

A Unique Blue-capped Cordon Bleu Experience

by Debra Barbieri, East Northport, N Y

The very beautiful Blue-capped Cordon Bleu Finch *Uraeginthus cyanocephala* has always been my favorite. Four years ago I acquired several pairs with hopes of successfully breeding them. They were my first waxbills. I quickly went to the school of hard knocks and learned the tremendous difference in breeding African finches as opposed to the Australian finches. They all went to nest, they all laid fertile eggs, and they all died – either thrown out or starved. I tried everything I could imagine, talked to all my friends and tried all the usual advice – more privacy, larger cage, fostering, small mealworms, etc., and nothing worked.

My opinion is that if you are going to keep birds, then it is your obligation to meet their needs and give them every possible chance of survival. I looked at these little birds and I knew I never would never want them to starve to death. After three unsuccessful sets of losses and 12 dead hatchlings, I decided to try feeding the babies myself and work my problem out down the road.

Now I know there have been many

heated discussions regarding hand-feeding and imprinting and, in the end, there is no “correct” answer. We must all do what we feel in our hearts. Ultimately, whatever we decide to do doesn’t make us any less professional. Being successful and professional, to me, is dedicating one’s self to preserving one’s flock and keeping the birds alive. We expect to throw a pair of birds together, have them lay eggs, and raise young without incidence. I would like to share with you a recent experience I had – one that I still can’t believe has happened.

My tale begins Christmas day 1996. I picked up yet another cold, starving hatchling, but this time I was prepared. I had already handfed parrots so how hard could a small Cordon Bleu be? Armed with a flat toothpick, I rolled up my sleeves and took my Kaytee Handfeeding Formula out of the freezer. I followed all the correct procedures for feeding a parrot. If they could raise a cockatoo on this stuff, why not a tiny finch? I fed it and it grew. The hardest part for me initially was handling the baby’s tiny size but she grew and became “Blue” – one of the few finches I own that is named.

She is totally tame and will even share your sandwich if you’ll let her. She free-flies daily and is truly a wonderful little bird just packed with personality. She lives in a Hoi cage, which usually houses several young birds for a few days after they are pulled from their parents. This arrangement suits her just fine as long as she can fly and eat the seeds off my husband’s Italian bread. What more could a little bird want?

About two months ago I had an unfortunate experience with another pair of Cordon Bleus. The hen escaped out of the breeding cage and flew straight into a wall and broke her neck instantly. The male went crazy and called pathetically for her for days. When I could no longer stand it, I put him in Blue’s cage just so he wouldn’t be alone.

The next morning, much to my surprise, they were in love. They constructed a nest in a small wicker basket and incubated four eggs. Eleven days later only one hatched and was fed for three days and was tossed. (I slipped it in someone else’s nest). They went right back to nest. On Tuesday, December 8, 1998 the eggs hatched. They took perfect care of these nestlings and everything progressed nicely. I looked in the nest once a day and the babies were packed full of food. This was easy to see due to the angle of the nest opening and the lighting.

Disaster struck on December 13th. While changing the food dishes and loading them up with white worms, meal worms, egg food and sprouts, the male just fell over and died while eating. He wasn’t sick, just keeled over. My first concern was for the babies. I removed the defunct male and observed carefully. Blue was so preoccupied I don’t think she even realized he was gone. She tended to her babies as well, if not better, than any other parent.

On December 16th. Blue really needed a break and wanted to fly so I let her out. She took a few laps around the room and then jumped into a dish of water. She had lost a lot of weight, was dirty, and looked really exhausted.

While she was busy, I decided to see what exactly was going on in the

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nest. I removed the basket from the cage and looked in. I saw several heads but was concerned only because there looked to be so many. I also thought that I would make sure everyone was alive and also to close hand a few if possible. Blue, sitting on my hand, observed happily as I took out one baby at a time. As I removed them she fed them right in my hand. I was in total shock. In the nest and now in a little dish on the table were five very well fed babies. I banded all but the smallest and Blue was right there watching and tending to her young as I banded. When I finished I placed each one carefully back in the nest, Blue jumped inside and I put the nest with Mom and all back in the cage.

If I didn't experience this myself, I would never have believed it could happen. This goes against every story or rule any waxbill breeder has ever told me. It also has taught me that absolutely anything is possible. I learned a long time ago that there is only one rule – expect absolutely nothing that you read or heard as gospel to hold true every time. In short – there are no rules.

