

BIRD OF THE MONTH

The Budgerigar

Melopsittacus undulates

By Josie Pyle

This article is about the budgerigar – but not the pet birds of variable colours, sizes and shapes commonly seen in aviaries, pet shops or as pet birds. This article concerns the wild or “Bush Budgie”, which is becoming more popular in aviculture.

Although all wild budgies are green, it is more than just colour that differentiates them from their domesticated cousins. This article will illustrate and expound on these differences and look at the attributes of the wild, green budgerigar.

Budgies have been kept as pet and aviary birds since the time of European settlement of Australia. The budgie’s popularity in Europe grew rapidly so that by 1913, one establishment in France housed 100,000 birds! In the time since budgies have been kept in captivity, their attributes have been changed to meet “ideal” standards set down by the Judges of Bird Shows. This has changed the appearance of the bird so much that, on viewing birds recently imported from the United Kingdom, I hardly recognised them as budgies; apart from their colour, they were almost as large as Red-rumped Parrots! As well as larger size, show budgies are bred to sit more upright on the perch, appear “fluffier”, have larger heads and etc etc....more and more removed from their wild cousins. They wouldn’t last 5 seconds against the friendly neighbourhood goshawk.

In the wild budgies are fashioned by the processes of natural selection for speed, manoeuvrability and concealment. Wild budgies are small, slender, dart shaped birds that sit forward on the perch ready for a rapid launch at the first sign of danger. Their uniform colour of bright green blends exceedingly well with native foliage, as I found out on a trip to Alice Springs. A flock of over twenty birds flew into a eucalypt tree but, despite many minutes of diligent searching, I was only able to locate a few of the birds – those making the most noise. The rest sat quietly perfectly camouflaged against the backdrop of leaves. In California escaped birds have formed a feral flock, all of which have reverted to the native green colour. Let’s face it: yellow or white is NOT a good survival colour!

In Australia the budgie is distributed throughout most of the continent, except the northern and eastern coastlines, south-west of Western Australia and Tasmania. Budgies are most abundant in the dry arid interior where they are highly nomadic in search of water and seeding native grasses. In the south birds appear after the winter rains, breed through spring then return to the north following the monsoonal rains and breed there in the early dry season. Budgies live in a variety of habitats including mulga and mallee scrub, spinifex grasslands and eucalypt woodlands, especially along watercourses. Adapted well to their nomadic desert existence, budgies can cruise at 90kph and can survive up to 30 days without drinking. Once they find a waterhole, they can suck water rapidly into their bodies without needing to raise their heads to swallow, thus reducing the amount of time they are susceptible to birds of prey. A flock of budgies almost seems to flow down to the water as birds land, quickly drink and take off again to make room for others in the flock. In times of drought flocks of over 10,000 birds may congregate around remaining watering sites.

Following good rains in areas within their range, budgies will rapidly arrive and immediately start breeding. They nest in hollows in tree branches. The female lays 5-6 eggs, which she alone incubates for 18 days, although the cock will give support by feeding her during incubation and helping to feed the chicks. Young birds fledge shortly after 4 weeks and the precocious devils are themselves capable of breeding after a mere 3 months!

In Summary

The “Bush Budgie” is a social nomad that roams the arid interior of Australia in search of rainfall and subsequent optimal breeding conditions. Once these are found, budgies breed rapidly and prolifically, before resuming their travels.

In captivity this means:

- Birds do better in flock situations. In an aviary birds will be seen to move around and roost together. They are a very social species.
- Breeding may be triggered by rainfall and aided by the provision of seeding grasses (or soaked seed).
- Birds may prefer hollow logs to budgie boxes. Many aviculturists will stick a hollow log “spout” over the entrance to a nesting box to encourage birds to breed.

With the multitude of colour, size and even feathering variations of budgies around today, it is important that the wild type or “Bush Budgie” also gets a

fair go. Following captive breeding of trapped wild birds, there are now sufficient numbers around to make them available to aviculturists who want a bit of a challenge and to experience a decidedly different type of budgie.