

# Painted Finches

## Where are they now?

by Roger Davidson, Denver, CO

The Painted Finch, *Emblema picta*, originates from Australia and in the early 1980s was being reproduced in limited numbers in Europe. They were quite expensive then and several American breeders imported them at a high price. They were popular in the mid-to-late 1980s and then seemed to lose their popularity. Why, when they were difficult to reproduce and high priced, was this finch popular and now that it can be obtained at a much lower cost, it is not as desired? This scenario should be just the opposite. There are breeders working with this finch in America but their numbers have greatly declined. Let us encourage more breeders to propagate this finch.

The Painted Finch is one of the more colorful of the Australian finches. As adults they can be sexed visually. The male has more red on its face, chin and breast patch. The female has only a few reddish feathers on her face and her breast patch may also have only a few red feathers. Both adult birds have distinct white spots running along the sides of the abdomen and breast. The female has more extensive

white spots, however, as they run clear up to her throat and chin. Immature birds are duller in color and lack the red on their bodies and heads. The white spots of the adult birds appear as washed out gray barring.

In the early 1990s we found that the newly imported Painted Finches were much more flighty than almost all other Australian grass finches. They were not suited to small cage units that Gouldian and Owl Finches reproduced in. They did much better in cages of longer length. I use a cage similar to those observed in European aviaries. This was what was called a "meter" cage being one meter (39 inches) in length. They appear more steady with this extra length but even so we eventually placed them in cages 48 inches long. In small cage units (36 inches in length or less) the Painted Finches were forever flying back and forth showing their nervous behavior. The extended length of their cages was directly related to the reduction of this nervous flying and breeding success was then achieved. The height and depth measurements were 18 to 24 inches square.

These finches have a habit of flying straight up and hovering for a few moments before going forward to the ground or another perch. I have not seen this behavior in the other Australian finches. This may be observed in other species but was not observed in the other nine commonly kept Australian finch species that I

keep.

We have much better success in small indoor-planted aviaries and even outdoor heated aviaries. These birds can be heat sensitive so drastic temperature changes can cause disaster. Their nests are placed within clumps of grass or under the shelter of shaded plants. They seem to thrive on this security.

Even though they love security during the nesting period, the adults are not that shy. They can be observed in full view on a front perch trying to catch a ray of sun coming through a window, or on the ground drinking or flicking through the compost and leaves.

The male Painted Finch has a wonderful song and he has a very active courtship with his mate just before the breeding begins. The courtship is much more varied and active compared to that of the other Australian finches.

The Painted Finch also spends much more time on the ground than do the other Australian finches. They will often roost on the ground so one must always have clean bottoms to all of the cages as often the birds' plumage will become soiled. This is especially true if the keeper does not clean old food and fecal matter from the cage bottoms.

I was told that the Painted Finch liked running water and that it would stimulate breeding. Painted Finches do love to bathe and will foul up their drinking water if given a chance. I use watering tubes or waterers that hang outside the cage and that are reached only by a bird sticking its head through a narrow slit in the wire.

A large open-faced water dish, wide but only a inch deep, is provided every other day for bathing. The birds splash the water everywhere. This dish is removed after 20 to 30 minutes or fecal matter and dirt quickly get into it. The birds know when the bathing dish is coming and they relish it. They jump right into it as they know from experience that their feet will hit the bottom. It is like being at the edge of a pool or stream.

We always place a smooth, flat rock on the bottom of the cage or flight. It is surprising how often the

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Painted Finches sit on the rock for long periods of time. It seems that they were either waiting for the sun or that the rock absorbed the sun's heat and the birds gather heat from the rock. This was highly unusual for me to see.

A standard 5- to 6-inch square wooden finch nest box was used for breeding the Painted Finch. For those birds being cage-bred, the nest box is hung on the far left or right outside front of the cage. These nest boxes have a narrow inspection door in the back. This was seldom used with the Painted Finches as they did not appreciate an intrusion during the nesting period. When the babies are one to two weeks old, the parents get off the nest and this is the time to look into a nest and to band the chicks. Babies should always be banded and there is just a narrow window between 11 and 14 days of age when this can be easily done.

Nest material consists of clean Bermuda grass stems approximately six inches in length and single strands of burlap of the same length. The burlap is placed within the empty nest in a circular pattern to begin with. The cut grass blades and additional burlap strands are placed in abundance within the cage or flight. The finches will diligently add to the nest until it is full and it is shaped into a half-dome or full dome.

Bath parents share incubation duties with the female taking the night shift. Even so, both parents will spend time in the nest during the daytime. Incubation is approximately 14 to 16 days with the fledging time being between three and four weeks after hatching. Young birds that have just fledged can be very nervous and may bounce off the walls or ceiling of the cage during their first exit. The youngsters later spend time on the ground and investigate everything with the parents during the day, but at night will roost back in the nest.

Juveniles begin to show color at around two months of age. The young males will begin to sing—or at least try to. Small individual feathers will begin to show up on young males, thus they can be sexed rather accurately. Another month will go by before they attain adult plumage.

The youngsters should be removed from the parents cage and housed separately as the adult male may show some aggression, especially if the pair proceeds with another clutch. Even *young* males when housed with females may show some aggression. Some breeders segregate the sexes until the breeding season when they pair up the birds and put them into their own breeding units.

The diet of the Painted Finch did not end up being the same as that of the other Australian finches. When they were given the same seed diet as Gouldians, the Painted Finches wasted too much of their food. The Painted Finches preferred the smaller seeds and would waste most of the canary and large white Proso millet seeds. Now they are given a great variety of small seeds. They prefer the Japanese millet and panicum seeds. Panicum is just the same as spray millet only in individual seed form. They would eat only panicum seed if they could, and they must be encouraged to eat a variety. They are also somewhat reluctant to try new foods and this includes egg food and germinated seeds. But with patience, and by limiting some of the more desirable seeds, one can soon get the birds to sample the soft and germinated foods. Once they accept the two latter foods, the Painted Finches do well on them, especially while feeding babies. Baked egg shell, oyster shell grit and charcoal bits are offered to the Painted Finches. Only the charcoal seems to be ignored although many of the reference books suggest these finches need it. My Painted Finches show no interest in live food.

Although there continues to be a long-lasting interest in the Australian finches in general, the Painted Finch seems to have declined in interest in American aviculture. This is hard to understand and is unfortunate as this is such an ideal finch species for aviculture. They are colorful, can be easily sexed visually, have a delightfully active courtship, and have a good song.

Let us regenerate interest in this wonderful little bird and make it one of the crowning jewels of American aviculture. ➔

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