**What Constitutes a Winning Bird?**

by Alistair Home

Let me say from the outset that I am not claiming to have any of the top winning birds. My greywings that are doing pretty well at National level don't really compare with the very best birds in the major varieties, but the principles of what goes into the make- up of a good bird apply in all cases. I am drawing on a little bit of my own experience and a lot on the comments of other people that 1 have gleaned from articles and interviews I have read. My main point is that we should not become so obsessed with one aspect of the ideal that we forget the whole bird.

I think there are three main elements that go to make up the winning show budgerigar and they are; physical constitution, feather structure and varietal display. All three are determined genetically and can therefore be influenced by our skill in selective breeding (spiced with a bit of luck, of course), but husbandry also plays a major part in what is finally produced.

***Physical constitution***

The bird should feel a real handful when held. There should be thickness across the body as well as length in the body itself. Smooth line is maintained if the bird is well muscled, not carrying too much fat. We should not think that a densely feathered bird is large - the ideal is a bird that is physically substantial.

The common idea in the UK is, *"you can't breed rats from mice".* Many of our imported birds are rather small in body - perhaps that is why they have been sold. The lesson is that at least one partner in every mating should have body substance and length if we hope to breed substantial birds. Two small birds won't breed large offspring even if there are large birds in their ancestry.

The quality of the feeding from their parents in the nest can determine youngsters' final appearance. I believe very strongly that in addition to seed, grit and green food we must provide vitamin and mineral supplementation as a part of our feeding routine. Personally I use Murphy's Pro-System (which is available in Victoria from Sonia Berger) and 1 have found it to be very satisfactory. I do not, however, rely on it alone. I also feed my birds on hard boiled egg during the breeding season, especially when they have chicks in the nest. I notice that the world famous German breeder Jo Mannes also uses it as a supplement. Sometimes I feed it alone, sometimes in a mixture with bread and carrot.

***Feather quality***

Much has been written about 'directional feather' and we can see the benefit of that feather in the winning birds today, particularly above the eye. We should become very conscious of feather qualities, looking for how they sit on the bird and selecting to favour feather that gives the best final appearance. Coarseness may be beneficial, but it can bring problems too if the feathers do not sit neatly.

Of equal importance is density of down and softness of feather. Fred Sherman delivered a very interesting talk in Hobart about his experiences in introducing English stock into his aviary in Zimbabwe. The most telling point he made was that he examined the down of all birds bred and selected for density. It is this density which gives the correct line to the feather placement and it should form a part of our thinking when culling and mating up. In relation to softness Jo Mannes says that a major factor in his line of birds has been selection for softness as well as length of feather. Fanciers who have visited his aviary vouch for the impact of the feather of his birds. In the management of birds with this extra feather I'm led to believe that breeding performance will be enhanced if the feathers around the vent are trimmed prior to pairing up. You don't need to worry about "guide feathers", just make sure that the thick down and long feathers do not prevent proper contact between the mating birds. Research in England suggests this is the only significant factor in enhancing the breeding performance of the exhibition bird.

***Variety***

It's essential to remember that 40% of the points for a show bird is for its variety. An opaline with bad markings and patchy body colour for example must lose most of that 40% - it would have to be a long way ahead in other respects to win with that sort of handicap. The common saying is that we should judge the bird first. NO! We must judge the whole of the bird INCLUDING ITS VARIETY. The bird that is excellent in shape, size and feather has its place in the breeding team, but unless it is also good in variety it has no place in shows. It's not true to say that faults in variety can be readily corrected. They are no easier to remedy than any other faults, and sometimes can be frustratingly difficult.

In summary then, I believe that when we are establishing an exhibition family we should try to keep in mind all aspects of the bird so that the end product is a balanced, well proportioned, attractive specimen.