

Breeding Birds—Budgerigars



This fact sheet gives guidance on breeding Budgerigars.

What to look for when buying Budgerigars to breed

If you are buying budgerigars to breed from, it is best to choose cocks and hens which are about twelve months old and have never been used for breeding. Birds more than two years old should not be bought. When birds are bought from a breeder who shows his budgerigars, you can get a good idea of their ages. The year each bird was bred is stamped on the aluminium ring on its leg. When you buy un-ringed adult budgerigars, you cannot tell their ages. Signs of old age are very scaly legs on both cocks and hens and very nobbly, dark brown ceres on hens. A cock with an almost black cere should not be bought. This can show that a bird is too old to breed. You should also check:

1. Is it healthy ?

A bird which looks happy and bright, moving about busily, is a fit bird. A wide-open bright eye is another good sign. Any bird which sits quietly, with its eyes partly closed and feathers fluffed up should not be bought.

2. Is the beak properly formed ?

If the lower part of the beak overlaps the upper (undershot) or the upper part looks too long (overshot) choose another bird. These conditions can cause difficulty in eating and – if you decide to use the bird for breeding at a later date – they can be passed on to chicks.

3. Does the beak look shiny ?

Any bird with a crusty look to its beak could be suffering from Scaly Face and is best avoided. The bird you buy should have a clean, shiny beak.

4. Are the feathers under the vent clean ?

If a bird has dirty vent feathers it may have a stomach upset. It is best left and another one chosen.

5. Is the bird the sex you want ?

A cock bird should have a bright blue cere. The exceptions to this rule are the pure white and pure yellow varieties of budgerigar (Albinos and Lutinos). Even as adults, the cocks of these varieties have ceres which are more purplish-pink than blue.

According to the stage of the breeding conditions cycle, a hen's cere will

vary between a pale biscuit colour and deep brown. This is also true of Albino and Lutino hens.

6. Is a hen able to lay eggs ?

Hens which have been used for breeding sometimes develop a large, fatty lump under the vent. Hens like this cannot lay eggs and so should not be bought.

Selecting the variety

When deciding which variety of budgerigar to buy it is really a matter of which colour you like. Unlike some other animals and birds, all varieties of budgerigar are more or less the same size. If you see a budgerigar which is larger than others it will be because it has been bred by someone who shows his birds and has chosen big birds to breed from.

When the first budgerigar was brought to Britain from Australia, nearly 150 years ago it had a bright green body, yellow and black wings and head and a dark blue tail. At that time all budgerigars were that variety, which has become known as Light Green. Since then, breeders all over the world have bred many new coloured varieties. Although some people set out to breed a new colour, it is really a matter of luck. The skill comes from seeing that a new colour has been bred and then choosing a breeding mate to make certain that the colour is not lost.

Greens

All colours of budgerigar come in at least three shades. The first budgerigars to be bought from Australia were Light Greens. The name describes the brightness of their body feathers very well. In the course of breeding with Light Greens it was noticed that a bird with a darker body had been bred, although it still had the same yellow and black markings on wings and head. For a time this new colour was called Laurel Green, but it is now known as Dark Green. Pairing Dark Greens together produced chicks, some of which were even darker in body colour. These became known as Olives. Light Greens, Dark Greens and Olives all have dark blue tails and small patches on their faces - known as cheek patches – which are bright violet.

Even later, another, duller green budgerigar was bred. This is called the Grey Green. Grey Greens have black tails and grey cheek patches.

Blues

When blue budgerigars were first bred they were sold at very high prices but blue budgerigars are no more difficult to breed than any other colour and so

their value soon came down. The lightest of the blues is called the Skyblue and has body feathers which are a pale turquoise blue. Normal blue budgerigars have black and white heads. The next darkest blue is called Cobalt and is a rich, attractive colour. Almost like the Cobalt is the Violet in depth of colour but the Violet has an extra sparkle which makes it the most beautiful budgerigar of all. The darkest blue is the Mauve. The Mauve budgerigar may sound attractive but in fact it can appear as a muddy coloured bird.

