**Feather Plucking is not Hereditary**

**CEDRIC AIREY**

I firmly believe that feather plucking is a symptom of another condition and when that condition is relieved feather plucking does not occur. I cannot accept the theory that feather plucking is hereditary and that the offenders and their offspring should be killed. I think this theory is perpetuated by each generation of newcomers accepting it, without question, and repeating it as fact. No-one seems to be willing to substantiate it from personal experience. Very often the same people who tell us the problem is here- ditary suggest putting a nest box on the breeding cage floor and letting the cock feed the chicks. This may help if the problem is environmental but it is not much help if it is hereditary. Possibly a re-occuring problem is being mistaken for a hereditary one.

**OVEN READY CHICKS**

I was foolish enough to accept this theory when in my first breeding season I discovered I had a maiden hen which plucked chicks "oven ready" and a cock with another hen which stripped all the feathers from his mate's head. Even then I did not feel that killing them all was the solution. Two years later I decided to try one of the sons of the hen plucker in the breeding cage. No problems from the cock or any of his offspring. Encouraged by this, I tried one of the "oven ready" cocks, the 'oven ready' hens were, by this time too old for breeding. Again no problems. I now have four generations of birds descended from the original two feather pluckers. Not one of these birds, cocks or hens,has ever plucked a feather from a chick even when interbred.

**FINDING THE ANSWERS**

I have had minor problems with birds from other families; the down not appearing or disappearing from between the wings on very young chicks - easily remedied with liberal applications of Nivea cream, as many fanciers know. Feathers missing from the back of the head of active three or four week old chicks ~ completely cured by using deeper nest boxes, i.e. increasing the distance between the concave base and the bottom of the entrance hole or removing some of the debris. This damage is probably caused when young chicks try to leave the nest before the hen thinks they are ready. She restrains them by holding on to the neck feathers and out they come, it's accidental rather than intentional The foregoing is sufficient for me to have grave doubts about the "kill everything, it is hereditary" theory.

**ALTERNATIVE CAUSES**

I offer for the readers' consideration three alternative causes for feather plucking. The first is breeding condition. How many breeders can differentiate between a hen that will breed and one that wants to breed? The reluctant hen from the eager hen? I cannot. The reluctant hen will mate, lay eggs, hatch and feed the chicks because it is her natural instinct. But she is not an enthusiastic mother. She gets bored sitting and feeding the chicks and starts plucking them. I anticipate this condition and provide millet spray and an iodine block or piece of cuttle in the nest box for every hen. It is therapeutic,an alternative to just sitting weeks on end. The second alternative is diet deficiency. Additives may contribute but feather plucking has been with us long before additives became popular. We know ground up chicken feathers are fed to chickens as protein. Does a Budgerigar hen nibble the down and feathers instinctively because of a lack of protein?

**ARTIFICIAL LIGHTING - BOON OR CURSE?**

A third alternative is artificial lighting. Does the increased noise and activity created by extending lighting, long beyond the amount of natural light the birds would have in their natural breeding environment, disturb sitting hens and prevent them getting sufficient rest? Does it also contribute to a reduction in the birds life span? I have no experience of parent birds attacking their young but I believe it is a different problem and not a follow-on to feather plucking. I apply these ideas to my stock with positive results. My hens are very placid. They do not bite when handled. I leave chicks with their parents until the next round starts hatching. I have odd chicks, which later proved to be hens, sitting the eggs with the mother hen and one which fed, or went through the motions of feeding the newly hatched chicks. The cocks are not aggressive towards the chicks, probably because the hen's daily ration of millet in the nest box relieves them of some of the pressure of keeping the hens fully fed. My stock are all descendants of a few birds from top bloodlines. I do pair related birds which should theoretically increase the possibility of producing feather pluckers if the problem is hereditary.

I only pair what I consider to be my best birds so my findings are not based on the results of vast numbers of pairings. No matter, I am merely casting doubts on an existing theory. It is for those who advocate the killing of feather pluckers and their offspring to logically disprove my findings and provide first hand evidence that this problem is hereditary.