



Jim Aitchison
Fauldhouse.
Scotland.

Jim Aitchison has kept Borders for 55 years - also British birds. These days he breeds from just 15 hens in a 12x8ft shed. He has had his fair share of wins on the show bench and has judged at most major shows in Scotland. He was honoured to judge the international All Border Show in his own village of Fauldhouse and was fortunate to select Best Champion and Novice Winners. He is looking forward to judging this year's International All Border Show in Fleetwood. His other great loves are breeding Staffordshire Bull Terriers and gardening. Here are the answers to the questions put to him.

Nest Pans

I use clay nest pans, which I place on a tripod with legs; I like this method because I can move the nestpan to suit the hen if necessary. It also stops the young from soiling the back of the cage. Nest pans can be suspended on cut pieces of 4.1/2" plastic piping that has been cut to suit.

Perches.

I use suspended perches but I do not think it really matters as some hens mate on the floor. My perches are placed 4 1/2" off the floor.

Mite protection

I use Frontline on my birds three times a year and never seen mite or lice in my shed. Should a nest become infected you should replace the nest pan and spray the cage with an anti-mite spray

Supplements

I use Harrison's High Potency Super Fine prior to the breeding season and do not see any use for supplements.

Clear eggs, WHY

If only I knew!! Seriously you should be looking at the condition of the birds, especially the cocks. Hopefully with proper feeding and time the bird's condition should have improved. Hen birds should be seen trying to build nests in corners, extremely active and calling for tread. Cocks should be singing strongly, regurgitating food and dancing on the perches.

Pairing-up

When pairing up straight cock/hen relationships the cock is placed with the hen when she appears ready and is remains with throughout incubation. Such bonding is ideal as in most cases both parents then feed the chicks.

Multiple mating

I select one cock for three hens, early morning I run the cock with the hens at half hour intervals. Repeat in the afternoon and again in the evening. As soon as mating has taken place the cock is removed. If mating does not happen within minutes the cock is taken out, as the hen is not ready.

Storing eggs etc

I prefer to store eggs in plain canary seed, I don't think it really matters but through habit over the years I turn the eggs daily until they are replaced back into the nest. As for checking eggs for fertility I prefer to simply leave the eggs in the nest irrespective of fertility so as not to upset the hens breeding cycle.

Hatching, Feeding and desertion

The hen should be fed on her staple seed diet. To feed only soft food or greens would only encourage the hen off her nest. To help humidity I slightly spray the nest with plain water for a couple of days before hatching.

Hatching, Feeding, Desertion

It is very important that hens are accustomed to your chosen brand of soft food during the pre-breeding period; I also use a little chickweed. If the hen does not feed during the first day of hatching it does not bother me but if she is not feeding the following morning or the chicks are losing their pink healthy colour I look to put them to another hen. Note: The pink colour does not apply to dark birds. The foster mum may have chicks the same age or you can try a hen sitting on clear eggs.

If a hen deserts her eggs then if possible I transfer the eggs under another sitting hen and leave dummy eggs in the nest of the deserting hen as occasionally she may return to her nest and resume her duties in which case her normal eggs could be returned

Antibiotics or Not

I am not in the habit of feeding hen's with antibiotics whilst they are feeding their chicks. Family G.Ps over-prescribed Penicillin to the extent that it lost its potency. I think the same is happening with some Border fanciers with the over-use of antibiotics. Personally I dose my birds with Sulphamethanine Prior to the breeding season, I further use it on the youngsters at about 5-6 weeks. This generally stops the young from 'Going light'

Ready for weaning

I usually remove the youngsters from their mother at around 22-24 days without weaning with the use of a wire slide. I have never had problems with the young feeding themselves. It may take longer with a single chick.

Conclude

In offering these tips I would advise anybody with a successful regime not to change it, but always listen to others as listening costs nothing and good advice may be bad.

Good luck
Jim Aitchison.

Helpful advice for the breeding season



Alan Harper asks the following Border fanciers for advice -
Jim Aitchison, Robert Bennett, Ron Bullimore, Ron Palfreyman.

Dear Fellow Fancier

Breeding Border canaries is for me exciting but most challenging. The more I talk with fanciers the bigger the breeding problems appear to be for both seasoned fanciers and Novices alike, with lack of fertility being a major problem. Could it be good show birds often come from bloodlines with a limited gene pool? Does this, coupled with inbreeding, have a negative effect on breeding ability?

When first talking with Jim Aitchison we drew the same conclusion that if the Border fancy is to go forward and flourish there needs to be far more emphasis on sharing knowledge for the mutual benefit of all concerned. Furthermore I know there are many fanciers sharing our view.

