

WHAT MAKES A BUDGERIGAR RARE?

By Ken Yorke

In the last couple of decades, the exhibition budgerigar fancy has seen the rise of clubs and shows dedicated to (or at least with a bias toward) rare varieties. In almost every case these Rare Clubs seem to cater for completely different lists of “rare” birds. So what makes a budgerigar rare?

Rarity is generally associated with a small population, but can also be influenced by geographical distribution. That is, what is rare in one area may be more common in another area. Such is the case with the budgerigar where some varieties are restricted to some countries by import/export/quarantine regulations.

In this article, I will look at some of the truly rare budgerigars, using a definition of “rare” as “less than 1000 living birds worldwide”. A few of these rare varieties have been standardised in some countries by their respective regulating societies but others are not recognised either due to lack of knowledge, lack of birds or lack of interest, and in some cases even actively discouraged. In addition, I will mention a few “uncommon” varieties as defined by “more than 1000 living birds but not widely distributed”.

It is probably appropriate now to ponder what is considered a “variety”. We generally equate budgerigar varieties with particular colour variations from the wild light green bird. These colour variations are generally associated with particular genetic mutations. Not all colour variations are caused by genetic mutation, some have other causes such as disease and environment. For example, some birds which survive certain feather diseases such as French Mould will develop pied like markings which increase with age. Such one-off non genetic varieties are beyond the scope of this article.

Not all genetic based varieties relate to colour variation. For example, feather size and structure variations such as Crest, Long-Flight, Feathered Legs, Silky, Feather Duster etc are also genetic budgerigar varieties. These particular feather varieties generally have not been exploited (and in fact are often actively discouraged) by budgerigar fanciers, unlike poultry fanciers who encourage them. Genetic body structure variations in budgerigars tend to be ignored as “varieties” by budgerigar fanciers instead treated as “bloodline characteristics” belonging to certain particular named studs. Canary and poultry fanciers on the other hand have developed completely different varieties based on body structure changes e.g. Yorkshire Canary and Border Canary etc.

Table 1 - Uncommon Varieties

<u>Variety</u>	<u>Origin</u>	<u>Inheritance</u>
Saddleback	Australia	Recessive
Melanistic Spangle **	Australia	?
Easley Clearbody	America	Dominant
Feather Duster	Australia?	Recessive
Slate	UK	SexLinked Recessive

*** The Melanistic Spangle has been given various different other names around the world and is not recognised as a separate variety yet. It is unclear whether it is a mutation in its own right or merely a modified traditional Spangle.*

Table 2 below shows the currently rare varieties of budgerigar and excludes those historical varieties which are definitely known to be extinct.

Table 2 - Rare Varieties

<u>Variety</u>	<u>Origin</u>	<u>Inheritance</u>	<u>Comment</u>
Dusk	Australia	Dominant?	Established
Anthracite	Germany	Partial Dominant	Established
Australian Recessive Grey	Australia	Recessive	Almost extinct
Australian Faded	Australia	Recessive	Being established
Australian Brownwing	Australia	Recessive	Being established
Blackface	Holland	Recessive	Established
Dobie Mottle	Australia	Polygenic?	Probably extinct
Other Mottles	UK and other	Dominant?	Not established
Darkwing	Australia	Partial Dominant Modifier	Established
South Australian Blackwing	Australia	Partial Dominant	Probably extinct
Feathered Legs	Various	Polygenic?	Not established
Black	UK and America	?	Not established
Polydactyl	Various	Polygenic?	Not established
Stargazer	Australia	Recessive	Not established
Silky	Europe and Australia	?	Not established
Misty	Belgium	Partial Dominant	Being established
Pearly	America	Sexlinked Recessive	Being established

Let's take a look at these rare varieties in slightly more detail:-

Dusk A variety which is visually almost identical in all respects to Olive Green in the green series and Mauve in the blue series. The cheek patches tend to be duller than traditional olive or mauve. (In my "Budgerigar Variety Bible" I temporarily called this variety the Second Dark Factor, but breeders have since decided to call the variety Dusk). Although genetic research is continuing it appears to be a dominant variety unlike traditional dark factor which is partial dominant. Some individual Dusk birds tend to have a slightly more intense yellow but this is not consistent and may be an unrelated trait.

Anthracite In the double factor state, it appears as a light black coloured bird (in the blue series) with near black cheek patches. Single factor Anthracites appear one shade darker than normal, e.g. Sky blue Anthracite(sf) appears similar to cobalt.

