

I count myself extremely lucky that in the 50 plus years since I started keeping budgies there have been several outstanding guys who were my mentors to help guide me along the way.

I grew up in a family in Victoria Australia where my grandmother and several uncles bred and exhibited budgies. Bill Petzke, my favorite uncle, was my first real mentor. As a youngster I loved spending school holidays at Uncle Bill’s farm because we ended up in his aviary for hours every day.

Bill was the one who instilled in me a real love for the budgerigar and a fascination for all the varieties and colors they could produce.

He was the first to teach me that while we are trying to develop a bird that is physically far removed from the wild budgie, if we followed nature as closely as possible they would breed successfully and in numbers, This is the basis for many practices I still use today.

While many breeders set up their birds to band for early shows Bill set up his birds throughout the year when THE BIRDS showed they were ready. I remember him pointing out signs the hens and cocks would exhibit when they were ready to breed. The cocks rapping their beaks on a perch, dilating pupils, and fighting other cocks that came near him.. The hens laying flat on the perch, vibrating her wings, gnawing everything in sight, and calling to the cocks.

Bill experimented with different styles of nest boxes, always trying to come as close as possible as the holes the wild birds used. They were all shapes and sizes but had several things in common. They all had one large entry hole and no vent holes for extra air, just like a knot hole in a tree or rotten log. He

sprayed the inside walls of the nest and placed soaked blotting paper under the nest concave block to keep humidity as high as possible “just like in that rotten log” as he would often say.

He also fed a much wider variety of feed than was common in those times. The regular seed mix was the staple, but he also fed plenty of seeding grasses, willow and eucalyptus branches, fruit and vegetables, and dishes of supplements that were used for growing calves, pigs and chickens he had on the farm. Although his birds lacked the head qualities we see today I still recall his birds were frequently much larger than others we saw on the show bench, possibly as a result of the supplements he was feeding.

Frank Gardner Melbourne Australia was the leading “Budgie Man” of the era in the years after I graduated from college and started up with budgerigars again. My father, who did not know one end of a budgie from another bought my first pair of budgies from Frank in 1959 while off on a business trip. At the time dad had no idea who Frank was or what he was buying, but that Skyblue cock and Cinnamon Mauve hen produced several nests of cobalts that won awards at shows and got me hooked on the exhibition side of the hobby.

It was years later after I had finished college that Dad went with me to visit Frank and we finally learned where my first pair came from. The lesson from that experience...“You can be lucky and produce winners even if you don’t know where they came from or what you are doing”.

Frank was the first to explain the concept of line breeding within families to improve the overall quality of your stock.

He was also a stickler for sticking as close as possible to nature when it came to nest boxes and when to breed. He would frequently remind me that in nature the birds breed in Spring and Autumn (Fall) and after heavy rains when they know there will be plenty of feed for the chicks.

Above all else Frank instilled in me that breeding budgerigars is not a race. It is a journey that requires knowledge, patience and a little luck. I can still hear him say “If you buy these two birds and pair them together, and next year do this, the following year do that... In 3 or 4 years with a little luck you will be in the cards (winning) at the local shows. Note: In 3 or 4 years.. if you are lucky.. We need someone like Frank to mentor the newbies today. So many today go out, buy a few good pairs, throw them together, and expect to produce birds that win the following year. With a LOT of luck you may, but it will be the exception to the rule. It takes years to develop a line of winning birds no matter what you can afford to start with.

Eric Monks of Lower Hutt was retired by the time I moved to New Zealand in 1974 and spent most of each day with his budgies.



Eric first love was the Cinnamon Opaline and he worked hard to keep them clean. Flecking was not the problem it is today but Eric culled birds when the V in the saddle was not clean or the body color started to fade.

Eric fed a basic seed mix, with the emphasis on canary for the higher protein, seeding grasses and vegetables. He was the first I saw to introduce animal protein in the form of chicken carcasses left after a family meal... and he also fed dishes of mealworms in the flights when they were available.

He loved shows and spent hours preparing his birds, starting a month before a scheduled show date. His birds were always well presented and he openly admitted that his showmanship and preparation often won awards over better quality birds that were a little rough on the day. One of his buddies was a pigeon breeder who spayed his birds with water that had a little Listerine and Witch Hazel added and Eric did likewise. This is what I still use to prepare birds for show today.

Only birds that were entered weeks before the show could make it to the judging bench, so he always started with several for each class and put them back in the flight if they dropped tails, flights or spots, or started to moult.

Eric was the first to instill the idea of mentoring new folks who joined the hobby and he helped many get started with a few pairs.

Alf Ormerod – I started writing to Alf in England when I was living in New Zealand. I found it surprising that someone doing so well in the hobby would spend the time to write long letters on all aspects of breeding to a young guy thousands of miles away who he had never met.

Most of his letters related to breeding and matings, with heavy emphasis on line breeding. He felt strongly that the lesser birds from a strong family would often produce quality when paired together. I have heard comments from other English breeders over the years that they would visit Alf before breeding season and leave feeling he had lost his touch because the quality was gone... But if they returned several months later the baby flights had more than their share of stormers... and this apparently happened year after year.

