



Estrildid Finches
in Aviculture...

Indo-Pacific Estrildid Finches: Their Status in American Aviculture

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Introduction

The family of estrildid finches is far-reaching and quite varied in these tropical climates. In aviculture some are very common, some are very rare and some have yet to reach our shores. In fact, the most popular group of estrildid finches in captivity are the Australian finches. However, since these finches are well documented and generally known in aviculture, we feel no need to cover them in this paper.

Parrotfinches

One of the most popular families of the Indo-Pacific finches are the parrotfinches (genus *Erythrura*). Although these birds have been coveted for years, only two species have been established in the US: the Blue-faced, *Erythrura trichroa*, and the Red-headed, *E. psittacea*, Parrotfinches. In European aviculture and rarely imported into the US are the Mindanao, *E. coloria*, and the Peale's, *E. pealii*, Parrotfinches.

Recently allowed to be exported from Indonesia, we have the addition of the Blue-breasted, or Forbes, *E. tricolor*, Parrotfinch. Although gaining a firm foothold in aviculture in Europe, this finch is precarious in American aviculture. With the influx of so many hybridized birds, it is doubtful whether a pure-blood population will be established in the U.S.

The newest addition to aviculture is the Papuan Parrotfinch, *E. papuana*, from New Guinea. Our good friend, Mike Fidler, recently visited a well-known aviculturist in Germany in hopes of bringing a few pairs back to

England. These will be the first known Papuans in his country. Another friend from the States recently made a trip to Vietnam and New Guinea in an effort to collect this species. He did indeed succeed and his six pair are the only known Papuan Parrotfinches within the US.

The gem of the parrotfinches, the Royal Parrotfinch, *E. cyaneovirens*, has generally been suspected and rumored to have occurred in American aviculture. However, we feel these stories are produced by aviculturists exercising wishful thinking. We can only confirm the existence of one pair in aviculture, worldwide, and it is in Germany.

Two members of the genus *Erythrura* are still being imported into the U.S., although somewhat irregularly, and their prices are rising sharply. These are Bamboo, *E. hyperythra*, and the Pin-tailed Nonpareil, *E. prasina*, Parrotfinches. It is our belief that neither of these parrotfinches will be established, due to the difficulty of propagation.

The Bamboo Parrotfinch is relatively not-threatened and is doing well in the wild. However, the prospects for the Pin-tailed Nonpareil look dismal. In an enlightening conversation with Robin Restall, we were informed that populations are being quickly depleted in the wild and in many places have reached the point from which they can no longer recover. Being members of the Taxon Advisory Group for Estrildid Finches, we have advised Josef Lindholm, III that zoos should seriously consider this species for inclusion in their breeding pro-

grams as their wild populations may collapse

The Manila Parrotfinch, *E. viridifacies*, also known as the Green-faced Parrotfinch has been briefly represented in American aviculture in the past, mainly by a few individual birds which were incidentally imported. There is no record of an American breeding of this species.

There is no evidence that the Pink-billed Parrotfinch, *E. kleinschmidti*, was ever in the U.S. Unfortunately, a recent scientific expedition intended on obtaining several individual birds for serious study fell through at the last moment.

Mannikins

The family of mannikins is well represented in the U.S. Many species have been imported by the thousands, such as the White-hooded, *Lonchura maja*, and the Black-hooded or Tri-colored, *L. malacca*, Nuns. These are considered among the "bread and butter" finches for the importers. Very sturdy and relatively free from the problems of stress that accompany importation, these finches have become the staples of many pet shops. Species such as the Java Rice Bird, *L. oryzivora*, and the Spice Finch, *L. punctulata*, will be readily recognized by finch breeders in the U.S.

