

Behind The Hue

The trend in bird mutations is more than feather deep

By Rebecca Sweat

Breeders and pet owners alike have been equally enamored with the variety of mutations found in many pet bird species today. Kathie Hahn, co-owner of Bird Paradise bird store in New Jersey, said that if customers have a choice between a normal and a mutated variety for a pet, they'll almost always choose the mutation. "Most people pick a mutation over a normal bird because the mutations are generally more colorful," she noted. For instance, Hahn's store had a cage of green-cheeked conures for sale, along with a mutation of that species, the yellow-sided conure. "A customer came into the store and asked if we had any green-cheeked conures and, when I pointed them out to her, her eyes went straight to the yellow-sided conure and that's what she bought," Hahn related.

Pet owners often want a one-of-a-kind pet, said Katy Secor, a lovebird breeder in New Hampshire. "The rarer the bird is in people's eyes, the more desirable it is and the more they'll pay for it," she said. Retailers may even stipulate that their breeder suppliers raise certain varieties of birds, according to Secor. "A pet store might tell the breeder, 'We want birds that Joe's Pet Store down the block doesn't have. Bird breeders aren't usually making big bucks, and most aren't in it for the money,'" Secor said. On the other hand, she continued, "it would be nice to at least cover your expenses and make a little something for your time and effort. You've only got so much space in your aviary. If you can make \$200 a bird for raising a mutation versus \$100 a bird for a normal, most people are going to devote the majority of their space to the mutations."

Certainly breeders have always enjoyed coming up with new varieties, which serves as further impetus for them to focus their breeding program on mutations. "Part of the enjoyment of bird breeding is trying to come up with something that's new or more eye-pleasing," said Cindy Swiler, a cockatiel breeder in Kansas, and president of the American Cockatiel Society. If a breeder is successful at producing a new mutation, he or she will go down in history for that, which can be a further motivation, she added.

Careful Planning Makes For Healthier Birds

Along with trying to bring out the desired traits, breeders also work on any flaws that may be found in mutated bird. A lot of times these birds not only have unique physical traits, but they may also be more susceptible to health problems. "It's up to breeders to try to 'breed out' the bad genetics in the mutations so that the offspring will be healthy, while preserving the unique color or other desired trait," said John Miles, a longtime bird breeder in California, and first vice president of the American Budgerigar Society. This is an important step to take because, in the wild, mutations would be weaker and be eaten by predators. If these birds are going to be perpetuated in captivity, steps must be taken to ensure these birds are not weak.

"Breeding out" health flaws is accomplished by breeding the mutations to healthy normals or to birds that are split for the desired mutation. This is a vital step in the development of new color mutations — which are sure to have genetically-based health weaknesses, in addition to the mutated color gene. It may take three to five years of breeding before a new mutation's health is on par with its normal counterpart, according to Swiler.

But even in well-established lines, breeders may still breed some of their mutations to normals now and then — at least every several generations — to keep the health up of that line. "It's not good to just breed mutations to mutation because it runs everything down — you get smaller sized-birds, poor immunity, shortened lifespans and even blindness in the birds," Julie Allen, president of the National Cockatiel Society, noted. "You need normals to breed your mutations to — so that you can keep up their vitality, endurance, strength and size." If you breed two birds together that have the same mutation, sometimes the faults that were bred out of that variety will reappear, she said.

With responsible breeding, mutations are generally just as healthy as normals. In fact, Lee Horton, a longtime aviculturist in California who specializes in lovebirds and co-founder and past-president of both the African Lovebird Society and the American Federation of Aviculture, contends that the blue masked lovebird has proven to be stronger, better parents and more prolific in the past 70 years since it was developed than the normal or nominate masked species in the wild.