

## Starting with Budgerigars – Fred Wright

An interest in birds usually begins as a child. Time and time again after a couple of years with birds, the teenager gives up and makes a return to bird-keeping twenty or more years later. Many give up keeping birds at around 16/17 years old and return when they are settled, married and have the time and money to begin again with birds.

People know that it is not difficult to keep a few Budgerigars in a cage or small garden aviary but few realise that there is actually an exhibition fancy on their door-step. Those making a start, or a second start, tend to make their initial purchases from pet shops. Suddenly they are keeping a couple of pairs of Budgerigars in two separate cages in either a spare bedroom or the back of a garage. Making the step into keeping exhibition Budgerigars is more about luck and chance, rather than it being a natural progression.

Learning that there is an exhibition fancy is a tremendous discovery - many bird-keepers never realise there is an organised hobby with societies, shows and specialist magazines. Usually an entry to exhibition Budgerigars is made by knowing someone else that keeps Budgerigars for exhibition - perhaps at work or at school. Bird specialist pet shops and avicultural suppliers are sometimes able to direct the person with a few pairs of Budgerigars towards the exhibition branch of the fancy. Some clubs manage to publicise their meetings locally through local newspapers or the local library. With no formal method of entry to exhibition Budgerigars, it is no wonder the hobby is in decline. There is no doubt that people with time on their hands will go towards something that is promoted – computers, gardening or even cooking.

Starting can be expensive for those entering the exhibition side of the fancy - buying birds, a bird room, cages, an aviary or flight. Many begin by spending too much money without actually understanding what quality Budgerigars are about. Poor breeding successes, realisation that they have built a bird room that is to the wrong design or even more frequently - too small, results in far too many making a quick exit.

## **Getting the right advice**

This can be difficult, as you never know at the time, what might be the right advice to suit your circumstances. The advice might come from another breeder but he might well be doing things wrong himself. At the time we never know! The answer is to gain as much general knowledge about keeping birds - especially Budgerigars, before making a serious start that is likely to involve too much money.

Reading magazines and attending local club meetings is probably the best way to learn. Reading and listening is the way forward but always be prepared to adapt information and use it in the context of your situation and resources. Many begin with a few pet-type birds or what are called in the US - "commercials". These will breed freely and there is usually a demand for the youngsters as pets. At first it is important to learn how to breed Budgerigars. However, if the first birds were of poor quality, it is then necessary to sell them and then begin again with better quality birds. This can sometimes be demoralising and the fancier concerned might not have the determination to continue - and they give up. Another fancier lost!

It is a free choice - either begin with pet quality and be prepared to sell the lot to progress or begin with lesser quality exhibition birds and work towards improving them slowly. Little will be learnt about breeding Budgerigars by colony breeding - just the feeding and when they leave the boxes but little about the techniques of breeding Budgerigars will be gained. The real learning comes by breeding Budgerigars in cages, checking the boxes twice a day, ringing youngsters at about 8-10 days, moving and fostering chicks, keeping the boxes clean and watching the youngsters when they are about 30 days and are then ready to leave the nest. Knowing when to take them from their parents and preventing an attack by their parents takes years - and then we sometimes get it wrong!

One of the most difficult aspects of breeding Budgerigars is weaning the young as they leave the nest. They leave the box at about 30 days but deciding when they are fully self-sufficient can be a problem for many new breeders.

There is no right way of starting but there are plenty of ways that are completely wrong. Start small with a restricted outlay unless you have a deep pocket. Most will begin in a spare bedroom, the back of a garage or even a garden shed. A couple of breeding cages will be enough to start, so long as there is space to allow for any youngsters that might be bred from the first couple of pairs. Whatever the way might be that a fancier begins, it is vital not to make massive mistakes in the early days. Most new bird-keepers will be prepared to work hard at their hobby but if they spend lots of money and then make no progress, they usually give up.

My advice would be to make a start in a humble way, join a club, read everything possible and talk to experienced fanciers. The first year should be about learning how to breed Budgerigars and making a start at learning about the qualities of exhibition Budgerigars.

Successful fanciers usually have the support of their family. Keeping a stud of exhibition Budgerigars is a family affair so it is well worth involving the family right from the start. A supportive partner is a massive asset to a successful Budgerigar breeder - it avoids many of those domestic upsets. Use only part of the garden or by building a massive bird room and flights before the rest of the family are committed to your Budgerigars it is sure to cause trouble. Try to keep the family on your side!

Think about the noise your birds will make. Neighbours are not going to appreciate a large aviary of Budgerigars under their bedroom window - or near to the kitchen door. Budgerigars make a lot of noise and not everyone welcomes their chatter. It might well be worth mentioning that you intend to build a small aviary before you introduce 100 birds.

Unless birds are kept clean and you refrain from feeding birds in outside flights you will attract mice and possibly rats. Mice will disturb Budgerigars while they are breeding and they will contaminate food, but rats will kill birds - just for the fun. It is worth getting into the habit of never feeding Budgerigars in outside flights and keeping outside paths around the bird room free from seed.

Many fanciers are attracted to Budgerigars with bright colours when they begin. Violets seem to be the most popular. It does not matter about the colours beginners select to start. Beginners need to be keen and enthusiastic when they begin. If they are keen, they will learn quickly and that is what breeding Budgerigars is about in the early stages.

