

Nutrition by Mike Rankin



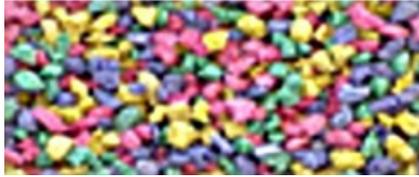
As part of my summer feeding program I would go out into the fields and pick Johnson grass tops for my budgies. Johnson grass seed are very similar to canary seed and relished by budgies. I would put whole bunches in each flight. I couldn't help but notice all the aphids on the seeding heads. I also noticed the budgies would consume the aphids like candy. This made me realize that animal protein is required to fulfill the need for complete protein in a budgie diet.

So I thought I should add a good source of animal protein to my regular feeding program. Many pellets advertise a complete diet for hook bills. I assumed that they knew what the requirements were for a small hook bill the size of a budgie. I started my research. I went to the usual sources - the internet and my college buddies. After a couple of weeks of research I was no more knowledgeable than when I started. No one seemed to know what the dietary requirements were for any hook bill - let alone a budgie. Some dietary plans were based on the diet of the wild species; others were based on extensive poultry studies. I talked my predicament over with several college research people. We could try and find some company to fund a study on the needs of parakeets. This would take several years and was unlikely to be a priority for feed dealers. The only way to get an approximation of the dietary needs of a budgie was to analyze the budgie itself. If we could ascertain what components it took to grow a budgie, we would be close to the needs. So that is what we did. We had to look at this from several dimensions. What did it take to build this body structure and what did it take to maintain the body once established. How did you allow for a breeding budgie verses a show budgie verses a resting budgie. We finally settled on a normal budgie living in a flight. In times of high demand and stress situations the budgie would simply consume more of the diet to meet the needs of the occasion. Based on that premise, we started to break down the budgie as to feather, flesh and bone. From there we calculated the need of each element. I know I am simplifying the process for this article, but the process finally yielded a chart of the basic needs of a budgie. (Attachment 1)

Now that I knew the requirements, how was I going to meet those needs on a daily basis? I had to make that dietary plan a manageable one for my daily routine. I looked at powder and potions of every sort. I finally settled on a pellet that I could add to my treat seed. This would be the least disruptive to my birds and my routine. Now all I had to do was find a pellet that met my needs.

I started my research again. It was difficult to understand what was actually in a given pellet. The names of the ingredients were very foreign to my experience. After going through dozens of pellet ingredient lists and correlating the ingredients to the requirements, I started to realize that most pellets were just grain. Some of the pellets had additional vitamins and minerals but not to the levels I needed. Pellets were corn or wheat or soy based. Corn is the most popular because it mills up so nicely and takes color so well. I call this class of pellets "people pellets" because they are made to sell. Wheat is the next class but the starch content was an issue for me. As I already feed fresh corn and soaked wheat this did not advance my cause. So soy was my base of choice.

I started reviewing my options based on the information I had. It came down to two pellets: one had most of the ingredients I needed and the other had the ingredients missing from the first. So I was stuck with two pellets if I wanted to meet all the needs.



Pretty Bird



Calf Manna

My next problem was how I was going to get my budgies to eat this stuff. It was as foreign as people eating flavored cardboard. So the experimentation started. The older budgies would have nothing to do with the pellets other than to play with them. The younger budgies liked to play with them. When a pellet got broken into pieces, then they would sample them. One of the pellets has an anise flavor, so any time there were small pieces the budgie would consume those pieces. With this realization, I set about producing crumbles from the pellets. I set up my old coffee grinder. This is a grinder you would find in an old grocery store used to grind coffee beans fresh at the sale counter. The grinder processes the pellets into a crumble about the size of a grain of rice. The young budgies loved it. The older budgies at least sorted through it. After several years, all of my budgies readily eat the crumbles. Part of the success was the fact that the chicks grew up with the crumbles and recognize it as a food source.

What started out as a simple plan to add quality protein to my feeding program became a major effort. If you are going to breed high quality budgies this is what it takes. Anything less and you become an also ran.