Why is it some leading fanciers can breed 200 plus Borders per season and many others struggle to produce anything like the same ratio of chicks per hen? Hence perhaps one of the reasons why there were only around 14 active Novice Border fanciers exhibiting at All Border shows throughout Scotland last year? It's far different situation with the Fife fancy.

Perhaps its time for The Border Convention in the same way the British Bird Council does to take the initiative and devise a programme to monitor annual breeding performance even if it was only with say 50 Border fanciers. What's your view - do let me know?

Despite all the care and preparation we apply during the pre-breeding period, whether a Champion or Novice fancier, we all face problems during the breeding season. In order to give you a few solutions to help deal with setbacks, I asked four breeders with many years experience, to offer their opinions on a few common breeding problems. I trust you find their comments of value.

Look forward to your comments regarding my views on monitoring breeding results alternatively meeting you during the show season.

Yours in the fancy.

Alan Harper

0044 01883 62 38 37
email: alanharper.1@btinternet.com



Photograph courtesy of P. Huyghe. Belgium



Ron Palfreyman
Swansea.
Wales

Before giving views as to how I overcome set backs we all encounter during the breeding season let me explain about a few things I do prior to pairing-up. For sure I trim the claws of my birds and any excess feather around the vent. I do not use lighting or heating in my bird room as I prefer to house my birds as near to nature as possible. I feed my bird's mixed canary seed and condition seed, oyster shell, cuttlefish and eggshells. These days I keep around 10 hens from which I yield around 35-40 chicks. I trust you find a thing or two useful within the following notes.

Nest Pans

The nest pans I use are of the clay bowl type. At one time I did try out some plastic pans but found them too wide particularly if holding only two or three youngsters. However if a hen has a nest of say five or six chicks, at thirteen days I will make up a fresh nest using the plastic or a large clay type pan to afford a little more comfort for the youngsters. It is at this stage when chicks are 12-13 days old the nest pans are dropped down to the floor of the cage.

Mite protection

As for protecting birds against mite I personally have not been troubled since using either Frontline or Ivermectin. Two treatments, end of January and third week in February are sufficient to more than cover the breeding season.

I did experience mite on a bird I purchased two years ago before taking it into my bird room. I washed the bird using a dog flea shampoo and two days later I treated it with Ivermectin before placing it in my bird room and all was well.

As a precaution I would suggest having a nest pan complete with nest at the ready just in case you find mite within a nest of chicks at anytime. You can always check for mite in nest by placing a piece of white paper kitchen towel over the nest of chicks, after a few minutes the underside will be covered in mite. If you are unlucky keep replacing the paper towel say 4/5 times in order to clear the majority of mite before placing the chicks in a fresh nest. Naturally you will have to treat the hen in the usual way.

Clear eggs

Clear eggs are usually the result of hens not being in full breeding condition. Hen canaries are similar to chickens and will often lay eggs whilst not being in full breeding condition. Breeding condition is a cycle and if birds especially hens are not within that breeding cycle eggs may be laid but prove to be infertile, although physical

mating may have been observed. With cock birds the physical signs are far more obvious than with hens. However the swelling of the vent is a good indicator of the hen's readiness to breed successfully.

Perches.

I have never paid any particular attention to type and position of perches in the breeding cages. At the moment my perches are of the twist-on type. However because of constant use and cleaning some are ridged whilst others are quite loose. Some are quick thick and others are thin, similar to what birds in the wild would experience whilst roosting or mating.

Multiple mating

Successful multiple mating of one cock to several hens is a certain way of forming a strain. It is however essential that the hens are all experiencing the breeding cycle in a few days of one another.

My method is to run the cock bird in a show cage, open the door of the breeding cage and hang the show cage on with it's door in the closed position. If the hen squats for tread open the show cage door allowing the cock to enter the breeding cage. If within minutes the hen has not called for tread pass onto the next hen and so on. This is best done at least three times a day, until eggs are laid.

Pairing-up

When pairing up straight cock/hen relationships the pair is caged adjacent to each other separated by a wooden slide. To bring both birds into breeding condition the wooden slide is left open on the inner end. This will allow the pair to get to know each other unlike the "Wham bang thank you mam" system used for multiple matings. The cock is only fed soft food, which after a day or so he will pass to the hen by regurgitation. Nest pans without felt lining are put in with all hens prior to introducing the cock bird. A small amount of nesting material is offered to the hen. Only when she is dropping this nesting material into the pan is a felted pan hung in the cage.