In with the blue series of budgerigars are the Greys. Greys have the same head and wing markings as blues, but their body feathering is an even Grey colour.

Yellowfaces

Although Normal Blues and Greys have white faces there are varieties called Yellowfaced Blue and Yellowfaced Grey. As the names suggest these have the same colouring as Blues and Greys but with yellow faces. Sometimes the yellow spills on to the body feathers causing interesting shades.

Cinnamons

The Cinnamon factor is mainly to do with the colour of the wing and head markings. Where Normal birds have black markings. Cinnamons have brown markings. A side-effect is that body colour is paler and softer. Cinnamons can be bred in any colour.

Greywings

Like the Cinnamon, the Greywing factor changes the colour of wing and head markings; this time from black to grey. The body colour is pale and soft. Greywings can be bred in any colour.

Opalines

The Opaline factor takes away the black markings from the head and so leaves it plain yellow or white. The wing markings remain black, but the background colour, instead of being yellow or white, is the same colour as the body. So an Opaline Dark Green has black and dark green wings and an Opaline Violet has black and violet wings. The body colour remains as the Normal, if not a little brighter.

Opaline Cinnamons and Opaline Greywings

When Opaline is combined with Cinnamon or Greywing the resulting bird takes its colour distribution from the Opaline factor and the colouring itself from the Cinnamon or Greywing factor. So an Opaline Cinnamon Grey has a white head, with hardly any markings, a pale grey body and pale grey and brown wings.

Yellow-Wings

Yellow-wings have body colours the same depth as normal Green budgerigars. Their wings should be clear yellow, but they usually have light grey markings. They can be bred in any of the Green varieties and look best when of the darker varieties. Yellow-wing Dark Greens have a lovely contrast between their bodies and wings.

Whitewings

Whitewings have body colours the same depth as normal Blues. Their wings should be pure white, but they usually have pale grey markings. They can be bred in any of the Blue varieties. It has been said that the Whitewing Violet is the most beautiful budgerigar of all.

Rainbows

When the Whitewing, Yellowface and Opaline factors are combined on one bird, it is called a Rainbow. Some people call any very brightly coloured budgerigar a "Rainbow", but the true Rainbow is a Yellowfaced Opaline Whitewing Blue.

Albinos

Albinos are pure white budgerigars with pink eyes. In some lights, on some birds, you can see a pale blue sheen on the rump and under the vent. Albinos are always of the Blue series and so can be bred with Yellowfaces. When the yellow spills on to the body a delicately coloured lemon shade results.

Lutinos

Lutinos are bred from the same factor as Albinos but are of the Green series. They are pure yellow with pink eyes. The depth of colour varies from bird to bird and hens tend to be paler than cocks.

Lacewings

Lacewings are a fairly new variety of budgerigar. They are best described as looking like Lutinos and Albinos with Cinnamon wing markings. They are not always easy to obtain, but there are breeders who specialise in the variety.

Pieds

Pied budgerigars are very attractive and all over the world there are clubs for people who keep Pieds. The main effect the Pied factor has is to put patches of clear colour on to an otherwise normal bird. On a Green Pied you will see yellow feathers on the body, clear yellow patches on the wings and some have clear yellow tails and a yellow spot on the back of the head. Blue Pieds have clear patches which are white in colour. There is more than one type of Pied and each type has different markings. Recessive Pieds usually have more clear

feathers than Dominant Pieds.

Spangles

The newest variety to become available is the Spangle. This has the colouring of a Normal but with the wing markings reversed. So where a Normal has black on its wings, the Spangle has yellow or white and where the Normal has yellow or white, the Spangle has black. Surprisingly, such a simple change has produced a strikingly beautiful budgerigar. In some countries Spangles are still quite rare and might be difficult to obtain. If available they are likely to be more expensive than other varieties.

