



## The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

(Founding in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)

PO Box 248, Panania NSW 2213, Australia

### Problem Panel

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*At our November meeting we had a panel of experienced aviculturists answer questions from the floor. The following are some of the selected answers that we hope are of interest to our readers. The people on the panel were as follows: Peter Hobbs, Wayne Simons, Ken Parsons, Dr Mike Cannon and Bruce Hockley.*

**Question:** Some finches normally require live food to rear their young. Do these birds, if they are raised without live food (as some people have been able to achieve) revert to feeding their young live food or will they rear them without needing live food?

Wayne Simons: A few people have been experimenting for a long time now in eliminating this large problem of supplying live food to finches. In the system used in America and other countries overseas, they will raise insectivorous birds on what we would call a soft food diet. It might be egg and biscuit mix with additives such as yeast extract and a vitamin supplement. John Albert at Yerrinbool has been developing strains of birds that were not dependent upon live food. In some cases this was done by rearing the young under [Bengalese](#) and then continued on soft food.

I have personally raised some [Red-faced Parrot Finches](#) under Bengalese this year as a trial. I don't think that they are as big as the young reared by their parents. They were fed very well by the Bengalese with soft food whereas the parents used live food.

Ken Parsons: There are certain strains as Wayne just mentioned, that will happily be reared on soft food and then in turn rear their young without reverting to live food. The thing that I have learnt about birds and finches in particular, is that they never stick to one particular pattern. Much of what we read about birds is only one particular person's experience and another person may have a different experience. If you select birds for a characteristic such as being able to do without live food it is proven that you can be successful. However, my hunch is that if you give the birds the opportunity they will revert back to their instincts and would be likely to do so unless you concentrated upon producing a special strain.

**Question:** I have two Blue-masked [Lovebirds](#) that I know their sex. I want a method of identifying them so that I can put them into a colony and still be able to recognise them. I have read of problems that people have had with using split rings and I am hesitant to use them.

Peter Hobbs: Get some No. 8 rings from the ring steward. You can cut them with a pair of side-cutters and spread them, or use a jeweller's saw as it will do a neater job. You can close these with your fingers. If you only have one colour ring, you can put one on the right leg and another on the left leg, to identify individual birds in a pair. I would not recommend that you do this with other sorts of birds such as [Ringnecks](#) because they will close it right up onto the leg and cause damage.

Terry Atkinson: I am sure that a No. 9 ring will go over the foot of a fully matured Mask with a bit of Vaseline or similar lubricant. It will stay on and will remain to identify each bird.

**Question:** **What are the reasons for hand rearing a bird other than if you see that the parents are not feeding it?**

Mike Cannon: If you speak to the people that do a lot of hand rearing they feel that the birds are quieter and easier to breed because they are accustomed to people being around them. Most of the people that have very expensive birds such as [Macaws](#), [Eclectus](#) and the more exotic parrots, raise the birds to ensure that there are no problems or so that they will go down to nest again. So they take the birds at a very young age so that they are able to have more clutches in a season than if the birds were left to rear the birds themselves. This greatly increases the breeding potential of the birds. The people who do it and do it well, feel that they get much better birds out of it and so long as they do not raise the birds in isolation but with birds of their own kind, they'd seem to breed them quite well.

**Question:** **What are the advantages and disadvantages of crop feeding as a form of hand rearing as compared to feeding with a spoon or other implement?**

Bruce Hockley: I have never used crop needles for hand rearing and have always used spoons as I feel that I can wean them a lot earlier onto solid feed. I am hand rearing some variegated wrens at the moment and I am having a lot of trouble weaning them off to take worms.

Mike Cannon: I am not certain what the best way to hand rear a bird is. I think a syringe is an excellent way because you can exactly measure the volume you are giving a bird so that you have a record of how much the bird is taking each time. They are also able to be sterilised easily. I have found that people in this country tend to use spoons most of the time. There is only one person that I know of who uses a crop needle to rear the birds and he uses it very successfully. I think that you need to be very careful with the crop needle as the bird will move back and forth as you feed it so if you are too rough, it would be possible to pierce the side of the crop. I have seen birds which this has happened to.

