

Handling Budgerigars – Fred Wright

The handling of budgerigars is something experienced fanciers will not think about but ask a first-year beginner and they will not find the task so easy. It's probably best considered by watching an experienced fancier or looking at photographs.

Some people will hold the bird's head between the first and second fingers while others will take the head between the thumb and the first finger. The aim must always be not to damage the bird but it's vital to hold the bird in such a way that it does not bite you. Hens can be difficult to manage so it's worth getting practice with cocks and moving on to hens later.

If you are frightened of the bird you are sure to get bitten. They seem to know and once there is any slight hesitation, they seem to take you and draw blood. It's probably best to take the bird while it's on the floor of a cage rather than on the perch. When you catch a bird with a net, it's as well to check which way around the bird is facing and get the bird in the right position as you take it rather than turning the bird while it's in your hand.

Practice does the job! I find the most unpleasant way of taking a hen is when you might be standing with a friend – and the friend passes you a hen to look. At that stage, they always seem to bite and it can be very unpleasant. Always be careful and respect the bird.

Handling birds in the nest is a good way to get the bird familiar with being held in the hand. I love to handle my babies while they are in the boxes all the time. If I have the time, I like to train them to stand on the finger and look at the birds carefully. It is one of the great pleasures of breeding good birds – watching them on the finger just before they are old enough to leave the nests. It's a job to be done when you have the time to enjoy them, and not at a stage of the day when you are in a rush to move on to the next job.

Most of us wean our babies and at that point we stop handling them. Some fanciers have the time to keep them tame and it's all the better for the birds if you are able to play with them. They always make better show birds and one fancier in mainland

Europe is well known for the way his birds are all finger tame and even as adults, they can be moved about the birdroom, into and out of cages from a finger. It's totally amazing but it just reflects the amount of time and dedication that goes into his budgerigars.

I place my babies into flights from stock cages when they are about 10 weeks old. I catch them, check ring numbers against my record book – check the sex and the colour and make sure all is well with them. When I take babies from the breeding cages I enter them into my record book and at the time I mark the last column of book with a comment about the baby. I either mark it EX for excellent, or VG for very good. When I catch the birds to go into flights, I take a special look at the birds I have marked for exceptional quality to see how they are progressing. As I catch them to place them in the flights, I check tails and flights. If anything is broken, I pull it so it will re-grow. I only pull flights and tails if they are fully grown. Any that are still in quill are left as I like to make sure they are fully grown and carry no blood before I pull them. There is a great theory that it is worth cutting a feather to make sure its “dead” for a couple of weeks before it's pulled. It's something fanciers should consider again if your birds tend not to re-grow tails and flights. May be this is the subject of another article sometime in the future.

I catch the birds in groups of 10 and place them in an all-wire cage. I do the job in the mornings and then spray the birds thoroughly with warm water. I leave them for 10 to 15 minutes and then place them in the flights. It is always a job for the mornings as I have no wish to see wet birds at night. They need to be fully dry before the lights go off.

For me one of the most interesting times of the year is when the daily jobs are done in the birdroom and you have a couple of hours to just “play” with the birds. I love to take a show cage into the flights and start catching birds. I like to run them through my hands, check tails and flights and sometimes place them in a show cage – just for a look. This is one of the most pleasurable experiences of keeping birds. There is never a “right time” to do this but I always describe spending loads of time with the birds in the breeding room and then giving far less time to the babies until they are in the flights. At this point I think it can be sometimes depressing to look seriously at

the babies. They all too frequently disappoint. I watch them to see they are fit and well but I am too busy to study them.

Once babies seem to get to the stage when they put down the odd spot, the birds start to look like proper budgerigars. At this point in time I love to run them through the hands, take a careful look and may be run them through that show cage. I usually take the record book with me or I take a pencil and record the numbers of the interesting or birds with potential and check them up when I return to the birdroom. It's a job never to be rushed – but one to enjoy.

We all know that scaly-face is a mite that causes a crust to form around the face and legs.

It is easy to treat but it's a problem that never seems to quite totally disappear from the birdroom. It's always worth catching birds regularly from time to time and if you are in any doubt about scaly-face being present – treat them. I brought a cock in from a friend a few years ago and I must have brought the problem in with him. I treat everything before I pair up but just occasionally, I spot a bird that I think might be starting up with the problem. It's one to keep on top of with regular vigilance. Handling budgerigars regularly and looking at them properly will keep the problem to an absolute minimum.

Some birds hate being held and will sometimes go into a fit. It's quite upsetting the first time it happens. I usually release the bird quickly to the bottom of the flight or the cage.

Just occasionally the bird will not recover but nearly every time the bird will look a bit dazed and move on as if nothing has happened. I watched a very experienced fancier handle a bird and it went into a fit. He placed the bird on the flat of his hand, on its back and pulled the legs towards the tail. Very quickly the bird came straight out of the fit and returned to normal. It was amazing and I have tried it several times since I saw this done. It's worth trying!

All budgerigars love to be sprayed and it's not always a good idea to spray them in wooden cages. I use an all-wire cage and return the birds to the stock cages or the flight later. It's a way of steadying the birds, improving their feather condition and it cleans the feathers. Its time consuming but its appreciated by the birds. Catching the

birds for this purpose is another chance to run them through the hands and check all is well. I am fortunate that my flights contain no timbers and all I need to take care of is that none of the food gets wet, so I tend to spray the birds in the flights several times a week but I regularly catch the birds and spray them thoroughly.

Another stage of the year for catching birds is when the time comes to sort them for selling – or keeping. My method is to be constantly sorting birds and placing the “for sale” birds in sales cages or flights. I always sort on a basis of “I do not need this one” Birds that fall into this category are birds with any faults, lack size or probably more importantly, I have younger birds to replace them. I always sort from the bottom and work my way up to the better quality birds.

Probably the last stage of catching birds before a breeding season is when the birds are caught and placed in stock cages ready for breeding. At this time, I cut the feathers around the vent to increase fertility and I always check the length of the claws. I always feel that hens especially, with long claws are likely to damage eggs while they are incubating.

It is at this stage that I usually wipe a spot of Ivomectin under the feathers on the back of the neck to be sure the bird is free of scaly face and any mites. It just makes sure all is well with the birds before they are introduced to their mates - before a breeding season.