**The Finer Points of Breeding Season Management**
**By Gerald S. Binks (U.K.)**

Following my previous articles, I know that all breeders are very interested in breeding problems and techniques to get themselves out of trouble. The well-known problems are not the ones I wish to discuss, but rather the less well known ones which both beginners and champions will be interested in. 2004 is my 58 breeding season. These days I rarely exhibit, but breeding quality is everything to me. Perhaps that is why I sell out easily every year. My existing lines go back to my own show winning grey greens which I received outcrosses from Jo Mannes, of which two birds did really well for me. Subsequently Jim Moffat died and his stud was left to me in his Will. That event was four years ago and having a large stud, just one or two birds as outcrosses were insufficient to meet my requirements. So for 18 months I studied all the international magazines and downloaded photos from the Net. I had a specific wish for a certain feather quality, as well as numbers. Where to find them - if they existed? Eventually I realised only one man could meet my needs in quality as well as numerically, but I would have to travel to South Africa to the Molkentin Stud. It proved well worth all the efforts to travel, importing 25 birds, vets and so on --- but that is a story for another time. This is purely that introduction to this article.
**The Aviary**
You will al have experienced this in aviaries that you have visited. You are shown around a cold aviary that has no feeling to it. Sometimes it has a height roof so that heat is difficult to maintain and there is a general depression about the place and the owner complains about everything including fertility. The chances are that he spends little time in there and because it is cold in the winter months, the hens spend all their time in the boxes. Mating is poor to useless. Make your aviary smart, professional in appearance and a pleasure to stay in for as many hours as are required.
**Vitamins, etc**
A great deal has been written about vitamins and minerals. I receive perhaps 7 calls a month from fanciers in trouble. Listen to everything they feed and in nearly all cases they are deficient in vitamins A & D. Without these two items in the correct proportions and timing, you will get nowhere in budgerigars. I well recall the late Jo Schwartsburg for whom I had great respect, telling me he gave A & D for the first 7 days of each month only, and fresh water for the following three weeks. He bred big birds, but there were other items involved, but all natural foods. Only the A & D were liquid. Watch you do not overdose on vitamins. Only a little is needed. On minerals, do remember that every nest needs grit that is changed weekly. Because the dish looks full, you do nothing, but the pair(s) have taken the top layer and their gizzards are crying out for the right sized particles. They do not in practice scratch down lower in the dishes and then you wonder why your chicks are backward and not growing properly.
**Nests**
Here are some thoughts for you. Firstly, cleaning out the boxes, when to do it or not to do it? I start by using sterilized graded sawdust. As the chicks grow, the nests slowly become fouled more and more. I change the box floor contents as soon as I smell the slightest smell of urine. Also some nests reduce the floor contents to grey dust. That warns me that there is a possibility of French Moult occurring. So I change to a clean box, spray the interior with VIRKON-S, first sawdust and back with the chicks. Have you ever noticed that those nests which have hard thy, often white, humps of excreta never get FM? Think about it. There is no one time to change the nest contents. The situation you see dictates when to act. I have changed my boxes in recent years. The DESIGN isn't important but the depth is. Shallow boxes permit too much light to enter and hens are easily disturbed. Entrance holes should face away from the light as well. Chicks fall out of the nest overnight, too soon, and are dead the next morning and hens lay their second round too soon and the eggs are scattered everywhere by the chicks. Deeper boxes stop those problems. Mine are now 28cms deep internally. The hens sit far better and the chicks do not die by getting out too soon. As a result two things follow:
1) The chicks are larger because they are fed longer by the adults.
2) The hens delay their second round egg laying for a little longer and consequently the eggs are not scattered so much.
Another tip to delay egg laying is to leave in a plastic artificial egg. That will help in some cases.
You come home from work and inspect the boxes. You find the first chick is trapped in the shell, but still alive. I suggest you get a syringe and inject some warm water into the sawdust layer immediately under the remaining eggs. At least that is the theory - but it does work very well.
Culling is an emotive subject. You however are acting in place of nature. Chicks that are not growing properly should be culled immediately - for the benefit of the others. Similarly a feather duster should receive the same treatment. They are like the "cuckoo in the nest". They take all the food that is going and the other normal chicks suffer. On top of that the parents get tired as a result and their feeding routine is pulled back. Both parents will be seen outside the box looking disinterested. Do not waste time culling when necessary. Do it straight away. Don't forget to identify the FD carrier!!!
What causes a cock to be found dead on the cage floor and similarly why does a hen die on her eggs? Both have full crops and are clean at the vent. It is guesswork to an extent. I think in the case of cocks, a few choke on a particle they swallow from the area. Hens can sit for too long and get poor circulation and a blood clot forms. In both cases I usually kick the door and put it down to lack of breath --- and get on with it. Still on hens, you sometimes find a hen is excreting green droppings soon after pairing. If you do not inspect every day and look out for such evidence you will lose her. She needs an antibiotic and a heat source fast. Occasionally a hen will be seen, say, halfway through a round, sitting on a perch with eggs chilled and/or chicks cold or dead in the box. You have no choice but to act as above with her but what about the eggs and chicks? I have an incubator that is on all the time, not for incubating but for use as a place to warm up eggs or chicks in cases like this, or when I am working around the nests when a tiny chick is found under some well-developed chicks and which will be crushed the next day unless transferred. Parked in the incubator for a while gives me to see all the other nests and consider where such a small chick can go and will be well fed. It is a useful tool.
**Now two points on infertile eggs**
Why is the first round infertile sometimes, assuming you are doing everything right? Second, why when the first round is fertile is the second round infertile? May I suggest that in the first case, the hen may be what I term “BOX BOUND” and refuses to mate from inexperience, or you have paired both cock and hen at the same time instead of a three day gap before the cock is introduced. In such cases there is also the possibility that the cock is not producing sperm (there is a 11 day gap in the cycle when cocks do not produce sperm) I therefore clear out the eggs as soon as the last egg has been laid. I then let the hen see that the eggs have gone for 24 hours and then shut her out and close off the box for two days before opening it again. The times that works is amazing, and fertile eggs appear. In the second case concerning an infertile second round, it may be the chicks have interfered with the parents mating procedure. They do get in the way sometimes and position themselves where the parents like to mate. As soon as you can get the chicks away the better. Then remove all but one egg and you will find the remaining eggs will be fertile.
**The Young in the flights**
Much has been written about when to take the chicks away from the parents. I usually watch when the chicks are getting up on the perches and the length of their tails. Remember there is a 10 day age difference in a nest of five chicks! More important than this process is most breeders do not feed the chicks as well as they did when they were in the baby stock cages, when they are placed into the big flights. I really attack this period even harder since the young chicks are under stress, are coming to the big moult and they require a tremendous protein input until they are through it and after. Remember that shoulder you felt in the nests? That is what you need to get back as soon as possible.
**Conclusion**
When a pair has to be stopped from breeding for any reason put them into your stock cages together with other birds. They need time to adjust and being in the same area together will settle far better than putting them straight back in the big flights immediately when the hen will be stressed and you can easily lose her. As a last word: do not forget to open the box after the hen has been shut out for two days. They do not breed well if you forget.