Crested

Crested budgerigars have longer feathers on top of their heads. The crest can be anything between a small tuft on the front of the head and a full circle of long feathers. As yet, budgerigar crests have not been developed to the same extent as on some varieties of Canary. Because of the factors which control the crest, only a small proportion of the chicks bred from crests carry a crest themselves. This means that it is not always easy to buy a Crested Budgerigar.

General

Budgerigars will breed at any time of the year if they are fit and given the correct conditions. This is because in the wild they are triggered to breed not by the season of the year but by water being available. Even in the deserts of Australia, rain means that grasses will begin to grow. By going to nest when it rains, budgerigars know that there will be food for their chicks by the time they hatch.

If you wish to breed your budgerigars in winter you should be prepared to provide artificial lighting so that there are twelve hours in which the parents can feed their chicks. Heat is not required as long as the temperature in the room where the breeding cage is housed remains above 4.5C (40F). Breeding budgerigars in open flights is best left until spring brings warmer weather and longer days.

You can get some idea of whether your budgerigars are fit to breed from the colour of their ceres (the fleshy part just above the beak). But the way the birds are behaving is a better indication. When fit for breeding a cock budgerigar's cere will be bright blue; a hen's will be changing from a biscuit colour to a rich brown. Both sexes will be active: the cocks chattering and flying about all of the time: the hens spending their time chewing wood.

Normally budgerigars will not breed if there is a single pair, so be prepared to keep two or more pairs if you want them to breed. Budgerigars should not be allowed to breed if they are younger than ten months old. In the wild, when

they are ready to breed, budgerigars find holes in trees and among the roots in which they nest. They do not build nests like many other birds. The hens chew the wood to form it into a shape to suit them and often lay their eggs on the wood chips they produce.

All you need to do to start your budgerigars breeding – assuming they are fit – is to give them a nest box. Budgerigars will nest happily in a plywood box 23cm long, 15cm wide and 15cm high (9 x 6 x 6 inches). They will not mind if the box is a little larger and detail design is not important. In the past budgerigars have used coconut shells and cardboard boxes as nests! In the bottom of the box it is best to have a block of wood, about 2cm (3/4”) thick with a slight hollow at one end so that the eggs will roll to the bottom of the hollow and not be spread all around the box. This is called a concave. The box will need a hole cut in it, about 5cm (2”) in diameter, so that the hen can get in and out. The last thing that is needed is a door for you to be able to look in, to check that everything is going well.

When breeding in cages, nest boxes can be placed either inside the cage or mounted on the outside, with a hole in the cage lined up with the entrance hole in the box. It is best to have only one pair of birds in each cage, as, in a confined space, hens may fight because they both want the same box. Some fighting can take place when breeding in flights but the extra space helps and there are ways to avoid problems. You should always put more nest boxes in the flight than there are hens. The nest boxes should all be at the same height, preferably high up. It is best to have an equal number of cocks and hens. If, in spite of all your precautions, fighting does take place you should watch to see which hen is the trouble-maker. The offender should be removed from the flight; possibly to breed in a cage. Be careful not to be too hasty as there will always be squabbling when several pairs of birds are breeding in the same aviary. There is a difference between squabbling and fighting.

You will find that cocks and hens will soon pair off. A cock will feed a hen and both will chase off other birds – usually cocks – who try to interrupt the courtship. This is when extra cock birds in a flight become a nuisance. They do not have mates of their own and so try to attract hens away from their chosen partners.

As a cock feeds a hen you will see him tap her beak, chattering all of the time. When mating is going to take place, the hen crouches on the perch and forms her back into a hollow. The cock steps on to the hen's back, places one wing across her neck, tucks his tail under her vent and mating takes place. Eggs are fertilised by the cock bird spraying sperm on to the hen's vent. Firmly fixed perches are essential if a mating is to be successful.

Eggs and chicks

Once a hen has started to go into a nest box regularly, it will be about 10-14 days before the first egg is laid. The signs that a hen is going to lay are the vent area becomes swollen, her tail pumps up and down and her droppings increase greatly in quantity and become wet.

