Pairing Up by F.N. Clews

I have found that the best time to pair up budgerigars is about the end of April, just after the main moult. Our birds are at their fittest at this time, most of them 'jumping out of their skins', and adult hens have usually lost most of the excess fat they may have had.

Normally such hens are in good condition at this time, often go to nest quickly, lay eggs and rear chicks with a minimum of fuss whereas if breeding is not allowed until later, the birds' fat will begin to build up, around the ovaries at first. Once the ovaries are surrounded by fat it's very difficult to get budgerigars to breed.

You will have heard the common advice that it's unwise to use a hen until it is over twelve months old. That, in my opinion, is nonsense. In the wild budgerigars begin to breed when they are old enough and mature enough - by their judgement. I have had some of my best results from hens when they were just five or six months old.

The common tale is that such young hens may allow chicks to die because the hen hasn't the gumption to start feeding them but in fact her instinct, no matter how young, is to respond correctly to a squeaking, hungry baby. Such young hens should be watched closely after the first youngster hatches and if there is no sign of a little white 'bubble' of her milk in its tiny crop before evening and it seems to be getting quieter and weaker, swap it into a nest of thriving babies and give her a chick three or four days old which is full, wriggling and soon noisily demands more. This almost invariably encourages the novice hen to begin feeding and after that they never look back.

Usually there is less behavioural and health trouble with young hens and fertility tends to be better because they don't disappear immediately into the nest box when introduced to the unfamiliar breeding cage. Putting the pair in together, it may take a young hen a week before she decides to investigate the dark nest box, giving the cock time to win her over and fertilise her eggs. Quite often adult hens will go into the nest box straight away and the cock can't get near her, or for long enough to do his duty. Many hens if left until they are older than 12 months before being allowed to breed are more reluctant to accept the persistent attentions of a cock bird.

In my experience, just the opposite to the above philosophy seems to be more common with cock birds, in that if you put up young cocks in their first year and they do very well, they inevitably seem to be poorer breeders in following seasons. If 1 had plenty of room and patience I'd leave young cocks in the flights until they are in their second year, until they are more mature and much stronger. After that you should get several years good breeding results from them.

And when pairing up do remember one of the essential findings of a veterinarian team at the University of Liverpool (UK): that the one major influence the breeder of budgerigars can have on the fertility of his birds' (particularly the larger, coarser feathered ones) is to trim both cocks and hens around the vent.

The aim when retaining birds and selecting pairs must only be to breed progeny better than they are. My personal practice, keeping that target in mind, is to sell my adult hens whenever the breeding season is over and when I have a firm assessment of my new crop of hens, only varying from that rule if there is a really outstanding reason to keep a particular hen for one more year. Cocks I'll keep for a extra year, but almost never hens.

Once established, it is not necessary to use a large number of pairs to be successful - only breed sufficient birds fundamentally for your own requirements. Nine or ten breeding cages should easily result in an end to the season with fifty or sixty youngsters in your flights, more than enough to participate in the shows with four or five of the outstanding ones, give you ample choice of those to be retained for next season's breeding stock to maybe say a dozen cocks and eighteen hens, and leave you with a minimal disposal problem with those surplus to your requirements. And when you breed a small number of birds of good and increasing quality, selling your extra birds becomes no problem at all.

It just isn't necessary to breed two or three hundred youngsters a year to come up with good birds - if you have to breed several hundred young birds to produce a small percentage of good ones, there is something wrong. Such numbers are hugely time-consuming and create a lot of hard work (aside from the disposal.problems at cull times), when breeding budgerigars is supposed to be a relaxing hobby.

Keep just a small number of birds so that they are not a chore and you are sure to enjoy them - it only takes one exhibit to take the Best in Show award!