This experience changed the way I am going to approach certain species or at least opened my mind to other possibilities. Feeding a Cordon Bleu and raising it to adulthood in my environment has now enabled the bird to flourish, being used to my dietary practices, my housekeeping, and the other various goings-on in my bird room. The element of fear and wild restlessness is now gone. Some might argue that I have ruined the bird, but I think we ravaged them when we took them out of their natural habitat and forced them to live captive anyway.

If handfeeding a bird that would have perished otherwise has enabled me to produce a calm adult who raises her own babies, then wouldn't the same practice work for almost any species that we are having a very tough time getting to parent raise their babies?

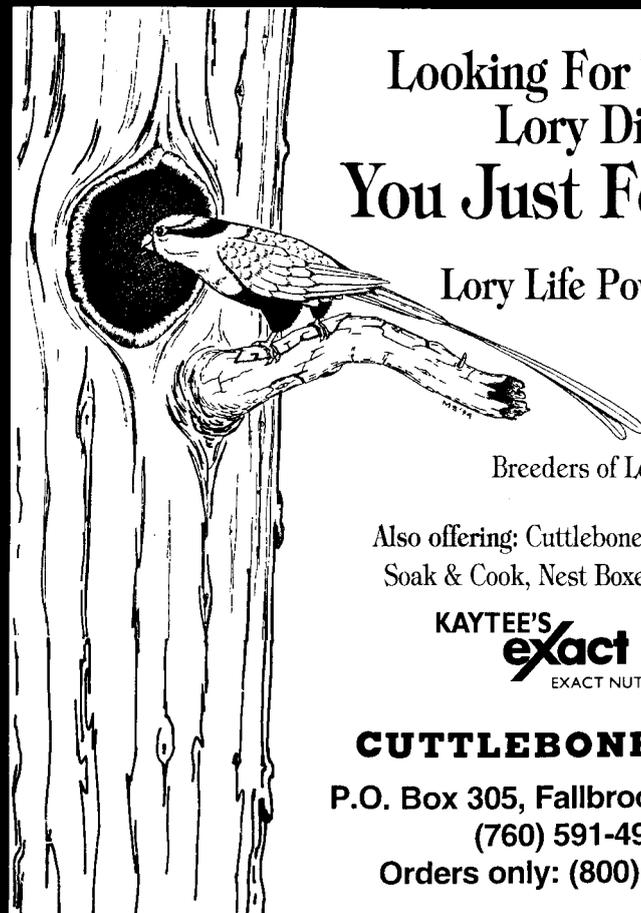
I am going to take careful notes in the future and observe this particular female Cordon Bleu and her subsequent offspring. If the opportunity rises in another species that refuses to parent rear, I will welcome the opportunity to take this under further study.

For those of you who are wondering, I have solved the feeding problem with my other breeding pairs of Cordon Bleus. I attribute this mainly to an endless supply of white worms and equally huge amounts of mealworms. I personally feel that this continuous supply has enabled the success I am now experiencing. I chuckle every time I hear someone say they give 10 or 12 worms a day to any finch – because my experience has certainly proved some need more. In fact, the only time I limit live food to any of my finches (African or Australian) is when they are incubating eggs. Cordon Bleus, when feeding babies consume without exaggeration hundreds of worms daily.

My other pairs of Cordon Bleus are housed in standard 3-foot safeguard cages that they share either with a pair of Painted Finches or a pair of Gouldians. There are artificial Christmas tree branches, wicker baskets, and plenty of private places to construct their own freestanding nests. Nesting materials of choice are a special file folder type

material, coco fiber and sisal rope. They bathe daily. Their diet consists of Turbo eggfood mixed with hard boiled eggs, Bevo Universal Food, meal worms, white worms a combread mixture with chopped fruits and veggies that I prepare, various greens (including romaine, broccoli, kale, green beans, etc), spray millet, Kaytee Fortified finch seed, and sprouted Kaytee Supreme Finch Seed (unfortified). I also use supplements nekton S & E, prime vitamins, Spirulina, a European mineral supplement.

Almost any other endangered animal in captivity is or has been consistently raised by humans in hopes of saving the species. Unfortunately, this includes most birds except finches. Perhaps we need to open our minds to other alternatives for saving and establishing some of the rarer finch waxbill species before it's too late. If anyone has had similar experiences to what I have related here, I welcome the opportunity to hear from you. I will also be keeping further notes and will share them in the future to all who are interested. 



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