However, among the common mannikins, only the Java Rice Bird has been established. There are several mutations occurring within this species, including the fawn, the white, the pied and the cinnamon. This finch is so hardy, it is illegal in many states within the U.S. for it is considered a crop threat. The Java Rice Bird, also known as the Java Sparrow, normally occurs in shades of gray. Interestingly, it has a brown counterpart, the Timor Sparrow, *L. fuscata*, which is less frequently imported. However, there are serious attempts being made to establish this finch by dedicated mannikin enthusiasts in the U.S.

From the Indo-Pacific area we also find the Striated Mannikin, *L. striata*, the forerunner of our well known Bengalese or Society Finch. If it were not for the work done on this finch by the Chinese many years ago, we would not have the excellent fostering

which we take for granted today.

New Guinea Mannikins

Relatively unknown in the U.S., but demanding high prices elsewhere, particularly in Germany, is the family of New Guinea mannikins. We personally believe these are the most beautiful and desirable of the *Lonchuras*. Some species have occasionally been imported here, such as the Black, *Lonchura stygia*, the Spectabled or New Britain, *L. spectabilis* and the White-spotted, *L. leucosticta*, Mannikins. Sadly, they have received a dismal response from American breeders. Difficult to sell for even \$100 per pair in the U.S., prices of \$500 per pair (equivalent) in Germany are not uncommon and these finches are rapidly sold and reproduced.

Clearly, Americans favor the more brightly colored finches. For example, a beautiful subspecies of the Chestnut-breasted Mannikin, the Sharpii, *L. castaneothorax sharpii*, occurs in New Guinea. The crown of this finch is almost white, as opposed to the gray of the Australian variety, *L. c. castaneothorax*. This bird is much more distinctive and highly prized than its Australian counterpart. Some of these New Guinea Chestnut-breasted Mannikins have reached the U.S. but, unfortunately, there was no serious attempt to breed them. In Robin Restall's upcoming book on mannikins, he describes many unknown subspecies as well as a few previously unknown species, one of which is currently in the collection of Dr. Luis Baptista for study. Obviously, there is much more to be discovered about this fascinating family of finches.

Crimson Finch

A very popular New Guinea finch which is not a mannikin is the White-bellied Crimson Finch, *Neochmia phaeton evangelinae*. Although imported in large numbers, and substantially less aggressive than its Australian counterpart, chances for its establishment in American aviculture appear dim.

Strawberry Finch

Another very popular finch from this area is the Strawberry Finch,

Amandava amandava. There are three subspecies of this estrildid and, unfortunately, the largest and most vivid subspecies, *A. a. amandava*, is subject to an export ban as it occurs in India. Aviculturists are seriously trying to establish the two other subspecies that remain, *A. a. punicea*, and *A. a. flaviventris*. However, hybridization between them is now a distinct threat.

The Green Avadavat or Green Strawberry Finch, *A. formosa*, is still being imported. This is curious as it also occurs in India and is thus subject to export bans. Our friend, Josef Lindholm, of the Fort Worth Zoo, theorizes that this bird may be exported from several little known provinces of China, particularly Hunan. We believe, in fact, he may be correct, particularly when one takes into account the scattered and wide spread range of its close relative, the Red Strawberry Finch.

Silverbill

The well known Silverbill, *Lonchura malabarica*, from India appears to have a good chance to become established in the US. Its ease in reproducing has made it popular as a substitute for Societies in fostering. This finch is perhaps the furthest along the road to establishment of the finches we have discussed here.

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the estrildid finches of the Indo-Pacific, Austral-Asian area compass a most diverse group of avicultural subjects: in physical appearance, availability, husbandry techniques and establishment outlook. Many are currently still available through import and are in desperate need of serious avicultural efforts to establish them before it becomes too late.

For some, establishment in captivity may be their only hope to survive the total extinction which may await them in their native habitats. As Mike Fidler once stated, many of the island species exist only at the mercy of the whim of the weather (and sadly, often man). To allow such diversity of life to pass out of existence merely because we as aviculturists could not be bothered would be a tragic loss and totally inexcusable. ➔

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