

Always our top priority

Exhibition fanciers breed birds to win, but as **DAVE BROWN** (right) emphasises, it's more important that we breed birds to thrive. Here he examines five areas of activity where our management for wellbeing has to be spot on



Photos unless otherwise stated: Dave Brown

HEALTH OVERVIEW

WHETHER we are talking about pet birds, an aviary colony or a stud of show birds, every birdkeeper has a duty of care in regard to their stock. Ensuring that all our birds are kept in the best of health and have a high level of wellbeing is a basic requirement for anyone who keeps any birds.

To state what may sound obvious: no one wants a short-lived pet or indeed a stud of birds that fail to reproduce. And yet it is surprising how many of us have come across fellow birdkeepers who at times have become complacent when it comes to cleaning their cages and scrubbing out their drinkers, which in turn sees problems arise through poor hygiene. Often, the explanation is that the fancier is simply keeping too many birds. That means that the daily routine becomes a chore and a drain on time, and as a result the time for observation and attention to detail is lost.

The golden rule which ensures all the other rules of good birdkeeping can be met is: **only keep the number of birds that you can comfortably manage and enjoy.** If you don't have time to sit and watch your flock, the flock is too big, and you should take steps to reduce your numbers by rehoming the

surplus with fellow fanciers and would-be pet-keepers.

Best practice: feeding

Always try to feed the best quality diet you can. Steer clear of seed that is obviously dusty or has a low germination rate. (Seed that is soaked and sprouts quickly will be higher in nutritional value than seed that does not.) Store all your seed in appropriate containers to keep it fresh, free from damp and inaccessible to vermin.

Try to buy enough seed and other feed supplies to ensure that you have enough of your chosen brands to get through the key periods such as breeding. A change in seed or softfood while pairs are rearing can lead to the chicks not reaching their full potential if they have to go on to a less nutritional product because it is the only one that can be obtained. Parents can also abandon their

chicks if they feel that the diet is not adequate. However, although it is sensible to have enough feed in reserve, don't stockpile and store more than you can use within a reasonable space of time, because all foodstuffs **MUST** be fresh when the birds eat them.

Feed a balanced diet appropriate to the species. This may include a variety



Offer when breeding: a grit and pink mineral mix



Varied staple: offer your birds plenty of diversity in terms of different seed and greens

You will know the answer: the number of birds that you can responsibly maintain is something you learn from experience



Nest check: only do it if you're sure it's appropriate at the time

of green and livefoods, plus softfood. The types of food and quantity may vary depending on the time of year. Protein-rich softfood will increase in the breeding season and only

seeds may be fed in the winter to help provide body fat and insulation. Everything should be fed in moderation and with a purpose, because birds carrying excess weight will face health issues, in the same way that overweight humans do.

All drinking water needs to be clean and should be changed every day. Consider standing bottles of tap water overnight to allow some of the chlorine content to dissipate. Some fanciers use water filters to help remove some of the chemical content and other impurities from the drinking water. If you transport the water to the birdroom in buckets or bottles (I use old plastic milk bottles), don't forget to clean these regularly to make sure that they are free of dirt and bacteria.

Birds appreciate a routine and, wherever possible, the fancier should aim to do the feeding sessions at the same times each day. Both your birds and your other family members will come to expect you to be in the birdroom at these times!



Stiff brushes at the ready: you must clean all of your drinkers regularly



Bucket stop: all that equipment has to be spotless, so don't shirk the soak and scrub

At the end of every day, always clear away any uneaten fresh food. This will prevent contamination and issues resulting from stale food being picked over the next day.

Some birdkeepers advocate winnowing seed, and when times are hard this is understandable. However, if you do this, ensure that the seed is free of droppings and other contaminants before offering it. Think whether you are happy to take the chance.

Best practice: housing

Accommodation needs to be suited to the species. It should be dry and free from draughts, which are harmful to birds if they are exposed to them for a significant time. There is a difference between draughts and good ventilation. Air vents placed low and high on

opposite walls, or electric extractor fans, will ensure that stale air is removed and replaced with fresh.

