

UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT

CUTTLEBONE

by Marian Cochran

(First published in the Pacific American Singer newsletter
Volume 5, number 4, October 1998)

Cuttlebone is probably the most common dietary supplement given to canaries. It is an inexpensive source of calcium and other minerals. Birds enjoy the activity, too, of pecking it, and whetting their beaks on it. Birds need calcium year-round, and it is especially important for laying hens to get as much as they want.

The cuttlebone is the skeleton of the cuttlefish, which is a member of the cephalopod family, and a cousin of the octopus and other squids. This lightweight internal shell helps the creatures stay afloat. Cuttlefish live for only a few years and die after breeding. Commercial fishermen harvest the cuttlefish primarily for food, and the skeleton is cut out during preparation.

You can buy cuttlebone in several sizes, small for finch-sized birds, on up to large for parrots. In the pet store, cuttlebone comes with a metal holder, whose prongs can be bent to attach it to the birdcage. Most canary owners do not use this holder, because birds get their feet caught - and cut - on the edges. Instead, some use a clip type holder. The clips are usually plastic, and some come with their own little perch. Other birders drill a small hole in the cuttlebone and put through a wire, like a small electric wire. (Take care that your wire can't catch the bird's foot.) Others push the shell through the bars, hold it steady with a clamp, and let the birds stand directly on it.

If your bird ignores his cuttlebone, try turning it sideways. Because the shape is about the size of a large bird, some birds are intimidated and hesitate to approach it.

If the bird still ignores the cuttlebone, turn it over. Usually they like the lighter coloured, flakier side more than the yellowier harder side.

If the bird still ignores the cuttlebone, try soaking it. There may be salt or a "fishy" residue that makes it taste funny.

If the bird still ignores the cuttlebone, just scrape a bit onto his food about once a week, sort of like you salt your own food. Hold the bone over some treat food, and scratch it with a knife.

Some interesting facts about cuttlefish, *Sepia officinalis*, is a mollusc.

Cuttlefish are considered one of more intelligent of sea creatures. Their eyes, brains, and nervous systems are quite highly evolved and sophisticated.

They live in the oceans, in reefs and around rock outcroppings. Usually they grow to about 1 or 2 feet long. *Sepia apama*, the giant cuttlefish, lives near Australia and grows to the size of a dog.

Cuttlefish are cephalopods, which means head-foot, because we see two parts to their bodies: the head and the ten tentacles. Unlike other molluscs (clams, oysters, and snails), their shell is internal. It is bouyant and helps them stay afloat.

The cuttlefish can blend almost invisibly with their background. Their skin is covered with small sacks, chromatophors, that can change colours instantly.

They have a small jet just below the tentacles. They can expel ink through here to confuse a predator. This ink leaves a nasty stain! Their name, sepia, is also the name of a dye made from the ink.

They also use this jet to squirt water, so they can dart out and snatch prey. With this jet propulsion and the highly evolved flexible ribbon fins on each side of the body, a cuttlefish can manoeuvre quite well, hover, zoom about, and stop and start suddenly.

The cuttlefish communicate with a highly elaborate series of arm movements and colour changes. During mating, the males do quite a dance for the females, waving their arms and flashing their brightest colours. Then they lock tentacles, and he passes her a “gift wrapped” packet of sperm, which she guides into her body. The females lay about 25 eggs, leaving them pushed into coral or rock. She never looks back. The young hatch entirely capable of fending for themselves, just a smaller version of their parents.

Most molluscs have a beak, like a bird's. The cuttlefish's beak is powerful, and shaped like a parrot's. Its front tentacles are specialized for feeding. They grab crustaceans, and then crack them to eat.

Cuttlefish are territorial, often spending their entire lives near one coral reef or one rock outcropping. They live a few years, and die shortly after breeding.