

Breeding Birds—Contest Roller Canaries



This fact sheet gives guidance on breeding Contest Roller Canaries.

The Roller fancy holds its singing contests until the end of February each year,

when the final show is held at which birds, which have won high prizes during the contest season sing off for the title of the best roller in Britain. This means that the most successful current year cock birds are subjected to a very long show season indeed and the breeding season is imminent while they are still being contested.

This is of particular significance in the roller fancy as one of the most important factors in a rollers song performance is that the bird should not be anything like in full breeding condition. Too high a condition has very adverse effects on the song of the roller, as the song tends to become higher in pitch and much harder in timbre, as opposed to the deep, soft and essentially unforced song required in a contest bird.

Roller fanciers need to exercise considerable skill and discretion in the feeding of contest birds to avoid excess condition, known as going over the top, whilst maintaining the birds in a state of robust good health so that they are eager to sing when required, but in a calm and steady manner. In order to achieve this ideal state, the contest birds will have been fed on a fairly restricted diet, consisting mainly of sweet rape seed with the addition of some canary seed and certainly towards the end of the contest season very little extra in the way of mixed seed or soft food.

The birds access to full bright daylight will have been limited to avoid excitement and every effort will have been made to avoid them getting into breeding condition.

Once the contests are finished these restrictions may be lifted, and the birds allowed more light, liberty and stimulating food, but it is still rather optimistic to expect 100% performance in the breeding cage from a bird which has been specifically held back until almost the last moment. Although these birds may show all the signs of being in full condition in a remarkably short space of time, this tends to be superficial and the internal organs have not had time to fully develop with the result that although mating may take place after a vigorous courtship, there will be an abnormally high proportion of clear eggs.

It is better to let these young contest birds come along into full condition in their own time, without forcing them with too rich a diet, and use the older cocks which have not been contested in the later shows for the initial pairings. A good plan is to let these over year cocks fly together in a flight cage as soon as they start to moult in the autumn and leave them together all winter. They will benefit from the space available and their natural jealousy will ensure that they do not allow each other to sing too long or fiercely and so strain their voices.

They may be fed with gradually increasing supplements to their staple diet of 50 /50 rape and canary seed from January onwards, and separated into single cages when their condition increases in a natural fashion to the stage where

serious fighting occurs.

In any case, these cocks should have a few weeks on their own to allow a little time for the less dominant ones, which may have been at the bottom end of the pecking order, to recover their full confidence and self-esteem before being mated.

The hens meanwhile should have been housed in the largest flights available, avoiding too much overcrowding. During the winter they should have had a nourishing but varied diet consisting of half and half rape and canary in the hoppers, with a small quantity of mixed seed scattered on the floor of the flight twice a week to keep them on the move and interested. A small quantity of soft food, which will be used in the breeding season, should be offered about once every two weeks so that they are familiar with it and acquire the taste.

Cuttlefish and grit should always be available and a piece of apple, a small cabbage leaf or sprouts cut in two once a week will see them through the winter.

On this regime the hens should put on a bit of weight, but they should be sleek in feather, active and inquisitive with a bold clear eye. A small quantity of mixed seed thrown through the bars of the flight cage should have them all in a group on the floor straight away, picking about like barnyard hens.

As the days lengthen with the turn of the year, the extras can be gradually increased, both in quantity and frequency of supply. The mixed seed should still be scattered on the floor of the flight to give them all an equal chance, but can be given each day. A good mixture is one part pinhead oatmeal, one part Niger, one part maw seed, half part hemp and half part linseed - about one handful to each six birds.

The supply of soft-food can be increased to once, and then to twice per week, as the spring draws nearer. When the shoots of the dandelion appear, they should be dug up and given to the birds - leaves, roots dirt and all. This acts as a good conditioner, and a small amount of this and other green-food can be offered each day.

By February the hens should be becoming very active and calling with increased frequency. Their flight from perch to perch along the length of the flight cage should be direct and powerful and they should grip the perch hard on landing. They should still be carrying some fat, but the longer more active days will have tightened them up considerably.

By the end of February the gradual increased feeding of extras, together with the lengthening daylight hours, should see all the hens in first class fettle, very active and interested in the song of the cocks and about this time you should get them into their breeding cages, to allow them plenty of time to settle into the new quarters.

When transferring them they should be individually examined to check on their condition. They should be plump breasted and solid and feel heavy in the hand and any which are a bit lacking in flesh should be noted and the feeding adjusted slightly for those individuals.

The feet should be examined and if the claws on over year birds are very long they may be cut back to just short of the vein running down the middle of the claw.

Once the hens are in their separate breeding cages the supply of soft-food can be given once per day in small quantities, say half a finger draw full each time, and usually despite the extra feeding and smaller space in the cage the birds will tend to fine down and lose a little of their winter fat. This is because they will now be coming into breeding condition and will never be still. They will be flapping their wings and making round trip flights from the perch and back without alighting at the other end, and calling to the cocks with increasing frequency and urgency. If they have been bought on steadily without forcing by the middle or end of March some of them will squat for mating if they are whistled at or if a cock is singing vigorously, and they will be putting their heads through the drinker holes to try to see the cocks. They will also have started to carry potential nesting materials such as the odd dropped feather or green-food stalk about; and when carrying this material, well back in their bills for extended periods without dropping it, together with showing all other symptoms, they should be fully fit and ready for mating.

The cocks will also have benefited from the increased length of daylight and supplementary feeding and by this time will be singing louder, harder and in a more ringing song. This will be accompanied by dropped wings and tail, and dancing as if the perch was hot with the feathers drawn up tight except on the rump where they are erected, emphasising the dropped tail. When they are fed some soft-food or green-stuff they will regurgitate it and feed their feet or the perch ends. Only when all these indications are present, usually about the beginning of April give or take a week or two, the hens may be supplied with a nest pan and material, and the cock introduced to those hens which make a really serious attempt at nest building.

If both partners are as fit as they should be mating will usually take place immediately and the breeding season has begun.

This fact sheet has been produced by :
Society for the Protection of Aviculture—Spring Gardens, Northampton NN1 1DR
www.spauk.net