

Wild-type budgies back in history?

At the recent AGM of the PMBBC on 29 November 2014 Lionel Sydenham showed us a booklet of Colour Plates of Budgerigars - fifteen plates at a cost of nine shillings issued by Cage Birds, Dorset House, Stamford Street, London.

Attached to this article is a scanned copy of the publication that clearly found its way to South Africa. On the scanned copy there are a few errors of colour descriptions in my view. See whether you can perhaps spot any.

I then searched on Google for the artist RA Vowles and found the article below on the webpage as indicated.

The Colour Plates were painted commencing in the 1940's based on the information available.

This particular article and another article to follow shortly make for interesting reading and have strong support for maintaining the wild-type budgies. Clearly the writer has strong views regarding the direction in which the exhibition budgerigar was being developed and the complications and effect it had on the hobby.

Also note something very astonishing: 40 000 members! Surely not! This is a stark contrast to today where Associations and clubs are struggling to grow and maintain membership. So where did it all go wrong?

Good read for a different perspective.

Johan Lucas: AWEBSA

The Ideal?

<https://budgerigars.wordpress.com/the-ideal/>

From the 1940s onwards, artists were asked to portray the 'Ideal Standard' set by the Budgerigar Society – so that breeders could breed towards the colour, shape and form of the 'ideal bird'. In the early years of the fancy the emphasis was on the new colour mutations but birds were expected to have tight feathers, good posture

and a 'balanced' form. Breeders were already aiming to increase the length and bulk of birds – the 'bigger is better' mentality was already at work.

R.A.Vowles – a celebrated bird-artist of the period – painted the definitive '*ideal standard birds*' in the 1940s, 50s and 60s – by combining the best features of real show-champions. This was arguably '*The Golden Era*' of budgerigar breeding in the UK because:

- **it was an inexpensive hobby for newcomers**
- **birds were healthy, vigorous, fertile and long-lived**
- **over 40,000 fanciers were members of the Budgerigar Society**

The champions of the day still looked, more or less, like larger versions of the wild bird – although the top fanciers were already pushing for larger and larger birds. Various colour mutations from the original green had developed (blues, greys, lutino's) – but feather quality, posture and general form was still recognisable as the original budgerigar. These birds still had: small heads, flexible necks, visible eyes, smooth plumage, jaunty posture, visible legs, visible beaks. In addition, the heads were still proportionate to the body size, the mask- spots were still round, sharp-edged and neat. The same cannot be said for today's 'champions' which are very far removed from the classic birds of the 1950s: modern birds have been selectively bred to have enormously exaggerated heads, hollowed-out backs and shaggy feathers.

Seeds of Decay

If you look at the 'idealised' models from the 1950s, they are undoubtedly beautiful: the colours are vivid, the eyes are clear and sparkling; the plumage is smooth and tight; the stance is jaunty and erect – there is an overall 'balance' – no part of the body dominates over anything else; there is an evident 'harmony'. But the seeds of decay had already been sown: the 'ideal' head in the above models is already significantly larger than that of a natural bird; the neck is thicker and beginning to disappear; the chest and back are thicker than the natural bird. The judges and leading fanciers – simply pressed for the greater exaggeration of these artificial characteristics, more and more in each generation, until we ended up with the

distorted forms of today's exhibition birds, where heads are unnaturally large and the feather quality is rough and disordered.

Nature Rules: 'The Natural tends to be Beautiful'

It is an old adage that *'beauty is in the eye of the beholder'* and I am sure that the fanciers who have spent decades developing their champions truly believe that their birds are 'beautiful' – but in my judgement they are so far removed from the balance and harmony of the natural bird that they are jarringly ugly. I don't think that I am alone in thinking that *'the Emperor has no clothes'!*

Why is it that we discover 'Beauty' everywhere that we look in Nature, whether it is in the beauty of a wild budgerigar, a cockatoo, an Eclectus parrot or the humble bluetits, robins and blackbirds of our own gardens? Why do we find such speed and grace in the Cheetah, such elegance in the Gazelle, such streamlined form in the dolphin or the shark? What is this strange quality which we label *'beauty'* – and why do we discover it everywhere we look in the natural world: in the forest, the desert, the coral reef or the garden?