*In an ideal world the best way forward would be to establish a stud of popular and strong normal colours. Normal, Cinnamon and a few Opalines and it makes no difference if they are Light Greens, Grey Greens, Sky blues, Cobalts or even Greys. There will be plenty of time at a later stage to concentrate with the specialist colours and varieties like Crests, Clearwings and Recessive Pies - but that is in an ideal world. The main thing is to gain experience about breeding Budgerigars with "fun quality Budgerigars" and making the step to quality birds after a successful breeding season.*

There are some magnificent bird rooms about. Some of the top champions and the aspiring top champion have wonderful bird rooms. Some are built with no expense spared - some built like a bungalow, double glazing, running hot and cold water, central heating, some with a kitchen-type food preparation room with TV, radio and telephone.

There are some bird rooms which have cost thousands of pounds to build which house poor quality Budgerigars. A super bird room might look good to prospective customers. It will be pleasant to work in, but a bird room does not breed Budgerigars of quality - it is the breeder that pairs the birds, the breeder that feeds them and the breeder who presents them on the show bench. Many of these super bird rooms will have the facilities for 100 or more breeding cages. However, it only takes one pair to produce the best in show at the Budgerigar Society club show in the UK.

It is sometimes possible to purchase second-hand equipment at a fraction of the cost of new. It is worth giving serious consideration to “used” cages, nest-boxes and flights. Look at plenty of other fanciers’ rooms and equipment. Try to learn from every visit to a bird room that you make. There is always something that can be learned from visiting another fancier. Listen to what fanciers have to say at club meetings.

A first breeding cage can be a simple box-type cage with an inside nest-box or a box attached to the outside. However, breeding cages tend to come in banks or units. Most are constructed in a way that allows the slides between cages to be removed to produce cages that can be used to house groups of birds during the non-breeding season. These units and quality breeding cages are available from avicultural suppliers but many fanciers prefer to build their own, to their own design.

An ideal that was developed in the USA were the all-wire cages that have become so popular throughout the world. Small Parakeet breeders used cages constructed in this way at first and their breeding results were so good that Budgerigar breeders decided to give them a try. The theory is that as Budgerigars are a colony bird, if they can see other Budgerigars breeding, they will in turn breed more birds themselves. It is truly interesting to see a pair of Budgerigars mating which results in other pairs starting to mate. My experience is that pairs allowed to breed in all-wire cages tend to produce far higher fertility rates than other pairs in conventional box-type cages. However, as a personal preference I prefer to see my birds in box-type cages for most of the year. I have resolved the problem by using a combination of both types.

The number of different designs for a Budgerigar nest-box never seems to end. Budgerigars that are fit will breed in almost any box that is available so long as it meets the basic requirements. Boxes can be outside the cage or inside. I prefer an outside box as they are easier to inspect but they can cause problems in a bird room that lacks depth when visitors arrive - they knock the boxes and upset the hens. Inside boxes can

be a desk-type design that sit on the cage floor which are easy to inspect and remove, to a box that is high in the cage secured on a shelf or hooks.

The modern exhibition Budgerigar needs an entrance hole that is about 50mm diameter. The nest-box holes of yesteryear where as small as 30mm diameter. It might be obvious but holes that are too small will stop the hen entering the box. Many new breeders have told me about hens that will not go to nest and the problem is that the box holes are too small. Most fanciers will agree that holes that face the dark tend to produce better results than those that face the light. It is probably that hens prefer a dark box.

A convenient type of box is known as the “box within a box”. Many breeders find this to be an ideal design, they are easy to use and it is easy to exchange the inside box for a clean one when it gets dirty. However, boxes are more about the personal preferences of the breeders than the birds. Deciding which design to use is more about what is available unless you are able to make your own.

Nest-boxes are usually made from plywood. The best boxes are constructed with an exterior grade plywood which will be resistant to water. At the end of the breeding season boxes need to be soaked and washed so an interior grade plywood tends to fall to pieces after a couple of years. Top quality boxes will last for years and years if they are cared for properly.

Most breeders use a timber block at the bottom of their boxes which has a concave carved out. This encourages the hen to lay their eggs in the depression which keeps the eggs together. Some breeders decide that a concave is unnecessary - and don't use one.

The basic requirements of a bird room might be a few breeding cages and perhaps a flight but that is the minimum. There are additions that make a bird room more “user-friendly”. A sink with running water in the bird room makes a huge difference once there

are a good number of pairs. Eventually there needs to be provision for a little storage for seeds and other foods, dishes and drinkers, and even show cages. If even the basic bird room has some form of cupboard for storage and a couple of plastic dustbins for food storage, it will go a long way to address the problem of storage.

Heating and lighting may be considered as a luxury. Heating and lighting is vital if it is the intention to produce youngsters during the cold winter months. I have never been a believer in too much heat but keeping the drinkers from freezing is a necessity rather than a luxury. Lighting is only important if the decision is made to breed youngsters during short days. To bring Budgerigars into breeding condition the short days of winter need to be extended. Bringing Budgerigars into breeding condition requires at least 14 hours of light. Even if birds reach full breeding condition they require an extended day to feed their youngsters. The nine hours of natural light on a winter day is just not long enough to feed a nest of youngsters. Unless it is the intention to restrict breeding to the long days of spring and summer, some form of lighting is a necessity.