Any housing should be of adequate size to allow flight between the perches and must offer a sense of security to the inhabitant. Traditional box cages, whether made of wood, metal or plastic, have solid sides and back. That means birds housed in them may feel more secure, because they only need to keep an eye on movements that they can see through the cage front.

All-wire cages are popular and are used successfully by many fanciers. Usually they are placed against the birdroom wall, which means that they follow the same principle as the box cage. If you site an all-wire cage in an open position, your birds may be more unsettled as they react to potential



They don't clean themselves: lots of lovely breeding cages does commit you to lots of work in order to guarantee a healthy environment

dangers from all directions, including from above.

An excellent choice for bird breeders is to use cages that can be divided into breeding units with slides, or used as long flight cages when the slides are removed. They allow their occupants to enjoy a larger living space when they are not breeding. This in turn promotes wellbeing through the opportunity to maintain fitness with the longer flight space.

Use solid slides in both box and all-wire cages when dividing them. This will help to prevent squabbling between neighbouring pairs, which is a source of stress. It will also provide a physical barrier so that the birds' droppings cannot be flicked between the cages, which may be a vector to spread disease if a bird becomes ill.



Confidence breeds wellbeing: show training is a dimension of good health management



Well, hello: 'Wire slides are good for introductions, but use solid slides between breeding pairs'

66 Avoid the use of birds in your pairings that have relatives and ancestors which developed health issues



Welcome home: have lots of fresh seed and grit available when you bring birds from a show

One argument in favour of wire cages is that the wire floors allow stale food and droppings to fall through into the trays below and are kept away from pecking birds. This then cuts back the risk of bacteria or stale food being ingested, which could cause ill health.

Whatever your choice, your cages must be cleaned regularly. You need to replace the cage litter weekly – and personally I like to change my perches every week, too. Canaries in particular seem to soil their perches quickly and also wipe their beak and face on them as part of their grooming practice. It is a no-brainer that wiping a beak across a soiled perch is asking for problems. I keep two sets of perches, so they can be swapped round and cleaned with the least disturbance.

Cages and aviaries will also benefit



Choose your partner: you wouldn't pair this crest to another crest Photo: Rob Innes for Cage & Aviary Birds



Plastic cages: a solid back and sides, like those at the front here, can help birds to feel safer Photo: Laura Keens for Cage & Aviary Birds

from a regular wash and disinfect. There are animal-safe disinfectant products available on the market that are all appropriate. Also consider a regular treatment with an anti-mite solution.

Always ensure that your birds are not overcrowded. However good your management otherwise, overcrowding will be a cause of stress and increase the chance of disease being spread.

Best practice: breeding

Your big aim is to make sure that your birds are fit for the job ahead. Depending on the species, birds will demonstrate their keenness to breed through raised activity levels, song, chewing on timber and carrying nest material. If you ever pair birds that are not fit you are likely to experience disappointing breeding results and will also risk ill health in the adult birds, for example through egg-binding.

Feed a rich diet to build condition and make sure that a ready supply of grits and minerals is available. Build the diet gradually, rather than suddenly introducing greens and softfood a week or two before you pair up.

Study your breeding records. Avoid the use of birds in your pairings that have relatives and ancestors which developed health issues. Think about feather quality. If you pair together birds

that both possess a heavy buff feather, you may increase the chance of birds developing feather lumps in the future. And if you are starting out, make sure you know the pairings that should not be considered. For example, do not pair two crested birds together because a lethal factor exists in this pairing.

When your birds are incubating, it can be harder to clean the cages as regularly as you'd like. Sometimes even this disturbance is enough for parents to desert the nest. Always ensure, however,

66 I give some supplements, but I understand that for success their use must be combined with good management

that obvious clusters of droppings are removed and definitely clean the cage floors just before the chicks fledge. Those chicks will soon start to pick through the shavings, so the rules about keeping stale food away apply doubly at this critical stage.