I use the crop needle often to feed sick birds and I think it is an excellent way to give medication as you can accurately measure the amount given.

I think this falls into the category of stick with what you know best. If you have a method that you know works, this is where aviculture stops being a science and becomes an art.

As the food you need to feed the bird becomes thicker you may find difficulty in getting the food through a crop needle, this is where some people have success with a syringe with a tip that is about 1/4 inch wide. These are called catheter tipped syringes and they are available in this country.

Peter Hobbs: I have seen a friend feed up to 40 young birds using a syringe with a short piece of plastic tubing on the tip. Used in this manner it is very quick to feed a large number of birds. As well there is a lot less mess than when you use a spoon. It does require a bit of practise to become proficient but it can be done. I have drilled out the interior of the hub of the syringe and I find that fish tank tubing fits nicely over this tip. However in some respects, I still prefer to use a spoon.

**Question:** **This year I am having a lot of problems with infertility with [Neophema](#) eggs. Is there anything that can be done to improve their fertility?**

Peter Hobbs: Maybe you have run into a very bad strain. In my breeding with Neophemas, I could never do any good with [Bourke's](#) or [Turquoisines](#) but with [Scarlets](#) I had no problem at all. Everyone I talk to tells me the reverse is the case.

Wayne Simons: I have found that some people do well with Neophemas and others are having problems at any chosen point in time. The next year the opposite is true. I have had well established pairs of [Elegants](#) that have bred well for 2-3 years then suddenly they become infertile. The following year they were normal again. I would be suspicious that if all the Neophemas in one collection suddenly develop a problem that there may be a dietary or incompatibility

problem. I have found incompatibility to be a common problem in Neophemas, particularly Turquoisines. You can get a very moody hen bird that will really have a go at a cock bird every time he comes near her. She will certainly go down to nest and lay her eggs but she is laying infertile eggs. In this case I swap the birds around and see what happens.

Ken Parsons: I believe [Nutrequin Vitamin Supplement](#) is recommended for fertility. I have used it over the last couple of years and seem to have improved results. It is certainly worth a try.

Mike Cannon: Infertility is a fairly large and poorly understood area. It depends how deeply you want to go into it. The first step is to actually open up the eggs and have a look to make sure that they really are infertile and that you do not have a case where the embryo forms but fails to develop properly. It is possible for infectious organisms to be absorbed inside the egg soon after it is laid. This can kill any embryo that is beginning to form. What happens is that the egg cools after it is laid as the temperature of the air is less than inside the hen. The contents of the egg shrink as it cools and this sucks some of the moisture sitting on the shell inside the egg. The eggshell is porous enough to allow some infections to enter. The three main areas that I would look at are the two that Wayne mentioned. Number one would be incompatibility. Number two would be a good look at your general hygiene. Number three would be diet. The problem is that there are many areas within each of these. If it is present in more than one pair, I think it is likely to be a management problem rather than anything else. If they went well last year and yet this year they are not, you need to look for something that has changed in your routine.

Terry Atkinson: There is another thing you could try. Trim the feathers around the vent area just before the breeding season.

**Question: What age should you take young parrots to a Vet for surgical sexing?**

Mike Cannon: It depends upon the person performing the procedure. It is a fairly new technique in this country and we are still refining it. There is a veterinarian in America who surgically sexes them just before or just after they leave the nest. This is certainly where I am aiming. It is not as simple as it sounds. There are quite a few structures that can be difficult to examine at that age. When George Smith was at the Melbourne Convention he was discussing problems with sexing [Indian Ringnecks](#) as there is a little fat pad near the testes and ovary that can cover them and lead the operator to make a mistake. When the bird matures, the fat pad is not as prominent and the gonads can be seen more easily. As we become more experienced at this sexing and improve our skills we will be able to do them at very young ages. At the moment I prefer to do them when they are a little mature, say about six months. I will do them at a younger age and this is normally acceptable. My attitude is that if I am unsure I will say so and advise we repeat the procedure sometime in the future.