He had a real interest in improving varieties. I remember in 1983 when he and Harry Bryan brought in their first spangles from Europe. They were not show quality initially but both Alf & Harry bred them to their very best birds and within a year Harry won two Best In Shows with a Yellowface Sky Spangle cock that caused quite a sensation. In 1984 Alf sent me two of the youngsters (one with a B73 ring) so we could introduce them to USA.

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In 1984 I visited Alf & Doris with Eric Peake and during that meeting discussed flecking that had become a problem with opalines. I had bred a super young greygreen opaline that had a huge golf ball head but was too flecked to show. They both immediately explained how to breed opaline to opaline within the family and the flecking would gradually move back over the crown and disappear down through the saddle. I assumed they were joking but later tried it... And to my surprise it worked, and in three generations had some clean opalines that won consistently.

When I first moved to USA in 1977 I found it a challenge to find anyone involved in the hobby, but fortunately when I did I was living within an hour of Harold Trethaway of Wilkes Barre Pennsylvania. Harold was not your "usual" budgie guy.



In the US many breeders keep their birds inside because of the extremes of temperature, hot as Hades in Summer, and well below freezing in Winter. Not Harold. He had two sheds up the hill behind his house. No heating and no AC to keep it cool in Summer. Yet Harold bred year around as the birds came into condition and was a consistent winner at the North East shows.

In the summer it was so humid in the breeding shed you would break a sweat while he showed you the youngsters and pairs he had just put up. The nestboxes were actually damp inside but his fertility and hatchability was excellent, and although I recall seeing birds panting from the heat I do not remember any parents or young dieing as a result.

Winter was the opposite extreme. It was quite a challenge to make it up the hill after a snow fall. The breeding shed had a little insulation in the form of plastic sheeting over the flights, but you still needed to be rugged up if you planned to stay for long. Again the breeding pairs and chicks seemed to thrive although I remember the hens would not spend much time out of the nest when feeding.

The second shed was aptly called "The Ice Chest", wire mesh over the windows and no insulation at all. First trip up in the morning Harold would break the ice in the water dish and pour in some warm water and within minutes all the birds were down at it for a drink. I often marveled that the birds in this shed survived any Winter but they certainly hardened to it.

Despite some of his unorthodox methods Harold taught me that budgies can survive and breed in extreme temperatures if you have fit, healthy and hardy stock.

He also kept amazing records in notebooks for each year and within a few minutes could give you the pedigree of any bird in his flights back several generations. He spent hours checking pedigrees when he was pairing up for the next breeding season. In the 80s I bred a light green clearwing from a pair of Trethaway birds. Harold could not believe it initially but started going back through his pedigree notebooks. Several days later he called to say he traced both parents back to an Ormerod cock he had purchased from Ken and Libby Tefft in Rhode Island, and when he called Alf he was told that bird had been split for clearwing in the one season he worked with them. Amazing what pedigrees can tell you.

It was during one of my visits to Trethaway's that I first met Eric Peake from Flint, N Wales who was introduced as a BS Judge and budding artist. Spending plenty of time with Eric in the 80s I was able to pick up details on the markings of specific varieties, feathering and overall balance of our exhibition budgerigar that only the eyes of an artist would see.

He had a depth of knowledge on certain varieties, especially clearwings and cinnamon opalines. that was new to me.

The biggest influence Eric had on me, and the hobby in USA, was encouraging other BS Judges to officiate at shows in our country... and while here hold seminars and slide shows to help educate the breeders. Eric judged our Blue Chip EBS Show in Cincinnati several times as did Jeff Attwood, Terry & Claire Pilkington and Geoff Corser, and when they were here the entries were our highest ever.



Don Langell, Boxford Massachusetts, was nicknamed “The King” of budgie breeders in USA by Terry & Claire Pilkington during a visit to Boxford and the name stuck with him for years. And The King had by far the biggest impact on my knowledge of the budgerigar and my success on the show bench.

I was fortunate during the 80s and 90s to have a job that enabled me to travel to New England several times each year and I always adjusted the schedule so I spent a day or two with Don and Jean at Boxford.

During these visits countless hours were spent in his bird room and talking birds around the kitchen table. Don was a master breeder and once he got to know you every trip to the bird room was a learning experience. Always ready to give advice and discuss his management practices and breeding techniques, Don would often challenge you to check your knowledge or to test if you really understood why he did certain things with and for his birds.... And there always was a reason for everything.



More than anyone else Don was instrumental in developing my eye to see specific features in a bird. He did this by having me catch up birds and evaluate them for specific reasons. Much related to the various families he bred, but could also be used with budgies in general.

You knew you had made his inner circle when he would leave the keys so you could access the bird room before he was home from his job at the bank.. But there was always a test in store ... Catch up 5 pairs you would breed together and explain why you would mate them that way... Place the youngsters you thought would develop into the best show birds or stock birds in show cages and discuss your reasoning (and write the band numbers of any you thought would be outstanding on a wall so you could check the bird again during future visits).