A handful of clean sawdust, placed in the bottom of the nest box concave, will show if the hen has been in the box or not. Some hens do not like sawdust and throw it out on to the cage floor. Others accept the sawdust and lay their eggs on it. This is better, as the sawdust keeps the eggs clean and stops them rolling around each time the hen leaves the nest box. Once a hen has started laying she will lay an egg every other day. So after three days there will be two eggs and so on. A clutch of budgerigar eggs can vary from one to ten, but around six is normal.

It is the hen budgerigar which sits on the eggs, but some cock birds join their mate in the nest box. It takes 18 days of the hen sitting on the eggs (incubation) for them to hatch. Because the eggs have been laid every other day, the chicks will hatch every other day. Sometimes a hen does not begin sitting until she has laid the second egg. Then the first two chicks hatch on the same day – 20 days after the first egg was laid. Because of this staggered laying and hatching, the first chick is often seven days old by the time the fourth chick hatches.

When a budgerigar egg is laid it is creamy white in colour. If it is not fertile it stays that colour and you can see through the shell if the egg is held in front of a bright light. If the egg is fertile the yolk moves to the rounder end of the egg and after four days blood vessels can be seen forming as the chick develops through its final stages. Two days later, a fertile egg looks like a shiny white pebble.

Although you can open the nest box door once a day, to see that everything is going well, you should not interfere more than this. If a hen lets the egg get cold, during its 18 days of incubation, the partly formed chick inside may die. The egg is then known as an addled egg and will change colour from a clear white and take on a brown tinge.

Some hours before an egg is due to hatch the chick can be heard calling, still inside the shell. When a chick is newly hatched it has a small “horn” on its top beak. It is with this horn that it chips its way out of the shell. It pokes a small hole, turns a little, pokes again and goes on doing this until the end of the shell drops away, allowing the chick to leave the shell. If a chick does not succeed in getting out of the shell and dies in the attempt, it is known as “dead-in-shell”.

Within a few hours of hatching, a chick will have been fed by its mother.

Hearing the chick, calling from within the egg, starts the hen to produce a milk like substance in her crop. At first it is this crop milk which is fed to chicks, but

as they get older solid seed is fed as well until at three weeks old chicks are fed seed only. Budgerigar chicks are fed while they are laying on their backs. Their beaks open and the hen puts in the food which she has already partly digested in her crop. As the chicks grow larger some nest boxes become quite dirty. Changing the sawdust every week helps to keep the chicks' feet clean. Many hens who do not like sawdust when they are laying eggs, accept it when there are chicks in the nest.

If a chick's feet become caked in droppings, never try to remove the dirt by picking it off with your fingers. You could easily damage the partly formed feet. Instead, soak the feet on warm water and remove the droppings when they have become soft.

If you are going to exhibit your budgerigars you may put closed aluminium rings on each chick at about 10 days old. You should check each day that the ring is clean and that there is no sawdust, seed or droppings trapped between the ring and the chick's leg. Chicks leave the nest box when they are about five weeks old. The cock bird can be seen teaching each chick how to eat and how to fly. Very occasionally, when a chick is bigger than its nest mates, a cock bird can mistake it for another cock bird and attack it. Although this is unusual, it is as well to have a small box ready – like a small nest box – so that it can be put on the cage floor with the chicks inside. The cock will feed the chicks but if he tries to attack them they can go to the back of the box.

When you are sure that the chicks are feeding themselves they can be moved to another cage. Even then it is a good idea to put a friendly cock bird with them. He may help them feed and will teach them how to behave sensibly. By this time the hen will have started laying another clutch of eggs. Two nests of eggs and chicks are enough if the chicks are to be strong and healthy. As long as there is a nest box available, budgerigars will carry on breeding until they lose their fitness, so to stop them breeding, remove the next box.

This fact sheet has been produced for:
The NCA —Spring Gardens, Northampton NN1 1DR
www.nca.uk.net