With the more domesticated species that will tolerate nest inspections, do carry out a regular check – perhaps daily, but no more than that. Address any problems: remove any addled eggs or dead chicks. As the young birds develop, if you find that the box is heavily soiled,

clean it or replace it with a fresh box so that their plumage does not become soiled.

Best practice: additives and medicines

There are numerous bird-specific products on the market and many offer fantastic results. I use some supplements, but equally I understand that for success their use needs to be combined with good management.

Do your research and decide which products suit your existing management régime. Administer supplements with a purpose. For example, a multivitamin can help to boost breeding condition and, when administered at other times of the year, can help to maintain a good level of health.

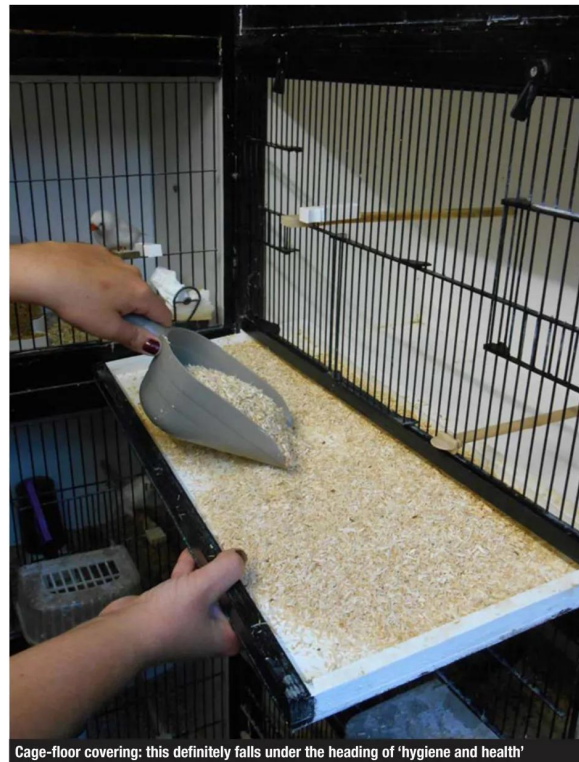
Calcium supplements may assist the production of healthy, high-quality eggs.

But don't overdo it. It is hard to maintain a régime that features more than a couple of supplements. Administer any product by adhering to the manufacturer's instructions and, just as important, be consistent with its use. Don't change to other products when you think the breeding season isn't going your way.

In terms of medications, the best advice is to consult a thoroughly experienced birdkeeper. Bear in mind that though antibiotics are available through some avian suppliers, they are not a supplement and if you regularly use them as a "tonic" it will only lead to health problems further down the line. We have all read how antibiotics are losing their effectiveness in humans through overuse.

All drinkers should be cleaned regularly as standard practice, but this is even more important if you are using supplements in the drinking water. Most such products leave a residue on the mouthpiece of fountain drinkers and can be a growing space for bacteria if it is not removed regularly.

Dave Brown is a champion breeder, exhibitor and judge of zebra finches and canaries.



Cage-floor covering: this definitely falls under the heading of 'hygiene and health'

Best practice: five tips for bird gatherings

- 1 Training your birds for the show-hall environment is a must. By training birds properly, you will reduce their stress and increase their confidence to show their full potential to the judge.
- 2 Before travelling to a show or sale it is a fancier's duty to ensure that their birds are in good health, free from disease and transported and shown in a scrupulously clean cage. We do not want to risk the health of our own or other people's show birds.
- 3 When I travel to a show I tend to take my own supply of drinking water from home. That is what the birds are used to and it means there's no chance of upsets caused by a change in supply, however unlikely that might seem.
- 4 Take antibacterial wipes with you and clean the perches or cage backs that may have become soiled while in transit. You don't want to risk a bird becoming stained.
- 5 Upon your return from a bird gathering, consider treating against mite. Perhaps you could offer a probiotic to give a boost after what may have been a draining trip to a show. And of course make it your first priority to give them a fresh supply of seed and grit on their return home.



'We thought we'd start, Dave, because we know you're always down the birdroom at this time'