

Breeding Gouldians

Advanced Techniques

by Mike Fidler, England

In the November/December 1996 issue of AFA Watchbird I outline the basic techniques for breeding Gouldians. These aviculturists who specialize in the species will want to employ more advanced techniques which ensure a greater degree of success and get more juveniles onto the peg.

Breeding Age

In the wild, conditions are tough and predation levels high. It would be an old and wise bird that reached much more than two years old, consequently over thousands of years they have developed the compensating factor of maturing early. As a result of this, Gouldians are at their most productive in terms fecundity and fertility between the ages of eight and 24 months. At this age they are also more likely to self-rear successfully and suffer fewer illnesses etc.

In the main, I pair my birds up at between eight and 10 months of age, take three or four rounds of eggs off them and then sell as they finish breeding, so that I am not using up space with molting birds.

As a breeding season lasts approximately eight months this means that I sell many birds which are 16 to 18 months old. Although the purchaser then has to molt them through and give them a four to five month rest, the birds have a proven breeding record and the quality of youngsters they produced can definitively be checked.

As a matter of interest, it is often the more experienced Gouldian breeders that insist on buying proven pairs. Having, perhaps, advocated generally using young birds for breeding, I have no inhibition about using and keeping

older birds if there is a purpose, i.e. a new mutation that you are still trying to fix or a bird with particularly good size, type or color. Cocks, in particular, will remain fertile for years. One particular good size and type of cock I once kept was still filling eggs well into its sixth year. He was not keen on self-rearing then though and genuinely left feeding to his much younger mate.

Breeding Condition

Breeding condition in Gouldians is governed by age and diet, presuming they are not molting, of course.

Breeding in their natural habitat is governed by the availability of the right volume and quality of food and this in turn is governed by rain. The rains may begin around November and last through May. However, this is highly sporadic, which can result in years of plenty—apparently this year is one of those when the rains come early, stay late and are copious in quantity—so this year the breeding season will be long and good as there will be plenty of feeding grasses around for a long period of time.

In other years there may be little or even no rain, consequently there is no or very little new grass and seeds. So Gouldians have evolved to become opportunistic breeders. This means that they will breed when the right quality of food is available to raise nestlings and they will remain dormant when conditions are unsuitable.

As a complete side issue, Gouldians have also developed an internal water retention/recycling system which means they require far less water to survive on than most other estrildids. As a matter of interest, if you keep Gouldians and, say, parrot finches, just measure the difference in the amount

of water the two species consume.

Once the breeding biology is understood, matching it in a captive environment is relatively simple. Whether they are virgin or adult stock, once you can recognize cock from hen, separate them. This prevents pair bonding which can occur before juveniles achieve adult plumage and also prevents cocks driving nesting hens back into breeding condition before you or they are really ready. Preventing premature pair bonding also ensures that once you do pair, they will go down to nest with little delay. But perhaps the biggest reason is that pairs which were heavily pair bonded and then separated more than often go into a molt. In the wild it would be akin to losing a partner to a hawk. The survivor would then go into a quick molt so as to be prepared for finding a new mate in order to continue the breeding process once the molt is over

Stock should be kept on a maintenance diet of seed, grit and water with soft food supplement being given only once a week. They may be given a little green food each day if you wish, but not more than would be consumed in five minutes. Six weeks before you wish to pair up for breeding start giving the soft food supplement ad lib. They will come into breeding condition even faster if you also supply more greens and seeding grasses. This of course simulates the oncoming of the rainy season when all of a sudden the quality of the diet improves dramatically. All tropical and semi-tropical plants react amazingly quick to a bit of rain, and quickly flower and seed. Presumably, like the Gouldians, they have to “make hay while the sun shines” or I suppose, more realistically, complete their life cycle whilst the water flows.