**Question: What sort of nesting material is suitable for [wrens](#)? What is the soft food to feed them and will they eat fruit?**

Bruce Hockley: I have mainly bred [Blue Wrens](#) and I did breed one lot of White-throated Scrubwrens. I used a lot of bark, feathers, very fine grass and some coconut fibre for the nesting material.

For a soft food mix I have a recipe I make freshly each day. I started with Nutrequin for the first time this year. To this I add egg and biscuit, cornmeal and Aurofac D. Every morning I mix 1 tablespoon of this with an egg. At the moment I would use 4 eggs each morning. The wrens certainly seem to like it, so do the finches. I don't feed anything else other than moths that I catch in an insect trap and mealworms. I am not into a soft food mixture yet. I do intend to try some of the newer ideas available about soft food mixes during the next 12 months.

I have had fruit available for other birds but they have not shown much interest. I have had the wrens eat pear when it was mixed with dog food. I have never had them take anything else other than Madeira cake and insect cake.

**Question:** I have had a problem with buying birds from a shop - they will die soon after. Can the panel comment upon this?

Wayne Simons: It is highly recommended when you buy a bird, no matter what the source, to be as sure as you can that the bird is in good health. There are some obvious things that you can do. Ask if you can actually hold any bird you intend buying. Check its breast bone by feeling at the front of the chest and be sure that there is good muscle covering it. If the breast bone feels sharp and the bird is light in weight, it is unhealthy and you should not accept it. This is something that I always do before I buy a bird.

You should be aware that when you buy a bird from a dealer's shop (and I am not knocking dealers here) that they have a great volume of birds passing through and it is impossible for them to give every bird a medical check as it comes into the shop. Many people will take birds to dealers that might not be well and this can lead to a problem. Even with the most strict hygiene it is possible on any one day for several diseases to enter a dealer's shop. The best way to overcome this is to make sure that the bird is healthy to begin with.

Ken Parsons: I think that glucose is a good idea to give to birds when they are being transferred from one place to another. This will help them cope with the inevitable stress and will cover them while they become accustomed to the new food available.

Peter Hobbs: I have always found that any dealer that I have bought birds from has had no hesitation letting me feel the birds I am interested in. If he does not want me to do this I will refuse to buy birds from him. I also like to feel the breast bone and check around the vent to see if it looks mucky at all.

When I take a bird home, one of the first things I do is to worm it. It has to be handled to transfer it from the carry cage so I worm it at this time. It is then put into a cabinet and left there overnight. I like to have some clean white paper on the floor of the cabinet so that I can check the droppings in the morning and see if any worms have been passed. Once it has settled down for 2-3 days and it is eating quite well it can then be moved out. If it does look puffed up in the morning it will need some medication. I find it is a good idea to leave a light globe hanging in the cage - a 25 watt globe is sufficient - as this will provide warmth and if the bird feels stressed and wants warmth it will sit right next to the globe.

Mike Cannon: I agree with what has already been said except that I call it quarantine. I think that it is one of the most underutilised tools that aviculturists have available to them. It costs next to nothing except a bit of time and bit of effort. You should always be suspicious that any new bird may have something wrong with it. So that it may require worming or medication.

The other important point to remember is that this bird does not know what your normal routine is. It does not necessarily recognise the food that you normally use. Nor does it necessarily know what sort of container, or in what position you have your water container. It may not know for instance that it is supposed to drink from a drip bottle at the front right-hand side because it was accustomed to using an open water dish at the back of the aviary on the left-hand side.

I would strongly urge all aviculturists to use some form of quarantine. I think that it should be at least two weeks and in some cases up to six weeks depending upon how the bird settles down and what disease problem may be present. Use this period to monitor the bird. Is it accepting the diet you are offering? Are there seed husks present? Is it using the water dish? Monitor the droppings to be sure that they are normal. If you are concerned about lice or mites it is an ideal time to dust the bird. Most aviculturists are so excited when they buy a new bird and they usually need to start it breeding by yesterday, so they race out and put it into their aviary. Every now and then you will get caught with a disease or problem that is contagious and you will spread it to the other birds present.