Storing eggs

Eggs are kept in a partitioned wooden box numbered 1-10 and filled with very fine sawdust that has been pasted through a sieve. The eggs are laid on their side and turned once a day until they are 'put to set' usually evening time of the day the third egg is laid. The longest time I have stored eggs was nine days after being laid. I lost the hen and had to wait for another to become broody. This particular batch of eggs was turned three times a day and covered with cotton wool to prevent dust falling on them - yes, they all hatched.

Robert Bennett lives in Ireland and has been breeding birds for around 36 years as did his father and grandfather. A few years ago Robert was raising around 100 chicks per season now it is down to 50-60 with the same number of hens. I trust you find his methods of interest.

Nest Pan preparation

At the beginning of my breeding, I wash a hessian old fashion potato sack and dry it, cut it up into 2" squares. I place these between wires at cage fronts, with a clothes peg. The hens start to draw it out; this is a good indication that she wants to go to nest.

By placing a 2nd piece in the wire front, while the cocks in, he successfully mates the hen before she goes into nest. I use carbolic soap to stick the pads in and tobacco dust as used by pigeon fanciers. It comes in sticks that I grind down to a powder. The carbolic soap goes around the edges, and the tobacco dust goes below the pads as an extra deterrent to mite.



Dried Tobacco Stalks

Pairing up

On the lead up to the breeding season I like to give any extra nourishment and vitamins to the cock birds - namely egg food, ABIDEC and CYTACON. This produces good pre-breeding conditioning, strength and good health. I know when my birds are ready for breeding when the cocks would be dancing on perches, as if on hot coals, and feeding the cage fronts, or anything else they find!! The hens in the flight are feeding each other and pulling their feathers out - gathering nest material.

Multiple mating

My procedure for mating a cock with several hens is to run him into the cage - if mating does not occur immediately I take him out again. I try this again with different hens until mating is successful. I never leave him any length of time with any hen in case they have bonded.

Storing eggs

I store my eggs in "silver sand" or fine sawdust - this will hold them up to 5 days, to ensure I am setting a number of hens together. I would turn these eggs once a day.

Pre-paring soft food

For those using eggs in their soft food, I would ask them to consider the source of their eggs as much depends on the feeding of chickens these days. If chickens are fed on high-density feedstuff I found the eggs from such chickens if used in softfood in the prime cause for hens deserting their nest after 7 days. So be careful where the eggs you put into your softfood come from. I keep a few chickens myself so to be assured that their eggs are ideal for use in my canary softfood, I feed my chickens on mostly mixed grain barley, corn and wheat plus a small amount of layers pellets - and it seems to have cured this problem. (Remember most farmers are in this business for profit and this has encouraged them to feed high density feeding.)

Moving forward to the 2nd Round

Between the 1st and 2nd round I give all my birds a 3 day course of SOLUDOX 15% (Doxycycline 150mg/g (1ml to 1 litre) this is not detrimental to the birds. I also use OCEMYCIN 6 drops to 1 pint for first 7 days on chicks hatching, in the drinking water. This seems to keep the hens free from feeding problems.

I use a small incubator for hatching my Bantams, this I keep in an adjoining shed. This has proved invaluable to me over the years. If any hen leaving her eggs during incubation period, or taking sick while feeding chicks, I can move the whole nest into the incubator. This gives me time to think out my next move. I can hand feed chicks while in the incubator.

If on occasions I have a young bird, and nowhere to move it to, it's proved for me, quite successful to put a plastic pigeon egg into the nest. This keeps the hen from crushing the chick, and keeps it secure.

Weaning off

In weaning my chicks, I still use bread/goats milk/ small amount of blue maw seed. My cages have double doors, my nest pan is near the edge of the top door (my friend gave me this tip, and it has proved successful), I introduce the bread/milk /seed mixture in the top door while the chicks are still in the nest - they come to this dish, before they are even onto the floor. In other words they are weaned in the nest.

I trust you find my tips of value and have an enjoyable breeding season.

Best wishes

Robert Bennett.
Ireland

Incubation and Hatching

I dislike having a hen sitting on one or two eggs and like to make up nests, ideally four. This can be done when eggs are checked for fertility. The parentage of youngster can easily be established if eggs from a pair of clears are put into a nest of darks or vice versa. Young birds can also be transferred and whilst some people seem afraid to do this I have never had problems. I take the birds to be transferred and place them handily in an empty nest pan. The hen to which the young are to be transferred is tempted off of the nest by some tit-bit such as a finger draw of condition seed or a sprig of chickweed placed at the opposite end to the nest. Whilst the hen is occupied the young are quickly placed in the foster hen's nest. In almost every case the hen when returning to the nest will brood immediately. By the time she comes off, feeds, and transfers the food, the young will have taken up any scent of the new nest.

