

Budgerigars and their eggs – Fred Wright

We tend to dismiss the eggs and believe it all “just happens” in the breeding room with eggs but to be successful with budgerigars being they exhibition, colour or just pets, it’s vital to understand what’s going on with eggs - and to know what’s normal and not so normal.

We pair up our birds and we believe that in around eight days we can start to expect eggs to appear in the nest box. Less than eight days and we would usually believe they will not be fertile – and the hen has produced eggs too quickly. Most hens will start to produce eggs within 14 – 20 days.

The usual or normal pattern is for the hen to produce her egg early afternoon and she will produce an egg every other day until she completes her clutch. If hens are fit she will lay more eggs and if she is unfit she will lay fewer. Six might be considered as the norm. My pairs usually lay eight or nine but I always feel that when I breed, my hens as super-fit. If any of my hens produced just four or five eggs, I would think there is something that’s not quite right!

The hens usually start to incubate as soon as she lays or once the second egg appears but the incubation period is 18 days, and as eggs are laid on alternate days – it’s not surprising that they hatch on alternate days. However, not all eggs hatch and we need to look at some of the reasons why this should be.

Budgerigar eggs are clear white in appearance. They can be just described as white. I friend of mine who is no longer with us told a great story that when he started with budgies, he though he knew all about clear eggs and when these clear white eggs appeared in his nest boxes, he threw them away as they were “clear”. After a couple of months of this he chatted with a local fancier who pointed out his misunderstanding!

A “**clear egg**” is a phrase that is used to describe an egg that is not fertile or infertile. If an egg is fertile, on the fifth day of incubation, you can see if the red, blood lines within the egg start to appear, if a light is held against the egg. Years ago, a fancier would hold the egg up to a light bulb to see if it were fertile but the trend is these

days not to move an egg unless really necessary so as not to damage the inside of the egg which would tend to kill the chick as its being formed.

Remember that hens usually start to incubate as soon as the egg is laid or at least when the second egg is laid so always allow an extra couple of days before discarding eggs as clear. Give them the extra couple of days to show fertility before throwing them away.

With experience, fanciers tend not to use the light and with an extra couple of days it's easy to see fertile eggs as the eggs that look solid in appearance, as though they are solid china, rather than a transparent appearance.

There are plenty of ways that eggs can "go wrong". Keep nest clean, with sawdust and probably more importantly start with a clean and disinfected nest box and concave. Remove any solid droppings as they are left in the box without actually cleaning the box and exchanging the sawdust while the eggs are being incubated.

Let's look at eggs that start as fertile eggs that "go wrong". Let's think about fertile eggs that never fully mature. It's what we call – **addled**. There are two main reasons – the first is a bacterium that enters the eggs and absorbed through the shell. The tell-tail sign is that when the egg is opened, there is a characteristic smell – this bacterium either enters from the fingers of the fancier or from a dirty nest box. It's a good reason to avoid touching eggs whenever possible and if you do touch, wash your hands before touching or use a disposable plastic glove. The other way is from a dirty box and is a good reason to use clean boxes and probably use new concaves every year. It's a case for using a new box every year – if you do have serious problems with what we call addled eggs and there is the characteristic smell, when they are opened. A great case for using a disposable cardboard box as a nest box! Think about it!!

The other reason for an **addled egg** is an egg that either gets cold and dies, or it's an egg that gets pushed around and gets damaged inside – and dies. Some cocks get into the box and pushes the eggs around and it sounds as if they are playing marbles with the eggs. Sometimes hens will come off the nest caused by a disturbance – wind, mice and a noise like fireworks. Its then we get addled eggs in the bird room. Never move eggs unless absolutely vital – and if you do its carefully!

All I will say is that with great hygiene in the bird room, not touching the eggs without good reason and reducing disturbance – addled eggs can be reduced to an absolute minimum.

Years ago I used to mark eggs as they were laid. Too many losses and its generally not vital so I only mark if I move an egg. Then I use a soft felt-tip pen, mark carefully and never twist the egg. I still use a spirit pen rather than a water-based pen because the marking does not disappear and I have found no obvious problem with the spirit pen.

Dead in shell is a completely different problem. This is when a chick is fully formed – but fails to exit the egg shell. Probably several reason but let's look at just some –

Some people put it down to not enough humidity – atmosphere too dry. This can be over-come by spraying inside the bird room and around the next box. Another reason which I believe to be the most common is a weakness of the chick – too weak to fight its way out of the egg. To me it's a tell-tail sign of too much inbreeding of the stock. Sometimes a chick will just manage to chip its way out of the egg – and then die. If I see a chick at this stage, I take a small bit of shell away and blow into the egg – giving a bit of extra oxygen to the chick – it usually works for my birds!

Sometimes I believe the egg shell to be too thick and the chicks are just not strong enough to fight their way out. This can be due to too much calcium. Always keen to use calcium/mineral blocks and cuttlefish but I have serious about using too much of a calcium supplement. I have known it to happen in far too many bird room for it to be any coincidence. Use calcium supplements with great care for sure. The “experts” tell us you cannot over feed calcium – I do not believe them!

A good general diet, reasonable management, sensible levels of hygiene, fresh water and budgerigars will usually perform well for us, but never forget that all those chicks come out of the eggs so always think about eggs – they are a hugely important part of breeding budgerigars successfully.