

Budgie Beautiful

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You may not have bred the best Budgerigar this year, but you do have a chance of beating the best if you can present your birds to perfection on the day of the show. So how do you go about it?

First, select the birds that you consider are good enough - eight weeks before a show for young birds, and six weeks for adults. Discard birds that are narrow faced or have short masks and tiny pinhead type spots.

Leave the chosen birds in stock cages to settle for the first week or so, then look carefully at each individual, checking for broken flights and tail feathers as these will need to be removed. Many breeders do not like to pull tail feathers because in some instances they do not grow back again, leaving what is commonly known as a "tail-less wonder". However, if you wait for tails to drop and regrow naturally it can mean that your best show bird could be out of action for the whole of the show season.

I tend to pull one tail feather and when a replacement feather has started to grow, I feel confident enough to pull another. If the second feather does not grow the bird at least have one, and many a major winner has got by with one tail feather. Flight and tail feathers take about six weeks to regrow, spot feathers around 3-4 weeks.

The birds need to be sprayed next, to get them clean and encourage them to preen, which will put the natural oils in the feathers and bring them into show condition. I a pump-action sprayer is the best type. An old show cage can be used for spraying, although I do not like this method because you can only spray one side of the bird and it will associate the show cage with getting a good soaking, therefore playing up when put in a show cage for showing purposes. I prefer to use an all-wire cage where 6-8 birds can be easily sprayed from all angles.

Hot water can be used for the initial few sprays. This will not harm the birds, because by the time it reaches them in a fine mist it will have cooled to the correct temperature. A couple of drops of baby shampoo or Plume-Spray can be added at this stage and give the birds a good

soaking. Then spray every other day using cold water and as early as possible in the day to allow them to dry properly before roosting.

As they come into show condition some birds will require less water and the amount can be adjusted, but it is important to continue spraying. When they are in condition the water runs off the feathers in globules. Stop spraying about three days before the show.

Heads will require washing on a regular basis. Using a soft toothbrush and baby shampoo, hold the bird as you would for de-spotting and wet the head with the brush. Add a small amount of shampoo and brush the head from front to back, avoiding the eyes. If the bird becomes stressed, do not persist, let it rest and try again another day.

Pin feathers will open during the head washing, but there will be one or two that have not quite opened by the date of the show. All you need do is roll the feather between your thumb and first finger to remove the wax coating - a rub of the head and the job is complete.

Ideally, de-spotting should take place about four days before the show, giving the mask time to settle. Most exhibition Budgerigars have a lot more spot feathers and flecks than required, so you will need a good pair of eyebrow tweezers.

Start by pulling away some of the flecks (down towards the bird's feet). Once the flecks and the shadow spots have been removed it will soon become evident which are the main spots (six evenly spaced across the mask), the outer two being partially covered by the cheek patches. If you are not sure which are the real spots, put the bird back into the stock cage and re-assess it later.

The final task, the day before the show, is to straighten any bent or frayed tail feathers. Using a beaker of hot water, dip the tail into the water and then run the feathers through your finger and thumb. You will find that when dry the tail will be as good as new.