When hens are sitting I leave the normal seed mixture in the hopper. A small amount of soft food is placed in an egg draw on the morning the eggs are due to hatch. It is generally accepted that the young can survive for 24 hours without being fed by the parents but food is there if required.



I've cracked it !!

When breeding with pairs there is usually no difficulty with the second and subsequent rounds. The cock is with the hen all the time but a careful watch should be kept for signs of the hen wanting to go to nest again. Ensure that there is plenty of nesting material in the cage or you may end up with plucked youngsters.

Weaning off

When the young are around 16 days old it is time to put another nest pan in the cage or, if space is limited put the young in their nest on the cage floor and hang a fresh one up in its place. Around this time if the nest is moved or accidentally knocked the young will explode from the nest! As many know you can put them back, hold your hand over them and gradually withdraw it but they will not stay in the nest. When they do leave I put some soft food on a feeding board in addition to that supplied to

the parents. Curiosity will soon get them picking up and feeding with one bird taking the lead. This bird will often feed its siblings. When I see the majority of a brood feeding themselves I put them in a separate cage. This is the time to be hard-hearted. Some birds may cry pitifully but are the ones if left with their parents would be feed forever.

Best Wishes.
Ron Bullimore.

Clear eggs are removed from hens after eight days. The hen is sprayed with cold water and not reintroduced to the cock bird until the normal incubation period has elapsed, i.e. 14 days. Sitting hens are offered their usual mixed seed but interestingly it is mainly the plain canary seed that is eaten.

Hatching & feeding etc

If the hen is in tip-top condition no harm will come to the chicks if soft food is not offered for a day or so. On some occasions I have not checked for hatching and found young 2-3 days old before I have fed the mother soft food. Sometimes there is no obvious signs of young in the nest pan e.g. no egg shells strewn about the cage floor. During these few days the hen must be regurgitating selected seeds. As to drinking water, this is drawn from the mains water supply some hours before use. A few drops of Chlorhexidine are added to the water jug before use. In warm weather water is changed twice daily.

My methods of feeding whilst a hen is rearing chicks are quite simple. For the first three days only very small amounts of soft food is given to the hen three times daily. In addition a separate container is put in the cage in the evening time. This will contain a pinch of oatmeal a few grains of charcoal and a pinch of Maw seed

After the third day a little broccoli is offered and a tiny portion of sprouted seed, I must emphasise sprouted as opposed to soaked seed. When first soaking seed two teaspoons of household bleach is added to a cup of seed, then topped up with warm water. Soft food is then increased by adding couscous, which is soaked overnight. I vary the green food by using garden peas put through a blender, cabbage leaves or sprout stumps. Variety in feeding keeps the hens busy and busy hens make good mothers. Finally in my view nestlings frequently die as a result of over-feeding opposed to under feeding!!

If hens desert their duties

If your best paired hen deserts her nest then swap her eggs and pan to a less important hen which is due down two or three days before or after the first hen. Eggs belonging to the second hen can either be split up between other hens or kept for 24 hours in a hospital cage or airing cupboard. A new nest is made up into which I put 4-5 dummy eggs. This nest goes into the Microwave oven for 1 minute and placed in the cage of the first hen. Quite often a hen will re-sit on warm eggs. All eggs are tested at twelve days in warm water. When replacing eggs that have been tested I use a plastic teaspoon and I ensure that a small amount of water is in the teaspoon when eggs are returned to the nest. If chicks are alive at this stage eggs which are tested individually, will be seen to bob after a second or two.

Preparing for a second round

As stated earlier nest pans containing youngsters are put on the floor of the cage at about 12 days. A perch is positioned slightly above the rim of the nest pan. Using this method there is less likelihood of youngsters falling out and even if one does it will find its way to somewhere near the pan. Another advantage is that no problems are encountered when introducing the second nest pan when the hen is ready for her second round. This is usually about at about 19-20 days.

Ready for weaning

Seldom are any problems encountered when chicks pass the ten days old mark. When reintroducing the cock (single pairing) a wire slide is placed into position to separate the cage, the nest pan is transferred to the other side of the wire slide through which the hen and cock bird will feed the chicks.

Be careful to keep an eye on the hen for at times they will pluck youngsters. As soon as this is seen, a dozen or more small pieces of cotton wool are pushed between the bars of the cage front. This immediately distracts the hen who will then cease plucking. Youngsters the other side of the wire slide will be offered bread and milk (scalded) with a little Maw seed when they are seen to be in and out of the nest pan. Sometimes it is 24-25 days before I am satisfied that they are feeding themselves. Around this time second round eggs will be due for setting.