The answer, of course, is the process of evolution through natural selection. Nature has been weeding the gene pool of each and every species for millions and millions of years – producing animals, birds, fish and insects that are perfectly adapted to the environments they live in. When we look at animals and birds in Nature, we are seeing the 'Survivors and Winners' in the competition for life. We do not see the failures – because they have been weeded-out of each generation going back millions of years. When we see wild budgies flying in huge flocks across the deserts and arid grasslands of Australia, we are looking at birds that are perfectly attuned to live in an environment: where rainfall is scarce, where food can go from abundance to famine in a matter of weeks – and where the birds must endure searing heat followed by freezing nights – for months on end.

In addition, there are predators around which rigidly enforce standards of fitness, fertility, speed, intelligence and adaptability – without remorse. Many species of hawk will attack and eat any wild budgie whose speed, alertness and agility falls

below the norm. Predatory snakes and lizards will eat the eggs and chicks of any wild budgie that does not select a safe nesting hollow. Drought and freezing nights weed out any birds that are sick, weak or which lack the ability to adapt, migrate, change and survive. The result is that every wild bird is fast, intelligent, aware and agile – just as every cheetah runs like the wind and every wolf can run all day and all night until it gets its prey.

The Original Ancestor

In an article by *Robert Manvell* – an Australian Exhibition Breeder he reports that the National Museum of Australia has investigated the evolution of today's wild budgerigars and found fossilised bones in a cave that were 4 million years old. Tests proved that these ancient budgies were identical in size and form to today's wild birds – indicating that budgerigars have hardly changed physically in over 4 million years.

However, the article indicates that much further back in time, 15 million years ago, budgerigars, cockatiels and Rosellas shared a common ancestor that was much larger than today's birds. In that era, the interior of Australia was very, very different from today's sandy deserts and dry grasslands; 15 million years ago the Australian Outback was covered in temperate forests with vast inland lakes and rivers, and an abundance of fruits, seeds and nuts.

So the budgerigar ancestor of those days was a large parrot-like bird, possibly as big as today's cockatoos which lived in a gentle climate, with plenty of water and abundant food. However, over eons of time, Australia changed dramatically: the inland lakes and rivers dried up, the forests vanished and rainfall dwindled; desert spread and coastal mountain ranges cut off the interior from rain-bearing winds. The forests vanished, deserts grew and seasonal droughts became the norm; temperatures in the interior alternate between searing hot days and freezing cold nights.

Bird species evolved radically to cope with these dramatic changes: budgerigars shrank in size – smaller bodies are easier to cool and easier to feed in times of

shortage; the birds became migratory – capable of flying vast distances to find food and water; as the freshwater lakes disappeared budgies evolved so that they could tolerate brackish or even salty water. They learned to exploit periodic gluts of food and to survive the following famines. Budgies can cope with a huge temperature range and they can breed very quickly in response of favourable conditions suddenly developing.

The End Result – the Wild Budgerigar

The end-result, after millions of years of evolutionary selection and predator pressure, is a highly intelligent, superbly-camouflaged bird that can adapt to almost any situation of: heat, cold, availability of food and water, seasonal drought etc.

This species has superb all-round vision and speed of flight – and, like our own starlings, they fly in vast co-ordinated flocks, to confuse hawks and predators. Budgerigars are highly intelligent and have learned to evade predators: snakes, goannas, lizards, hawks and even carnivorous bats!

They can go without water for days on end and can tolerate water that is so salty it would kill many domestic birds. Fledglings are highly developed by the time they leave the nest at 4 weeks and can fly long distances with the flock almost immediately.

Exhibition Birds and Pet-Shop Birds

In sharp contrast, the modern ***Exhibition Budgerigar*** has suffered the loss or decay of many of its original wild qualities as the result of 100 years of domestication and in-breeding. Longevity, fertility and disease-resistance have all crashed in the Exhibition Budgerigar. This decline is less evident in ‘pet-type’ birds, or with those bred in large flights and colony-aviaries. However, the pet-trade is often stocked with birds that have been discarded or ‘culled’ by exhibition breeders – so pet-shops may end up with birds that suffer from the same genetic faults as the exhibition stock they derive from.