

THE QUEST FOR THE HOLY GRAIN

By Tony Melbourne

Most of us start in aviculture with a couple of pair of birds (in my case finches) and the initial food source is the Supermarket and small packets of bird seed. Of course it doesn't stop at two pair and next thing you know you are purchasing 5kg bags of seed. You are now hooked, the aviary numbers are on the increase and 40kg bags of seed are now the order of the day.

Now our fair country is subject to drought, fire and crop failure. This sees the price of seed skyrocket at an alarming rate and, just like the unions, imported seed goes up in sympathy with our own home grown. Bird keepers complain, so to keep prices in check, other seeds, which are often less palatable to birds, may be added to commercial mixes to make up the weight. This means that for every 4 or 5 bags of seed you buy, you lose at least a bag of seed that our feathered friends will not eat.

This did not impress me greatly so I looked for a better way of doing things. Having a copy of Russel Kingston's wonderful book on finches, I consulted same for a solution. The answer was simple - mix your own seed. I decided I could cover the bird's needs with 5 seed varieties; namely French White Millet, Jap Millet, Red and Yellow Pannicum and Canary. Next I purchased five steel rubbish bins, guaranteed to blunt the teeth of any mouse for storage. As an additional precaution, you could also place moth balls or some similar product outside the bins, to ward off insects and moths.

Now, by purchasing the seed in 40kg bags, I found that I could get a decent discount (as the merchant did not have to mix the seed). In addition you could mix the seed to your specific requirements and if you wished to add other seed, such as niger, you now know exactly what your birds were getting. After I started mixing my own seeds, I soon noticed that there was little or no wastage by the birds, as they ate the majority of the seed. So now I was reducing my seed losses **and** reducing my seed costs.

By now I had ventured into Neophemas and the three species of *Polytelis*, so I looked at a different way of caring for them. I remembered Tim Nielsen telling of the problems that they had in the Northern Territory when they had taken some Black Cockatoos under license for a particular project. The birds had been feeding entirely on rice on a dry rice property and were in poor condition, but would not eat any seed other than sunflower seed. A solution was found by feeding the birds with soaked pigeon mix. The

cockatoos immediately took to the pigeon mix, their general condition and deteriorated feathering improved and they quickly returned to good health.

So knowing that Tim still feeds his own soaked parrots pigeon mix, I ventured down the same path. Here I struck the jackpot. A 40kg bag of pigeon mix was slightly more than half the price of a bag of small parrot mix. The birds loved it; wastage was almost negligible and, even though dry seed was also available, they eat very little of this. During the breeding season I bulked the mix up with additional hulled oats, mung beans and a little sunflower seed. Breeding results were great with fine healthy chicks and no losses.

I am firmly convinced that this is the way to go, you save seed as well as reducing costs and, as an additional benefit, your birds appear to be in better condition. The *Knights Templar* and *Indiana Jones* might have missed out but I believe my quest for the *Holy Grain* has been accomplished.