Seed hoppers are left on cages with youngsters but are topped up with pinhead oats and a little condition seed. At the first sign of poor condition i.e. bleary eyes I remove the hopper leaving only soft food. A little wedge of carrot in the bars is a good cleanser and keeps the young chicks occupied.

Good luck during the breeding season.

Ron Palfreyman

Like so many things in life you get out what you put in.
Breeding can be frustrating at times however the rewards do foster
companionship and pleasure.

1 David Richards
WWBFCC 2006



2 Off to Dinner



3 Novice Fancier
C. Dicataldo



4 Mick Spare,
Mel Samuels.
Welsh Int 2006



5 Jack Fairhurst
and his birds



6 Blackpool BBFCC



7 I love my Borders



8 Dear old pals



9 WWBFC Party
Time 2005



10 River Dancers
International 2006



11 PP, JB, SB. Dinner
International 2006



12 Fleetwood
Market



13 Irish Dancers
International Show
2006



14 Sunny Fleetwood !!



15 Oh Mr Porter what
shall I do?



Ron Bullimore
Lincolnshire.
England

As a boy brought up in the country Ron kept at various times Bantams, pigeons, rabbits, jackdaws and British birds. Ron has had Borders for 53 years and held every office in various Cage Bird Societies. A panel judge since 1971 he has officiated at many All-Border and major CBS shows, also in Italy. For a number of years Ron has been in partnership with John Measures and they have considerable success on the show bench particularly with darks.

Getting started

I doubt if there is a canary breeder who has not had clear eggs, particularly in the first round. The fact that it is usually the first round would suggest that the birds were not fit and that the fancier was impatient!

Things to consider are: did the pair show the usual signs of breeding condition; is the cock singing, dancing on the perches and stretching to resemble a Yorkie? The hen carrying material in her beak, flitting from perch to perch turning in mid air, squatting in response to a cock's song? If the answer to all these questions is Yes, then possibly wobbly perches are to blame?

If when mating, a hen is swaying around and struggling to grip an insecure perch then the result can be clear eggs. For many years, on my own and now in partnership, I have used 'twist-on' perches. If the grooves in the perches are not too wide then it may have a very slight 'give' up and down when a bird lands but will not have side ways movement. In my early days I followed the common practice of using perches that had a groove in one end that rested on a cross wire of the cage front with a panel pin minus the head, driven into the other end. The spring in the cage front ensured a tight fit. There were two drawbacks to this type of perch however. They all had to be exactly the same length or the shorter ones would drop, secondly when a bird roosted it could be in contact with the back of the cage and thus an easy target for red mite.

Nest Pans & Eggs

I don't think the type of nestpan used matters a great deal. Over the years I have used the type favoured by the breeders of British birds, wooden, with a perforated metal base, also plastic and clay, the two latter with felt lining stuck in.

When hens commence to lay the first three eggs in the clutch are placed in a small draw, numbered to correspond to the breeding cages. The drawers are half-filled with fine sawdust. Eggs are replaced on the evening of the third day. I have kept eggs for up to 18 days before

(White of an egg is an old country substitute for Glue particularly to stick paper, i.e. corners of wallpaper that have come adrift)

Pairs or Strike mating?

A memory from my early days is clutches of four and five eggs, which hatched, were fed, weaned and then on to the next round. At this time most people bred from straight pairs. What better sight than a cock on one side of the nest and the hen on another, both feeding the young? Today with straight pairs that ideal is seldom achieved. There maybe various reasons but undoubtedly one is that today's birds are more inter-bred. I have mongrel dogs and pedigree dogs; it is the latter that cost a fortune in vet's fees.

Pairing up

There are exceptions to every rule but normally; straight pairs are easier to manage than when cocks are mated to several hens. If kept side by side and introduced by the slide gradually being moved or replaced by a wire slide they will gradually agree. A few minutes observation after withdrawing the slide will prove whether or not all is well. As I say however, there are always exceptions. I once had a pair that appeared to be compatible; I came home from work and found the cage spattered with blood and the hen scalped. She lived for several more years but never grew a feather on the head. Sod's law continued grew a feather on the head. Sod's law of course she had, as unflighted won several Novice awards. When running a cock with several hens the usual advice is to pair him first with the hen in best breeding condition then the next and so on. If only it were that simple! I have found that the only way is to run the cock with each hen in turn and observe. Sometimes there will be instant mating or a fight or a stand-off. If after a few minutes nothing happens I take the cock out. I do not leave him with the hen for any length of time or he may bond with that particular bird and when you introduce him to another he will be at the cage front singing to his favourite at the other end of the bird-room.