Wayne Simons: Just to add a little bit more to the worming situation as I think it is one of the biggest killers amongst the birds that we keep. One of the vets in Sydney was doing a study on worms in dealers' shops. He purchased 15 different varieties of finches and tested their droppings. Every bird was infested with worms. These birds were randomly chosen. The birds would not have picked these worms up in the dealers but must have come in with them. The message is that if you buy a bird and say to yourself that the bird looks OK and would not have worms, you will be fooling yourself.

Another problem that I see is when someone has been waiting a long time for a special bird and when they find it, it looks just a little off but they decide to give them a go. This is where you will make your mistake. If the birds are not perfectly alright, just say no, and wait a little longer. It is usual that when people settle for second best, the birds will die.

**Question: Is there a reason why birds lay soft shelled eggs?**

Mike Cannon: There are several causes of soft shelled eggs. Probably the most common is an imbalance of Calcium. It is also important to realise that as far as the bird's ability to absorb Calcium from its intestine, it will need to have a sufficient level of Vitamin D in its diet. However, there is only one form of Vitamin D that the bird can utilise and that is Vitamin D3 (this is high in fish oils and eggs).

You need to be aware that the hen stores Calcium inside its bones during the courtship period and the lead up to nesting. This is the most beneficial and efficient time to give it to a bird.

If you look at the amount of Calcium in a single eggshell it is equivalent to the total amount of calcium in the bird's blood. If it were to suddenly take all that Calcium out of its blood and put it into the eggshell it would drop dead because Calcium is important for the normal functioning of the nervous system. The body recognises this fact and if it cannot call on its reserves to replace the Calcium it needs to put into the eggshell, it will not allow the eggshell to be formed properly.

It is also important to be sure that the birds are eating the Calcium supplement you are supplying. It is not enough to have shellgrit, cuttlefish or similar available, you must be certain that the birds take it in or else use one of the other forms available such as Calcium Sandoz Syrup.

There are other causes of soft shelled eggs. If there is a low grade infection to the oviduct the egg passes through too quickly for a proper amount of shell to be formed. There are other causes of this but time does not permit me to discuss them all.

Peter Hobbs: I used to use a lot of Cuttlefish but now I don't use it at all because I found that it didn't make much difference to the parrots. I very seldom had a soft shelled egg. I put this down to the diet that I feed. I use a lot of fruit, green good and similar. I did find with Lorikeets, when I had a researcher who wanted to do some blood sampling, that the tests showed that my Lorikeets only had half the Calcium that they should have. At that stage I did not give them a calcium supplement. I had not had eggshell problems but there were problems with the young dying, feathering problems that may have been related to this. He suggested that I start feeding them Calcium. I used D.C.P. (Di-Calcium Phosphate) and we repeated the blood tests three months later. The blood levels were unchanged. He suggested I use Calcium Gluconate. I have used this ever since and I have had no further problems.

**Question: Could the panel give a comment on why the different Calciums available on the market are metabolised in different ways and discuss the different ways of using it?**

Mike Cannon: This can be a particularly boring area to explain. Calcium is not the only thing you need to assess in the diet. Most animals need to have the Calcium and Phosphorus in their diet in a ration of 1.2 - 1.5:1. Earlier Peter talked about Di-Calcium Phosphate. This has a ratio of 2:1. If you want to use a computer and put in all the information as to the levels of Calcium

and Phosphorus in all the foods that you are feeding, you can calculate this with a bit of effort. This is done for the formulation of nutritionally balanced feeds. But the problem of how the Calcium is absorbed will not end there. There are many forms of Calcium available on the market as the question suggested. There is Calcium Gluconate, Calcium Carbonate, Di-Calcium Phosphate, and Calcium Lactate and so on. Each of these has a different ability to have its level of Calcium absorbed. The amount of Calcium absorbed will also vary with the type of food you supply as some of it will hang onto the Calcium and carry it through the body. Charcoal is a good example of this. It forms a complex with many of the minerals in the diet and carries it out with the droppings.

In summary, it is a complex story in that the amount of Calcium absorbed and available to be used by the body depends upon many factors. The most important are the type of Calcium you feed to the bird, the amount of Calcium the body actually needs, the amount of Calcium already present in the blood, the ratio of Calcium and phosphorus in the diet, the amount of Vitamin D3 supplied and other factors in diet which stop the Calcium from being absorbed. The bird's body is constantly changing the amount of Calcium that it needs to absorb and this is balanced against the amount that is available in the diet or in its stores within the bones.

