

BEGINNERS CORNER

CARE OF THE YOUNGSTERS

by ROVING REPORTER

Development in young stock of any type should be normal, uninterrupted and apparent. Squeakers should not have major set-backs if they are to mature into strong, healthy and worthwhile birds that can stand the stress and strain of the hard events that will come to them later in life.

You may say how can a novice avoid any upset to his prospects from the time they are born, and what steps should be taken to preclude accidents? Actually the answer is one of planning and careful observation, assisted by certain knowledge of what can be expected and what should be avoided.

Perhaps the discussion should be taken under separate headings, commencing with the squeakers from the time they are born up to the time they are on the wing, so we will start without the procedure needed from birth.

CLEAN CONTAINERS

It is advisable to have small clean food containers placed in the nest box alongside the nest pan, and these should be kept filled with your rearing mixture which should be top quality, dust-free, fresh grains which will aid growth and health. The object of this separate feeding is to assist the parents in maintaining a steady flow of food into the youngsters, whereas if they had to battle with their cage mates for the food placed in there morning and night, there would be quite a good chance that the youngsters in some nests would go hungry. This happens frequently with stock birds that aren't good feeders, when the twice-a-day feeding plan is followed, and as a result the

youngsters never do much good. Moreover, by having the grains in small separate containers in the nest boxes, the food is less likely to be contaminated than large quantities of food spread all over the cage floor.

What must be remembered is that young pigeons should be well filled with food all the time. They then are never restless and disturbed, and being contented, they sleep far more, and this promotes growth. Fresh cool water should always be available to the parents and to the youngster once they start feeding themselves. By the containers being in the nest box, it means that the squeakers when old enough to move about in the box will start to pick up grain, which accelerates the time that you can wean them and remove them from the nest and place them in the nursery away from the older birds to fend for themselves. This is important, as birds that are left with their parents too long are apt to refuse food, become timid, and uninterested in things when they are finally taken away to be put with the other youngsters.

This in itself presents a set-back which could have more effect than one imagines.

When ringing a bird's leg, a setback can be given to the youngster also if it is not done at the right time and in the right way. The correct procedure is to take the little bird carefully in the hand when it is six days old, and place the ring on the left leg, passing the three toes of that foot through the ring, and moving the ring up the leg until the back toe is cleared and then letting the back toe resume its normal position. The ring is thus fitted and the numbers that identify the bird for life will be upside down when the bird is in the standing position, so when ringing a bird for a race the handler can easily read the letters and numbers. If you have neglected to ring the squeaker at six days of age and you find difficulty in getting the ring on, grease the leg with lanoline. However, it is better to remember that it needs doing before it is at this stage, as the pain and discomfort to the youngster, especially in inexperienced hands, could cause a real set-back, could even result in a broken toe, or other serious injury.

Weaning the youngsters should be done when the birds are three to four weeks of age. It will vary a few days one way or the other with individual birds, but the food containers adjacent to the nest pan will speed up the

squeaker's education as regards self-feeding. Once they have started to pick up small grains, or make attempts in that direction, a water vessel that is within their reach should be given to the youngsters, to encourage them to drink. In fact, you may ease the tip of their beaks into the water to show them where it is and what it is for. Once they will pick up food and drink they should be moved without delay to the nursery loft with other youngsters.

The transfer from one box to another should be done at night, so that when they wake up in the morning they find they are with other young birds of much the same age (this will be the case, as you have paired your breeding stock at the same time, and the squeakers have been hatched almost on the same day.) The change from one cage to another will go almost unnoticed, and no set-back will be caused to the birds. Watch them closely for a day or so after transfer, however and any bird that is not picking up enough food or water should be given assistance, and supplemented feeding. This is done by soaking peas in warm water (you may even leave them in there until they sprout a green shoot and feed these) until they swell and soften.

Then take the bird that is short of food and gently but firmly open its beak and run a few peas down its throat. Then place its beak in the water container and encourage it to drink. Do this two or three times a day and you'll find in a day or two, because of the bird copying its cage mates, that it is eating away with the best of them and so no set-back has occurred.

Any bird that develops canker, weediness, vent troubles or mopes and drops behind its mates in development should be immediately destroyed. Rearing is not done just for the pleasure of breeding birds, but is done for the sole purpose of selecting the prospects for the future, so why not accept facts that are staring you in the face.

DON'T REAR TOO MANY

Most people try to rear too many birds, anyway. They clutter the lofts with too many that "might come good". Where this idea originated no one seems to know. Better to feed a limited number of good ones, feed them properly, and have the success that comes with intelligent handling of quality birds. Each of your young birds should have its own perch to rest on. Always have more perches than birds in a

loft, and you won't have the fighting and disturbance and possible injury that comes from overcrowding.

Too many birds means too much risk of disease, too much money spent on feed, and too much money spent on feed, and too much trouble when it comes to tosses, and individual treatment becomes an impossibility.

Get the birds accustomed to being handled. Be quiet, gentle yet firm with them. The more they know you, the easier they will be to get into a trap later on. Handle them gently and clean their feet from any dirt or soiling. Stroke their plumage and stretch and place their wings. You can even hold out food in your hand for them to peck from when they are a trifle hungry. Once you have the confidence of the birds, you will have more chance of succeeding.

Watch for any bird that is going back in its growth. Consider well whether you should persevere with it or cull it. Keep the birds free from lice, etc., by using a recognised preventive on the perches or on their bodies.

Once the squeakers have passed the age of six weeks or so, cut down on their food, and make it a twice-a-day routine, feeding only the amount necessary for the number of birds in the loft. Overfeeding is just as wrong as underfeeding once the young ones have

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formed a proper frame and fat birds can be regarded as unhealthy birds. More-over, once you reach the stage of liberating the birds from the loft, you should have them a trifle hungry so that they will be more inclined to remain near the loft in case food arrives, than to go on lone excursions, which could be their undoing as far as you are concerned. Don't forget that pigeons, especially young ones, can do without food, but they can't last long or stay contented (as they should) when thirsty, so make sure that plenty of clean fresh water, kept in a cool spot where it can't get contaminated, is available to them.

Make your visit to the loft a pleasant time for the young ones. Time it so that it is roughly at the same time each end of the day. They will be looking for their food, and you are the one that brings it to them. Let them see that you are the provider. Get in with the birds and hold the food in your hand crouch down with them and roll some grains around you on a clean section of the floor. They will soon get confidence through necessity and approach the food and ignore your presence.

Reach out and touch and stroke some of the birds each time. They will then settle down and

be better in temperament. In other words, they will have more character, and you will avoid that scared wild scatter that often occurs, no matter who enters some lofts.

Birds should be self-possessed, calm and silent if they are to have a future as fliers. Touchy, wild-eyed birds may give the appearance of eagles, but rarely make the grade as fliers. Consider photos of champions the world over, and see the type of bird that they are. They all have a calm, confident look. Try to get your birds to have that same calm appearance. If you follow this system you will be on your way to a successful future.

Whilst I am aware there are suitable feeding pots manufactured to place in the nest boxes for youngsters to feed from. If these are unobtainable, any small tins can be made suitable. First cut the top cleanly off ensuring that there are no sharp edges than if you mix a little sand cement and water then fill the tins to about 2½" from the top. These will make stable feeding pots.

Empty glass jars are not suitable to put cement in as when the cement dries the glass cracks and breaks the jars.

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