DIY CALCIUM/GRIT BELLS

I am into all things DIY regarding anything to do with aviculture or anything – Jen and my mates tell me I am "hypo". Tried relaxing once and found myself pacing about, thinking of ways to relax and that took more effort than doing something. DIY aviculture is generally cheaper than the store bought item and to me quite self-satisfying. When you put your mind to it, there are heaps of "gadgets", toys and feed supplements that are easy DIY projects. The following is a recipe and "how to" for calcium/grit bells. I have one in each flight, hung off the side wire panel, just above the front perch hanger. The birds chew at it regularly some more/ more often than others do. It is a source of Calcium sulphate, grit (also another form of Calcium) charcoal (assists in absorbing toxins) and Calcium carbonate. I find the use of my Calcium bells basically eliminates the need to have a separate grit bowl or a cuttlebone hanging off the wire.

Ingredients:

1. *Plaster of Paris – 5Kg bag (Cement Australia brand is best) - From any large hardware outlet, look for it in the Builders area not from the arts and crafts area. Plaster of Paris is basically Calcium sulphate and in its natural form it's Gypsum before being cooked.*
2. *Packet of Bag/Reo ties – Galvanised not "black" wires – Sourced as above. Comes in a bag of minimum 100 ties. I prefer these to buying a roll of wire. No cutting to a uniform length and the ties have a "loop" at both ends so no sharp points or pull out of the bell.*
3. *Two cups of fine shell grit- pet shops/PSOA Sales Table.*
4. *Two cups of fine activated charcoal – pet shops.*
5. *Two generous cups of crushed cuttlefish or more correctly, cuttlebone, crushed to about fingernail size bits. A walk along one of our NQ beaches will get you heaps or, if you aren't lucky enough to live up here, PSOA Sales Table.*
6. *A mould – I use the polystyrene drinking cups. Available from any catering supplier, but basically any cheap small container will do.*
7. *Clean cold water.*

NOTE: As an alternate to items 3 & 4, use fine or medium char/grit from PSOA Sales table.

The Method:

1. *Lay out about 12/14 cups and have the same amount of ties at hand. Have these ready to go as the mix will go "off" pretty rapidly and you do not want to be stuffing around once the Plaster of Paris has been added to the other ingredients.*
2. *Into a plastic bucket, one with a spout, add one cup of shell grit, charcoal and crushed cuttlefish. Any "cup" measure will do just use the same cup for all ingredients.*

3. *Add water by the cup full until the heavier ingredients are covered by about 12mm of water. Cuttlebone will float so do not overdo the water. Mix the ingredients by hand or with a flat paddle.*
4. *Using a **DRY** cup, add the Plaster of Paris to the mix, cup by cup, stirring with a paddle or (I prefer) by hand, until the slurry has reached a consistency of runny lumpy porridge and sort of looks the same. For you technical blokes, around the consistency/look of block-fill. Make sure you add the P of P to the water not the other way around.*
5. *When you have reached the above consistency, pour into the moulds. Once the lot are filled, poke the wire tie into the middle of the mould, at least halfway down is OK.*
6. *Wash out the bucket/paddle or your hands. It sets pretty smartly and you don't want to look like something out of the Emergency Ward.*
7. *About ten minutes should do the trick and the bells are ready to be removed. Be aware that they will be quite warm to hot as a result of the chemical reaction that changes the mix from liquid to solid.*
8. *Remove the bell from the mould – I cut the polystyrene cup and peel off. If you are using some other form of mould, you may need to "line" the mould with some form of release agent. Do a small trial first and make sure whatever you use, as a mould or release agent is not toxic and will easily release the plug from the mould.*
9. *Let the bells set completely and cool down – hang in the flight. If you want to get artistic, you can carve the "bell" into a more aesthetic shape. Hell, I haven't got the time for that; there's another DIY to get started.*

I have found that I can get about at least twenty-four bells from the above mix. The bells last at least eighteen months – more likely much longer, with the bigger parrots and a couple of years no doubt with the smaller ones.
If the wet weather makes them a bit "mouldy" and what doesn't in my tropical climate, a quick scrub with a wire brush will freshen them up.

The Ingredients

1.

1. *The bits from top left to bottom right– Cup, P of P, Wire Ties, Shell Grit/Charcoal mix and Crushed Cuttlefish.*

2.

2. Charcoal, Shell grit and Cuttle Fish mixed in the bucket.

3.

3. Moulds (Poly cups) and wire ties ready for mix and pour.

4.

4. The mix slurry before the pour into moulds. About the consistency of lumpy runny porridge. Time is of the essence in completing the pour.

5.

5. The moulds are poured and ready for insertion of the wire tie.

6.

6. The moulds with the wire tie inserted. Insert at least halfway.

7.

7. *Cut/slit the mould and peel off the poly cup. Be aware that the bell will be quite warm from the chemical reaction between the Plaster of Paris and the water.*

8.

8. *The finished calcium bell removed from the mould. The top loop of the wire tie is squashed into an oval shape and bent down to act as a hook/hanger on the wire. No sharp points.*

That's it, a simple DIY that will save heaps of Dollars. Last heaps longer than those that are commercially available and the recipe can be altered with regard to basically all the ingredients except the Plaster of Paris and water.

Jim van Reyk