

A True Ambassador: the Budgerigar

**by Pamela Clark, CVT
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Many of us who delight in our larger parrot companions today were first introduced to the many charms of the psittacine world by the budgerigar, or parakeet as it has been commonly called in the United States. Few small parrots are as charming and engaging, employing so many talents to amuse us. Their talking ability is well known. The popularity this bird has enjoyed in aviculture has only grown with the years. Today, it is the most common parrot kept as a companion and is found in every country of the world. Thus, the budgie enjoys a loyal following as a pet, as well as a valuable exhibition bird. There are numerous reference materials that pertain solely to the breeding and care of the show bird.

Wild Origins and History in Aviculture

The Budgerigar has been known by a variety of names, including the Undulated Parakeet, Shell Parrot, Grass Parakeet, Zebra Parrot, Warbling Grass Parrot, Canary Parrot and the Scalloped Parrot. Individuals typically live for between 10 and 20 years, although there are numerous reports of 30 year olds still alive.

The name "Budgerigar" is the original native Australian aboriginal name, and means in translation "good food." According to Neville Cayley, who wrote *Budgerigars in the Bush and Aviary*, the first part of the name (boodgerie) meant "good" and the latter part (gai) meant "food" or "to eat." It was one of the responsibilities of aboriginal youth to collect the young budgerigars from their wild habitat, whereupon they were quickly roasted and eaten. To catch them, the boys threw sticks and rocks at the birds as they gathered toward evening. After they were collected, they were thrown on the ashes of cooking fires, which singed off the feathers. The people, so hungry for animal protein, then ate them. Dr. Donald Thompson, Associate Professor of Anthropology at Melbourne University, corroborates this report.

As these accounts indicate, the budgie is a native of Australia and is observed in large, noisy flocks. They inhabit the interior of Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia, North Western Australia, Central Australia and West Australia, although they appear to be absent in Tasmania. They are usually found in open country that is interspersed with timber and patches of scrubland. Since they are a migratory and nomadic species, they often appear in great numbers in a district that has recently seen a lot of heavy rain.

The budgie native to Australia is primarily green in color with a yellow head, and is about one-third the size of the companion budgies bred today. Nesting is typically done in the many dead stumps of eucalyptus trees and is at its height in December. The young in the wild typically fledge and become independent at four weeks of age. Once the young have fledged, the flock gathers for migratory movement. Their breeding success in the wild is underscored by the fact that thousands of birds are destroyed each year by bush fires, heat waves, droughts and storms, but that the species has never been in any danger of extinction in the wild. Their natural diet consists mostly of grass seeds eaten on or near the ground.

According to Robert Manvell of the Newcastle Budgerigar Club of Australia, DNA testing has confirmed that the budgerigar has ancestors in common with the Rosella and the Night Parrot, although it is thought that its closest relations are the *Neophema* species. Further information about their origins has been found in a cave in South Australia. This cave was the home of a large carnivorous bat, which fed on large numbers of wild budgies. The bats typically carried the budgies back to the cave in order to feed their young. In the process, they dropped large amounts to the floor of the cave and these became fossilized. These fossilized remains have been dated at approximately four million years. This would appear to establish the fact that the wild budgie of today has remained relatively unchanged for the past four million years.

Introduction to Aviculture

The first budgies to be collected and kept in captivity were brought to England in 1840 by John Gould. Since that time, the budgie's popularity has grown as a sought-after companion. In addition, bird breeders are seeking to create numerous new mutations through their breeding efforts. Thus, today there are over 70 different color mutations. As a result of these extensive breeding efforts, much inbreeding has been done and the bird we know today has health problems that did not exist in the wild bird. It is also a far larger bird, the largest being the bird developed in England, which is now known as the English Budgie.

It has been shown that the "exhibition" budgie appears to have had what is termed "stress susceptibility" bred into it. Adrenal glands of both exhibition budgies and companion birds were compared microscopically. It was observed that they were significantly different. After some time spent in communication with Australian officials, researchers were successful in obtaining adrenal glands from wild budgies. Researchers were initially surprised to see that these were similar in appearance to those of the exhibition bird. However, it was concluded that the stress generated for the wild bird from competition for food and nesting sites, as well as the danger of predators, was responsible for this. Since the boundaries between "pet" status and "exhibition" status are now forever blurred as a result of both the popularity of the budgie and the extensive breeding that has been done, owners can anticipate that their relationship with this little bird needs careful attention. Those who adore the budgie as a companion are faced with the challenge of finding a healthy companion and maintaining that good health.

