Budgerigar Health And Related

Feather Dusters and Other Misconceptions

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Feather Dusters and Other Misconceptions

By Stephen Fowler © 3/2007

Exactly one year ago a blue spangle budgerigar was hatched in my aviary, Feb 2006. As this baby grew, it developed the familiar head feather texture of a feather duster. He was the third of the season and was not expected in that clutch as both parents came from different breeders. All the previous examples had been grey green and had died shortly after weaning while attempting to compete with other babies in the weaning cage. As his coloring was very attractive, I resisted suggestions to euthanize him. Upon weaning, I left him in the breeding cage and culled the parents, as I had no plans to breed more feather dusters. While in this cage he was not able to reach the Bird-Zerk feeder containing the parakeet mix attached up the side of this breeding cage but fed quite normally on the dish of oat groats and out of a Planit #10 Mason Jar feeder sitting in a plastic sushi tray to catch spilled seed. The seed mix in the Mason jar was 80% small golden millet mixed with 5 percent each of Canola rapeseed, Quinoa, Amaranth and Harrison's Parakeet pellet. His water came from a Mason jar chick drinker and our high calcium content (19 grains/gallon) well water was always treated with 2.5cc of V-18 per gallon of water.

He stayed in this breeding cage for several months and was pretty much ignored, except for feeding, until the start of the next breeding season, Nov 2006, where upon I needed to use his cage. I very purposefully moved him to an identical cage with all the feeders/drinkers in exactly the same location. I didn't bother installing perches in this cage because he never/couldn't use them. He has been sitting on ½" X 2" welded wire and the edge of the dish his whole life and has not soiled himself significantly.

He ate the oat groats quite voraciously for several months but at about eight months he stopped eating oat groats and ate only the millet mix and fresh Romaine lettuce provided daily. Other than that I basically ignored him as my stud had grown to some 500 birds and I was also occupied with taking care of the other 750 animals and birds on my ranch.

The golden millet mix was an experimental seed mix that I designed to be fed to pairs raising babies in an attempt to expose the new generation to new feeds and to supply more of the amino acids required for feather growth than traditional parakeet mix could supply. I have found golden millet very palatable to budgies and excellent for starting most weanlings. After weaning, I did not feed this bird any canary seed at all and I never tube fed it, although I often do tube feed struggling weanlings to give them a nutritional boost. I didn't take the time to do this with him. Interestingly he does not spend all his waking moments eating; apparently, the early satisfaction of his amino acid requirements did not leave him in the feeding deficit that one normally hears reported about feather dusters. Since one of the previous feather dusters had died right after I had trimmed its facial feathers, I didn't bother trimming any feathers on his face or vent.

He currently weighs 54 grams and has never been thin or emaciated. In about September he started to molt and judging by the pile of feathers I removed from his tray, he did a complete molt. But his appearance did not change and I did not see any pinfeathers.

I have been completely surprised by the vigor he exhibits in his survival as I ignored him for most of his life expecting him to die almost any day for months. This bird is not used to being handled and was very uncomfortable when we photographed him. But he did eventually settle down on my hand and perched quite normally with the strength of a healthy bird. My assessment of this bird within the context of my breeding and evaluating birds for the past 55 years is that it is no more diseased than a Silky Chicken, a Japanese Onagadori Fowl or Parisian Frill Canary.

Other than his limited capability for movement and bazaar appearance he appears to be a completely normal budgie so I was taken aback by what I read on the web site of Creation Magazine, a reference discovered during a Google search for "feather duster". Where it was claimed that Feather Dusters were somehow happening as the result of a punishment from God. (http://www.answersingenesis.org/creation/v24/i1/budgie.asp)

This bazaar claim by what must be a "conservative" religious group triggered thoughts questioning what other misconceptions there are about feather dusters that I've on because most are either euthanized or fail to compete with normal budgies at an early age. This early termination occurs without any real study of the issues involved, because it is believed that they cannot make any legitimate contribution to budgerigar type breeding. This is not necessarily so, please read on.

The successful raising of this single feather duster to a condition of excellent health does not constitute a scientific study and many of the claims below are simply my educated conjecture from the success of this accomplishment.

Several ideas emerged that I found interesting and perhaps some are worth repeating. In my quest to design a seed mix that was as nutritionally complete as any soft food that I am aware of, I had indeed been able to provide sufficient methionine and lysine to allow nonstop feather growth without any signs of muscular or bone degeneration. This was actually really good news as budgerigars as a species are dry seed specialists to the extreme and whole seeds maintain their nutritional content far longer than ground or crushed seeds.

Also it may be apparent that claims that feather dusters have lethal genes are now quite suspect as it is most likely that system failure due to malnutrition in the overly traditional feeding habits of our fancy is the cause of death rather than any glandular malfunction. This is both in the social competition and nutritional content of our diets.

I see confirmation of our idea that perhaps the long-term fad of feeding a high percentage of canary seed to budgerigars might be more of a public statement of social/monetary means rather than an expression of good nutrition. Since canary seed is usually two to three times the cost of millet it is perhaps considered better because it is more expensive. In fact canary seed is quite deficient in methionine, a necessary component for feather growth, by comparison to millets.

Now on to the real irony, I had the realization that the feather duster could be considered to be a very extreme case of budgerigars with the double-buff feathering now so desired by our type breeders. I am now convinced that the feather duster would make an excellent experimental animal to develop budgerigar diets to facilitate reversing the failure to thrive of our high-buff birds. Thus removing what is probably the major barrier to consistent production of foot-long, type-bred budgerigars with an excess of feather around the head and shoulders with buffalo horn shaped eyebrows. The genotype for this exaggerated phenotype probably already exists. But our current diets are insufficient in critical amino acids and do not support the full development of this phenotypes feathering. It is logical that this exaggerated phenotype could have more extreme dietary requirements than the birds described by Watmough and others, for example.

Feeding adequate levels of Lysine and Methionine to our budgerigars of show stature via the more stable whole seed approach might also have the effect of granting a longer life span by reducing the daily dietary stress experienced by our birds eating traditional diets.

If for a moment we budgerigar breeders would stop taking ourselves so seriously, I will propose that when the fancy gains the wide spread ability to raise feather dusters that we do just that and also that we make a place in the sun for this much maligned mutation that we must be responsible for having created. We could do this by allowing a novelty class for them at the shows. Thus, turning a perceived liability into a public relations asset. Please don't allow the judges to pronounce their choices over this class as we have already judged this mutation far too harshly over the decades. Perhaps some scheme of collecting public opinion on the most pleasing or cutest would be more appropriate in contrast to our very serious exhibition pursuits.

Dietary changes should not be made haphazardly especially by those not skilled in the art and the whole fancy should ideally move as a unit. Otherwise we will potentially, severely limit the successful exchange of birds between fanciers. The economics of our fancy must be maintained for this necessary improvement to be worthwhile to everyone not just the select few who hoard secrets.

Unique solution ID: #1228
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Last update: 08-Dec-2008 09:25

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