

Lucky Choice

Murray Guy, Echunga, S.A.

Where to Begin?

At one time or another some of us debate where to purchase birds? Do we go through the various clubs, friends' collections or to a local bird dealer/pet shop? Obviously depending on what you want to obtain may limit your choices.

After losing an aged breeding hen canary prior to the 2006 breeding season, I decided I would purchase another mate for a two to three year old cock bird, who was a proven sire prior to losing his previous mate.

I visited a well known Adelaide bird dealer prior to the 2006 breeding season and from memory there was not a large selection of suitable hens available. A hen was purchased which had a plastic leg band. Now was this bird an older 'identified' breeder who was being sold off after the previous breeding season because of breeding problems or a fresh first year hen? I did not really know for sure. She appeared in good health, fine feather, flying well and her vent area clean, so with that I purchased her.

Who's The Dummy?

I have bred canaries for several years now, considering myself having good success. They are set up in two small aviaries; one aviary housing a small flock with multiple cocks and hens and a pair of cockatiels. And the other aviary housed a few finches and this was where I intended to single-pair mate this new hen. Something I started doing only in the past couple of seasons, is to remove the canary eggs daily and replace them with 'dummy' plastic eggs and return the stored eggs to the nest when the clutch was completed. I had previously reared good looking youngsters, however I would sometimes get a few that were slower to hatch, due to the fact that the hen starts incubating on her first egg. Those couple of days between hatches can make all the difference in some broods. I decided one year to take the time and effort and replace the clutch with dummy eggs, so that all the chicks would have an equal start in life.

It is always a good idea to read as much as possible or talk to other aviculturists with experience and knowledge to make sure you are on the right track. However, I cannot remember the last time I picked up a book on breeding canaries. My uncle bred canaries years before, so maybe I was going from memory. I had previously stored pheasant/domestic poultry eggs prior to setting them, so I guessed I was heading in the right direction.

Once I knew that nest construction was complete and the behaviour of the hen was noted, I would check the nest first thing in the morning. Sometimes I could be a day or two early, but more often than not, right on cue! I would remove the freshly laid egg, which I have found can be laid anywhere between approximately 6 and 8 in the morning.

store the eggs in an egg carton with a lining of tissue paper to sit on, in an even temperatured room. I have never taken the room temperature, but I would think it would be no greater than 20-30 degrees Celsius throughout the day, at that time of the year.

After collecting the first egg in the morning, I turn it 180 degrees that evening and turn it again the next morning after collecting the second egg and storing it also. That same evening I then turn both eggs. This continues until the morning of day four, when I take the three stored eggs back to the aviary and swap them with the three dummy eggs under the hen—obviously leaving her freshly laid fourth egg! Therefore, the eggs are turned on average at a 12 hourly interval, until all are returned to the hen.

Nesting Begins



The new pair got on well together and started nest building beginning in early spring.

Clutch #1

The pair's first clutch consisted of the 'usual' four eggs. As mentioned, the first three eggs were stored in the house and returned to the hen when her fourth egg was laid. Three chicks hatched (the fourth egg was infertile) with the result of two well grown chicks fledging. The third chick was very small and not as developed as its siblings and stayed in the nest. It was found dead on the floor of the aviary a day or two after the first two had fledged.

Clutch #2

The second clutch also consisted of four eggs, with the first three being removed and replaced with dummies. Four chicks were hatched and reared successfully. All chicks were healthy and evenly sized when fledged.

Clutch #3

Clutch 3 was identical to clutch 2, in regards to 3 eggs being replaced when the fourth egg was laid. The interesting thing to note was that at least one chick had hatched a day earlier than expected, on day 13 of incubation. I thought I could remember this happening previously, so I was not too concerned. The nest was a little awkward to get to, so touching inside the nest was the only way of telling what is going on. My other pairs, housed with the cockatiels, nest pans are all at eye level, making swapping eggs and checking nests much easier.

On day seven, after the first chick had hatched, I observed the hen on the ground fluffed up in the late afternoon. The nights had been cool for December, so I had to quickly make up my mind what to do. I brought the hen inside house and placed her in a cardboard box for the night. I decided to do the same with the chicks; and to my surprise found there were five and not the four that I assumed there would be! My Wife thought that maybe the hen was simply exhausted. This made sense, as the previous clutch of four youngsters were still in the aviary. I had not noticed, but maybe the cock bird was too busy chasing the older young; and not helping with feeding the newer clutch, leaving the hen to do most of the work.

The chicks were placed in a poultry brooder for the night, set at a temperature of approximately 23 degrees Celsius. This appeared too hot for them, so it was turned off and a towel simply placed over the top of the brooder for the night. They appeared comfortable with this, as there were five of them to help keep each other warm; and they were indoors.

I fed the chicks a couple of times before going to bed with 'Canary Starter', as they appeared hungry. The blunt end of a wooden skewer I found to be the easiest way to feed them. They were fed again the following morning before returning them, and the hen, to the aviary. I also removed the four older siblings from the aviary, as they may have been the cause of my problem in the first instance. Within minutes of their return, the cock was observed feeding the chicks.

That afternoon, my wife commented that she had noticed that both parents were going to the nest through the day, which put my mind at ease. The hen was not observed brooding the chicks later that evening, but at least she was perched. She still may not have been one hundred percent, although she did appear healthier than the previous day. Only the chicks were brought in for the night and again housed in the brooder. I then fed again, although they were not as keen as the previous night. The chicks were returned to their nest the following morning without an additional feed. The hen appeared well; and that night she was perched on the edge of the nest.

One chick fledged at fourteen days, which I considered premature, as I usually find that young fledge at about 17-18 days, so it was promptly returned to the nest. Three days after this premature fledging there was a terrible storm, so I was hoping that no chicks fledged during night. The following morning, all five were still 'crammed' in their nest. Three chicks had fledged by the afternoon of day 18, with two returning to the nest for the night.

The following day, four had fledged, all chicks being predominately yellow in colour. I was pleased with the end result...all five had fledged and were flying well. They were all fairly evenly sized; and approximately half the size of their parents. In addition to having good reliable breeding pairs, it goes without saying that the diet of your breeding birds plays an important role in producing robust and healthy youngsters. At the same time sustaining the parents in top condition while they go about rearing their brood. I always ensure that my pairs are fed a good quality seed mix and canary starter mix, fruit and vegetables, garden greens, such as milk thistles and seeding grasses (unsprayed of course!), grit, cuttlefish and fresh water.

Quit While You're Ahead!

I was not going to let the hen commence a fourth clutch, considering what had happened with the previous brood and I thought the pair had done well to produce eleven excellent looking chicks. I was not quick enough in removing the nest and she laid another clutch consisting of three eggs. The end result being only one chick hatched, however it was found missing a day or two after hatching, one chick died in the shell and the third egg was infertile. The nest pan was promptly removed after this.

I was pleased with the end result of this new hen's first breeding season with her new mate; and look forward to the coming season. I also learnt something new, as when later researching two reference books, I found canaries can, and do, lay four to five egg clutches. This was certainly a first for me!

Products Mentioned in Text:

Canary Starter
A complete soft food for canaries
Superior product to egg and biscuit mixes
Manufactured by: Passwell Pty Ltd
8 Oborn Road, Mt Barker SA 5251

References:

The Complete Book of Canaries
G.T Dodwell, 1986, Merehurst Press.
Coloured Canaries
G.B.R Walker, 1976, Blandford Press Ltd.

