

Members of the Budgerigar Society: PASS IT ON!!!

Some of you may have watched Jamie Oliver's television campaign a couple of years ago whereby he promoted the idea of healthy eating by encouraging people to "pass on" recipes and cooking techniques to their friends and family. The theory was that for every recipe passed on to a new person, there was the opportunity to spread the word about the importance of healthy eating from one social group to the next.

The theory behind the campaign got me thinking: could this be applied to the budgerigar fancy, which has faced a steady decline in members year after year in recent times? Could this be the solution to saving and indeed rejuvenating our hobby?

In 1997 the Budgerigar Society had 5201 members. In 2000 membership numbers had fallen to 4607. Today, I am reliably informed that the membership list totals 2744. Therefore, membership numbers have nearly halved in the space of 13 years. There is no single factor that can be blamed for this decline. It is a number of key factors, which compiled together, have driven the decline over the last couple of decades:

- The rise in other leisure activities. The fact is with the upturn in people playing golf, joining gymnasiums and dining out, people simply have less time on their hands. With the surge in the leisure industry, people's lives are busier than ever and with such a time consuming hobby as budgerigars, it is not surprising that the birds are often the first thing, which are dropped when people need to make more time for themselves and their families.
- The cost of the hobby. As with most commodities in recent years, the price of seed and other dietary supplements has increased significantly. Add to that the average price of a decent pedigree budgerigar and you have a hobby that has gone from being a working man's passion to a very expensive time consuming vocation. We only have to look at the current economic climate and the years of pain ahead to recognise that money is going to be even tighter in the future.
- It's not cool with the kids. Having experienced trying to explain my new hobby to friends at the age of 8, I am fully aware that the hobby just isn't a cool thing to do (even the word "cool" is out of fashion these days!). Rugby, football, skateboarding, tennis would certainly seem more attractive to most young people and are hobbies which without doubt are easier to talk about with friends.

The Budgerigar Society has faced criticism from certain members in recent times for not doing enough to promote the hobby. I do not agree with this criticism for a number of reasons. What could the Budgerigar Society do? Let's look at some of the options:

- Start an advertising campaign – any marketing strategy costs money. Budgerigar Society resources are already stretched. Therefore, would we be willing to pay higher membership fees to subsidise some form of advertising to promote our hobby?
- Send flyers out – how many of us read flyers that are shoved through our letter box or drop on the floor when we open a magazine?

- Ask officers of the society to go into schools and do presentations on our hobby – where would they find the time for this and how many of you would like to face an audience of a few hundred rowdy teenagers and then talk to them about our little feathered friends?

If we as a society want to capture someone's interest in our hobby, what we really need is for our members to explain the real joys of bird keeping in great detail and on a one to one basis, not from an advert in a magazine or a flyer. Therefore, rather than blaming the society for the decline in the fancy and looking to the officers of the society to solve the problems we face, it should be us, the members who need to do more to promote our wonderfully hobby.

If we follow Jamie Oliver's idea, just have a think for a moment. When was the last time you actively sought to encourage a friend or a family member to visit your aviary and observe the ins and outs of what your hobby is all about? How many of us when asked in conversation, "do you have a hobby?" will mention everything else that we do as a hobby rather than budgerigars in order to avoid the obvious questions of "what?", "why?" and "are you mad"?

If every member of the budgerigar society tried to encourage one person to take an interest in the hobby each year and a quarter of those people took up the hobby or at least pursued their interest further and joined the Budgerigar Society, the members list could increase to 3430 in year 1, 4288 in year 2 and 5360 in year 3. Obviously, these numbers are hypothetical and do not take into account the percentage of people who retire from the hobby every year. However, the proposition does present us all with a real opportunity of taking our hobby forward.

In addition to grasping that initial spark of interest, let us not forget the importance of mentoring new members. It is very difficult to try to explain to a potential newcomer to the fancy:

"Listen, I want you to seriously think about taking up this fantastic hobby. If you work hard at it, you could find yourself being decorated in national awards, travelling all round the world as a judge, meeting people from different walks of life (you could even meet Geoff Capes!) and all you have to do is simply manipulate the pedigree of a few feathered birds. The only drawbacks are that you are certain to experience the following before you even have a hint of success: a broken heart (when that youngster you've been waiting years to breed has its' head removed by its mother), frustration after frustration (when you dig deep into your pockets and buy that special bird that just won't breed) and disillusionment (when you seem to make very little progress year upon year despite putting in hours of hard work)."

My own profession dictates that I often have to put a positive spin on negative situations but even I have to admit that one might struggle to sell this proposition to a newcomer. However, we must at least try! After all, long established members of the fancy know that when the Budgerigar bug really gets you, the setbacks and frustrations along the way only make the achievements that bit more special. If it was easy, where would the excitement come from?!

When newcomers become part of the hobby, we should not just welcome them with open arms. We should be there to offer support and advice when they need it as they settle into their new interest. To encourage people to embrace our hobby and then simply leave them to find their own way is beyond pointless. Therefore, we need to take it upon ourselves as established fanciers to make time to encourage and mentor new blood coming through the ranks.

Taking our inspiration from Jamie, let us all actively try to encourage at least one person each year to take an interest in our hobby. The real danger of us not self promoting in this manner is that if we decline in numbers over the next decade as we have done in the last, we will be down to a serious minority and by that time, it could be too late to inspire any attempt to resurrect our much loved fancy.