Don had several families of birds in his aviary, the most prized being his "Black Band" family that produced the majority of his Best-In-Show winners. Another test was to catch birds from the main flight you thought were from the black band line and tell him what features you saw that were dominant. Initially this was a tough assignment and if I picked one or two correct I was happy. As years passed it became easier and easier as you saw specific "black band" features or even mannerisms. Even today some 15 years later I will often walk into an aviary or check a show cage and pick out a bird or two with "Langell blood" to the surprise of the owner.

Another key ingredient to the puzzle I learned from Don was to spend plenty of time observing your birds. Don spent countless hours in his bird room, often sitting in a rocking chair while he puffed on a cigar and watched the birds for signs they were getting ready to come into breeding condition.

He bred year round when the birds were ready to work and paid little attention to the calendar.

He often reminded me of my Uncle Bill Petzke years earlier, watching for cocks to start fighting, rapping the perch with their beak, and calling to hens in a distinctive tone that more shrill and different to normal chatter. The hens would be calling too, laying flat on the perch while pulling their feathers tight till they had a "snaky look" as Don put it, and gnawing any piece of wood in sight. When the appropriate pairs showed these signs into the breeding cage they went. I am certain this was a major reason why he had such high fertility year after year.

Nestboxes were another pet subject with Don that again brought back memories of my Uncle Bill back when I was a teenager. Don's nestboxes were a box-inside-a-box design which was somewhat radical in the 80s, but quite common today. They hung on the front of the cage so the entry area was shaded so the hen felt secure. A handful of pine or cedar shavings was added to the nest to help stimulate the hen into breeding condition when she cleaned most of it out. The nest had the usual entry hole but no vent holes to allow extra air circulation. The outer box was varnished (for appearance) but the inner box was always uncoated wood so it could absorb moisture and keep the humidity level inside the nest high. After eggs were laid Don would cover the eggs in the concave with his hand and lightly spray water on the walls of the box to further increase humidity during his twice daily inspection. He would also mist both parents when they were out of the nest so they would transfer additional moisture to the eggs when started sitting again.

Fate has a strange way of playing it's hand. I left the hobby for 9 years due to business commitments... But in early 2009 I received a phone call to ask if I would speak at a tribute to Don Langell at the All American later that year. Because I considered him a close friend I accepted as a way to pay tribute to my most influential mentor. He taught me so much and we had such great, fun times together. It did not take long in the show hall meeting up with old friends before my decision was made to buy a few pair and get involved again.

On returning to the hobby it was quite a challenge to get reasonable quality start-up breeding stock but fortunately several friends who had been in the hobby when I left were able to help out with a few pairs. With USA being so large and serious breeders in far off cities most of the birds were sent in sight

unseen. Fortunately the guys did well by me and shipped in some fine birds that have bred well during the first two seasons.

One aviary I have been able to visit is Gary and Kathy Hicken at Logan, a suburb of Salt Lake City Utah. Gary has been showing budgies since 1975 and is currently President of The American Budgerigar Society as well as a Judge in high demand.

The Hicken's have developed their own line of birds over the years and today have arguably the best stud of birds in the US frequently dominating the top bench where ever they show.

They have selectively imported every 3-4 years to maintain vitality and bring in or develop certain features they want in their stud. Breeders like Fred Wright, Molkentein and DeBeers are common in the pedigrees of their birds today. In the past year they added birds from the Lastella stud which had been influenced by imports from Daniel Lutolf a few years back.

Once again there is a lot to be learned by spending time with breeders like the Hickens and picking their brains. Kathy handles much of the feeding and day to day management of the birds while Gary, who is always busy with his duties as local Chief of Police, takes care of most pairings and the breeding season.

A few things stand out apart from Kathy's regular schedule. They always buy the best quality feed available and buy in relatively small quantities so it never sits too long or goes stale. The birds are fed soaked seed and greens/veggies each morning.

The entire aviary is misted with a fogger every morning with a solution of water and disinfectant , and birds are misted too.

Gary strongly believes his best birds consistently produce his best youngsters so his breeding team is also his show team. To get full advantage of his very best cocks he runs the best five with 4-5 hens during the breeding season. Chicks are fostered soon after they hatch, the original hens gets to rest a while, and a new hen is then introduced into the same cage where the cock is waiting.

To keep numbers in check Gary is constantly culling throughout the year. He limits the maximum number of cocks and hens, so if he wants to add one of the young cocks to the breeding/show team for next year he cuts one of the older cocks and it heads to the sales flight. This ensures he always has his optimum number of both sexes and that overall quality is always on the improve.

As you can see, even after 50 plus years in the hobby, there are always new ideas and techniques to consider introducing into the day to day management of your stud Absorb all you hear, then select those that make sense in your situation and give them a try.

You will be amazed what you can learn from these mentors with years of experience in the hobby.