**Question:**

**I have been told that Di-Calcium Phosphate is very insoluble and not a very good additive for finches because it passes through the alimentary tract so quickly it does not have a chance to be absorbed. Is this true?**

**Secondly, I have [Gouldians](#) in a holding cage and most of them are hens. Two of them are consistently laying eggs. Do I leave the hen on these infertile eggs or do I take the eggs out? Because every time I take them out she lays some more and I am concerned about exhausting her?**

Wayne Simons:

If you have all hens in an aviary I wouldn't have any boxes in there and I would not have any provision for them to build their own nests. This usually stops them from laying. It is unusual for a bird to continually lay off the perch. She might lay one egg here or there by wherever they can build even a scrap of a nest they will keep laying.

Mike Cannon:

I do think that it definitely is possible to exhaust the body's supply of Calcium. One of my [Princess Parrots](#) recently laid 10 eggs and then nearly fell of the perch as she appeared very weak and looked drunk. I immediately gave her some Calcium and a few hours later she was fine. In this situation I was confronted with the similar problem that is mentioned. I decided to leave the eggs there so that she would not be stimulated to lay any more eggs. I left them there for about 10 days then took them out and she is doing very well now. It will be interesting to see what happens with the next clutch.

In response to [Di-Calcium Phosphate](#) my somewhat rusty memory seems to recall that it is not particularly soluble. I think that there are other forms of Calcium on the market that are absorbed much better. The one that is most commonly used by most veterinarians is Calcium Sandoz Syrup. It is a carryover from the human market and is now registered for veterinary use. I am not certain if it is actually registered for use in birds.

This is probably an appropriate time to mention that upwards of 90% of the drugs and medication we use for our birds are not legally registered for use in birds. This means that we accept that we are using drugs that legally are regarded as being experimental. If any problems arise from the use of these drugs, the manufacturer accepts no liability whatsoever. Our market is not big enough to justify the enormous expense that a manufacturer must go to to register a product. The end result is that many of the drugs will be based upon what has worked in the past and be gradually refined by experience.

Having said this, I use Calcium Sandoz. It is designed to be absorbed well in the intestines. There also is an injectable form available which is able to be used in an emergency. I would prefer to use this sort of product in preference to Di-Calcium Phosphate.

**Question: How much Calcium Sandoz do you use per litre of water and for how long?**

Mike Cannon: I don't use it in the water, but then again I am terribly biased and am not a great believer of putting any medication in the water. I prefer to give most supplements or medications as an additive to the food. This is not as hit and miss as using it in the water. For doses it is still quite inaccurate. For small birds such as finches I will use 1-2 drops because unless you are prepared to analyse your food and calculate the amount of Calcium that you need then you are really only trying to make sure that you are supplying some Calcium in the diet. As long as everything else is equal and the rest of the diet is balanced the body is able to absorb only as much Calcium as it really needs. The remainder passes through. For the larger parrots such as my Princess, I gave her 0.35 ml via a crop needle. So far this drug is at the stage that someone says I used this and that happened. Until we have used it more we will still be guessing at the correct dosage.

**Question: I am breeding doves for the first time this year. I have had no trouble with the [Diamond Doves](#) but both the [Peaceful Doves](#) and the [Ringneck Doves](#) sat on eggs until they cracked and then they left them. Why did they do this?**

Bruce Hockley: I had the same problem last year with some normal Silver Diamond Doves and some Peaceful Doves. I never found out what the problem was but it just seemed to cure itself.

Wayne Simons: I have had the same problem with Diamond Doves and they bred quite well from the first time that they went down. They were raising their young very well until suddenly their eggs would crack with the young pipping the shell and she would abandon the nest. She has since raised some more young but I cannot give you a reason for this behaviour other than the fact that recently my wife has been using the mist sprinkler in the aviary for her plants. Perhaps it is similar to the ducks and fowl where they need a certain amount of moisture to allow the eggs to hatch normally.

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