Known Health Problems

Budgies have many disease problems. These include Trichomoniasis, infection by *Trichomonas gallinae*, the primary symptom of which is matted feathers around the beak and head from vomiting. Other common diseases and infections are Megabacteria, Scaly-face Mite, Coccidiosis, Giardiasis, Roundworms, Hairworms, Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease, cancer, tumors of the kidneys and gonads, Psittacine Pruritic Polyfolliculosis and Polyoma Virus. Veterinarians in the United States have done extensive work on polyoma virus, and a complicated pattern of different clinical disease, carrier states, and immunity to the virus has been identified. It is now known that budgies can be carriers of this virus and be quite healthy looking. In these cases, the virus is usually shed intermittently, usually during times of stress.

Companion Budgie Care

Given this profile, owners can see the necessity of maintaining their budgies in a manner that insures optimal physical, as well as psychological, health. Doing so will ultimately help to insure the integrity of the immune system. This begins with the purchase of a bird. It is believed that purchasing a pet from a small breeder who shows care in his breeding practices will help to guarantee the overall health of the budgie. Many breeders, who are breeding either for large numbers of production, or for color mutations, may give less care to each individual and be less concerned with the qualities most important in a companion.

Once the individual companion bird has been acquired, the issues of caging and diet arise. Budgies are by nature very active, inquisitive, social birds. This is a large part of their charm. They do best when provided with a cage in the living area of the home, where they can readily observe and be a part of household activity.

Provision of an adequate cage can be a challenge, since most cages sold for birds of this size have a vertical orientation that is not at all appropriate. Budgies in the wild fly swiftly. They are incredibly agile birds that love movement, including climbing. The best cage for them is one in which they have enough horizontal room to fly from perch to perch. In addition, they should have horizontal bars on at least two sides to provide for climbing activity. Owners are well advised to search until they find such a cage.

Diet is a challenging issue with budgies because so many different opinions exist regarding the appropriate diet for captivity. However, some information is available through an examination of the health problems that are now occurring due to poor diet. These include egg binding, obesity, goiter, hypothyroidism and fatty liver disease, all of which are thought to have their genesis in a diet inappropriate to the species.

Perhaps the best guide might be to examine the diet fed by breeders in Australia, since they have a familiarity with the diet eaten by wild budgies and have worked to replicate this. They typically feed grass seeds, as well as a regular supply of green food. Many of them grow green food specifically for their birds to enjoy year round. This enables the feeding of seeding grasses when they have just become ripe. These same breeders also feed native plants to their birds, such as silver beet, lucerne and salt bush. Silver beet is similar to our Swiss Chard.

Many opinions abound about the amount of protein that is appropriate and how to supply this. Some recommend the feeding of pellets. Others believe that some sort of animal protein should be fed daily, such as egg, insects or meat protein, in order to achieve a good amino acid balance. Many who practice this believe that overweight birds result from feeding too little protein, that the birds eat more than necessary in an attempt to get adequate amino acids for their needs. Thus, they take in more carbohydrates and fat than is required and develop obesity.

Aviculturist Mike Owen of Queensland, Australia recommends feeding a seed mix accompanied by fresh food that consists of 40% canary seed, 20% white millet, 20% Japanese millet, and 20% panicum. This mix has an overall fat content of 3.1%. The addition of fresh foods brings this total fat content for the diet down even further to approximately 2% or lower.

Since the initial writing of this article for the Holistic Bird Newsletter, I have earned my license as a certified veterinary technician. As a result of my experience working as a technician for an avian vet, I have come to believe that the Lafeber Avi-Cakes and Nutri-Berries, when fed with a small amount of Harrison's Adult Lifetime Mash and supplemented with green food, will keep the companion budgie very healthy. This is perhaps the easiest way for budgie owners to provide an optimal diet for their small companions.

Other valuable additions to the diet for budgies are millet spray (which should be fed as a treat), oat groats, whole wheat bread, and cuttlefish bone.

Although some might argue the case for a pelleted diet, it has been observed by Dr. Tony Gestier of the Australian Budgerigar Society that a diet containing insufficient fatty acids results in reduced egg numbers, reduced egg size and a reduction in the number of hatches. Pellets, as a complete diet, will not meet the essential fatty acid requirements.

Summary

The budgie is a valuable companion with wonderful talking ability. The same care should be exercised in terms of acquisition, caging and diet that we employ with our larger parrots. We will receive the most enjoyment from them when we allow them plenty of opportunities for exercise and social activity, and feed a diet that meets their nutritional requirements while not putting them at risk for obesity.

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