Over the period of six weeks or so the hens beaks will gradually darken whilst the cocks beaks become lighter and more “pearly.” You can recognize when they are in breeding condition as they will be extremely restless, constantly bouncing from perch to perch and off the wires and back. The hens will start calling for the cocks—a loud tweet which can be heard some distance away—and the cocks will be constantly singing and arching their

heads back over their shoulders. Interestingly enough, old time Gouldian breeders used to call that "twirling" and thought it was a disease of the middle ear. Another interesting, not commonly known fact, is that the Gouldian cocks each sing a song different from every other Gouldian, songs which they make up as they go along—although many of the younger cocks will pick up certain phrases of the dominant cock's favorite stanzas and include it in their song. Presumably, they think this will be more attractive to the females. At the end of six weeks most if not all your birds will be ready for breeding.

It is important to pair up immediately they come into breeding condition. If you do not, they will assume the opportunity to breed has passed and recycle by going into a quick molt in preparation for "good times" again. Always remember that Gouldians are opportunistic breeders. This means that in the face of any adversity they will go into a molt in order to be prepared for a snap opportunity to breed. If they were seasonal molters like many other species of they might miss that year's opportunity to breed if the haphazard rains just happened to come along during the seasonal molt.

Pairing up is simple, just put a cock and a hen in a cage, in any order. Sit back and observe quietly. If a cock and hen display to each other and end up head bobbings together, they definitely are a compatible pair and will more than likely lay eggs within three weeks and have a high likelihood of being good self-rearers. Fertility is also usually high in compatible pairs. Failure to display to each other does not necessarily mean that a pair will not breed and will not even be good self-rearers, it just means they are less likely to.

Having paired up the birds, I then give them a start by putting some dried grass in the nest box and then let them finish it off by themselves with coconut fibre. It is important to let them do it themselves and not try to be kind by making their nest for them. It is this nest building procedure which consolidates the pair bond and stimulates the release of the hormones which cause the gonads and ovaries to grow, bring-

ing the pair into final breeding condition. The above procedure is usually infallible and can only go wrong if;

- The birds were too well fed, i.e., too much soft food during the austerity/maintenance stage.
- Not enough exercise, i.e., kept in small cages during the maintenance stage.
- Too old or poor stock, diseased etc.
- Incompatible pairs.

There is a trick that you can use on pairs which will not get down to the job in hand. If after six weeks a pair has not got eggs or at least nest buildings then introduce a spare cock. The competition will activate the original cock and both together will drive the hen into breeding condition. Rather unfairly, both the original cock and hen will then turn on the introduced intruder so be prepared to take him out as soon as he starts to take a battering.

In more than 35 years of Gouldian breeding (I must be getting old) I have never had a hen accept the introduced cock. In a future article I will cover the next phase in the Gouldian breeding cycle.

In the meantime—good luck. ➔

Letter to the Editor

(A hole in the wire equals success)

Concerning the recent Watchbird article by Levin Tilghman on breeding Orange-cheeked Waxbills, I knew a gentleman 15 to 18 years ago who bred Orange-cheeked Waxbills. He worked at a full time job and was unable to provide livefood to his birds during the day. When his Orange-cheeks began hatching he would cut a hole in the cage and allow the parent birds to forage for insects in his yard. He would close the hole a day or so before fledging. He had good success for several years without losing many babies.

Toby Hutchinson

The Whydah Finches:

Birds of Paradise in Small Packages

by Nancy Mindlin, Edison, NJ



Man-**M**ankind's fascination with plumage is ancient. The interest can range from child-like wonder to a greedy kind of self ornamentation. In times past, many bird species with the most impressive plumage were almost exterminated by our "fascination" and now have to be protected. Perhaps on a smaller scale, I feel that the same fate has befallen most whydah finches in aviculture today. Though they are not endangered species, is it any less significant when they are wasted? But I don't mean to be hypocritical...

My own love of whydahs began in a pet shop. I saw a fully plumed male Pin-tail in a large flight. His tiny body size, his sharp colors and, most of all, those four kite-like tail plumes seized my attention. There was no leaving the shop without that bird. Thus began my interest in African finches.