Australian Recessive Grey Almost identical in colour to the common Australian Dominant Grey, but is recessive in inheritance. Microscopic examination of feathers by MUTAVI has

shown this to be a different mutation to both the common Australian Dominant Grey and the extinct English Recessive Grey.

Australian Faded Slight reduction in melanin throughout the entire bird resulting in slightly reduced intensity of body colour and markings and pinkish feet. They hatch with red eyes (like Ino) which turn brown (like cinnamon) then black (like normal) and do not develop a white iris ring until approximately two years of age.

Australian Brownwing Slight reduction in body colour. Markings are extremely dark brown (sometimes difficult to distinguish from dull black). They hatch with red eyes which turn black.

Blackface The lower mask is predominantly black similar to extreme multi-spotting in some exhibition normals. The black barring on the top of the head extends forward to the cere. Black barring is sometimes seen in the upper breast feathers.

Mottles Mottle (also called Progressive Pied) refers to normal birds which develop pied markings which increase with age. Several different genetic Mottle mutations have appeared around the world and are rarely established. The original Dobie Mottle is now almost certainly extinct. This group does not include similar visual birds which are caused by disease.

Darkwing A genetic mutation which substantially reinstates black pigment to other varieties which would otherwise have reduced black pigment. Currently, Darkwing characteristics are only visible on Dilute, Clearwing and Greywing birds. Only the Darkwing Dilute (a yellow or white bird with near black markings) has been standardised. Single factor darkwings have very dark grey markings, double factor Darkwings have almost black markings.

South Australian Blackwing A yellow or white bird with black markings. The double factor form had reduced suffusion and generally twisted flight feathers (called Frizzles or Silkies). It is almost certainly extinct.

Feathered Legs A variety not established and not generally encouraged by exhibition breeders as the feathers on the legs and feet can cause problems with leg rings. The expression of this gene/s varies from a single feather to multiple feathers.

Black Perhaps not a mutation or even a true variety, but there have been at least two documented cases (involving a total of at least four birds) of Black budgerigars being produced, but in each case the birds died without breeding. In fact most, but not all, had other physical problems similar to the Feather Duster.

Polydactyl Another variety which is not encouraged. Polydactyl is a genetic variety (perhaps even described as a genetic disorder) which exposes itself as extra or less digits. The most common form is a bird with five toes instead of four.

Stargazer A variety based on altered deportment. These birds in their relaxed state severely throw backward their head and stare at the sky. When disturbed or in free flight the birds bring the head back to the traditional forward position. They suffer no unusual

conditions nor abnormal behavior in any other way. (This a genetic variety and is not related to other similar and more crippling behaviors caused by nerve damage etc in other birds.)

Silky A feather structure variety whereby the feather barbs are altered resulting in a more straggly or hair-like feather which does not mesh together. This usually results in flightless or poor flying birds.

Misty A bird with slight melanin reduction throughout resulting in paler body and markings. Single factor birds are difficult to distinguish from Normals. Double factor birds are paler.

Pearly In normal daylight this bird is visually identical to Ino and is probably a multiple allele of the Ino gene. Microscopic examination of feathers by MUTAVI noted a slight increase in the amount of melanin present compared to traditional Ino. In areas of suitable artificial lighting these birds display a coloured hue which varies through all the colours of the rainbow depending on the angle of viewing.

It can be noted that most feather colours which appear on the budgerigar are either directly or indirectly related to melanin. Black, grey, brown, blue and violet all fall into this category. Only yellow is caused by non-melanin pigment. Grey green and green being combinations of yellow and the above melanin related colours. White being the complete absence of all. This being said there is only so many ways in which black pigment can be increased, diluted, removed etc and while different new mutations may cause these various effects, it is also the reason why some new varieties look similar to existing varieties. For example, Greywing, Faded and Misty all rely on dilution and as a result all have some visual similarities. With such similar varieties it is difficult for a new mutation to compete against an already established variety. For this reason it is unfortunate that new varieties like Faded and Misty will struggle to be established against Greywing unless they are easier to breed or have some other benefit.

Historical examples of new varieties taking over from old varieties are the SexLinked Ino over the Recessive Ino and the Australian Dominant Grey over the English Recessive Grey, these newer varieties being easier to breed and improve.

Such trends are likely to continue in the future when other new mutations occur. Sadly unless new varieties are spectacularly different from existing varieties or are easier to breed then most new varieties will continue to stay in the realm of rare birds kept teetering on the edge of extinction by a small band of specialist breeders.

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