

The Lady Gouldian Finch

By Ron Castaner

Finches are among the most popular and active of all caged birds. Their small size, variations of colors and reasonable prices makes them a wonderful addition and companion to anyone's home. The Lady Gouldian finch (*Chloebia gouldiae*) is one of the most popular because of the color and reasonable price.

The Lady Gouldian finch was named by the famous 19th century British ornithologist and artist John Gould, in honor of his wife, a Lithographic technician, who assisted in publishing many of his works. He once said, and I quote. "It was with feelings of the purest affection that I ventured to dedicate this lovely bird to the memory of my late wife, who for many years laboriously assisted me with her pencil, accompanied me to Australia and cheerfully interested herself in all my pursuits".

The Lady Gouldian finch is one of the most vividly colorful birds on earth. Its native habitat is the Northern Region of Australia, from the Kimberly region in the North West of Western Australia to the base of the Cape York Peninsula in Queensland. It lives in open woodlands and grassland. They select open plains with dispersed groups of trees, or the fringes of mangroves and thickets, and tend to always be near water. This species appears to be migratory throughout its range, moving more southerly in the rainy season and reappearing in the northern regions for the dry months.

Lady Gouldian finches are between 5 and 5.5 inches in size. It has a stout parrot like bill. Its two medial tail feathers are long, ending in a point. The coloration of the cock is much more brilliant than that of the hen. The female has all of the colors of the male but they are not as brilliant and are less sharply defined. The male has a noticeably longer center tail feather. The difference between sexes seems to be typical when considering many species of birds, in that the females are less pretentious due to the lackluster or drabness in their coloring. This might be considered a mating related difference, so that the male can more easily attract females. Another interpretation concerning color

variation might be affixed to survival of the brood; the brightly colored male might attract the attention of a potential predator, thus luring it from the nest. The juveniles are also recognizable due to color differences. Their heads, sides and necks are ashy-gray, changing to an olive green on the backs, wings and tail feathers. They have underlying brownish-black feathers, which are fringed in a yellowish tone, and have inner feathers that are a burnished white. The undersurface of their bodies is an ash-brown, paler on chin, middle of the breast and under the tail feathers. The upper portion of the beak is blackish with cream colored bumps, while the lower portion is reddish-white and tipped red. Their legs and feet are light brown, and the eyes are brown. The color variations of the Lady Gouldian finch tend to be its most striking characteristic. There are three distinct color variations among the Lady Gouldian finches in the wild, red-headed; black-headed and yellow-headed. Wild populations of Lady Gouldian finches are comprised of 80% with black heads, 20% with red heads and a small number with yellow heads.

The original wild-caught Lady Gouldian finch had a deserved reputation for being quite delicate but since exportation of Australian finches was banned in 1960, only domestic bred birds are available. They are very strong birds if kept in a clean environment and fed a well balanced diet. The domestic stock now available is much hardier and may even remain in outside aviaries year round in some areas of the country. Lady Gouldian finches are not much more difficult to care and breed than any other finch. Cold or drafty locations should be



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avoided, don't forget they come from a very dry and hot climate, if you keep them outdoors, make sure you acclimate them first, again keep them warm and away from any cold draft.

Diet:

Wild Lady Gouldian finches are not ground feeders and favor foraging from upright grasses. Semi-ripe to ripe grass seeds are a major part of the Lady Gouldian finches' diet. They also eat a variety of insects including beetles, termites, flies, flying ants, and spiders along with their prey right from the web. Domestic bred birds require a good quality finch mix, seeding grass heads and sprouted seeds. Green food, such as endive, dandelion and watercress are very beneficial. When breeding they will require a good quality egg food. Egg binding is sometimes a problem for Lady Gouldian hens, to guard against this the birds should be given a good quality grit mix that includes finely ground oyster shell, crushed sterilized egg shell, or cuttlefish bone.

Breeding behavior:

Lady Gouldian finches are apprehensive birds generally evading populated areas. A relatively quiet bird, the male Lady Gouldian finch has a high-pitched call that cannot be heard over long distances. The song is quite weak, squeaky, and unimpressive. You must be fairly close to the bird or else in a very quiet location in order to hear it at all. They have hisses, clicks and weakened whines for their songs. There is an occasional sharp modification of the normal call when startled. Additionally, there is an intimate call when in the nest that sounds like a foundling's. During the courtship ritual the male commences with beak-wiping, bobbing, showing off his brilliant colors by ruffling his feathers and holding his body and tail erected, first in a rapid up and down movement, then in a jerky fashion with the tail pointing down. He begins to sing while moving his head from side to side. This ritual may be repeated several times. At the same time he expands his chest and fluffs the forehead feathers, you will see him jumping up and down on the perch. The female will often do a bit of beak wiping during the ritual. Much of the courtship takes place on a limb, sometimes followed by copulation in the nest. Both parents brood over the nest during the day, and the female sits on the eggs at night (unless in captivity, then



*A red-headed normal Lady Gouldian finch with other finch species in the author's collection.
Photo by Ron Castaner.*

both are seen brooding during day and night). Additionally, both parents carry out the care of the young. In the wild the Lady Gouldian is a cavity nester, using termite mounds and hollow trees as sites for their nests. The nest tends to be simple with no roof, thin walls and may even be found in tall grasses. The nests are generally near water. They usually breed in the second part of the rainy season, when there is plenty of food such as grass seed and insects. Lady Gouldian finches are extremely social birds. They continue social life even when breeding, and even share hollowed out segments in the same tree. They are often found in flocks of several hundred.

Domestic Lady Gouldian finches breed equally well in individual cages or small colonies, preferring to

build their nests in wooden nest boxes or wicker basket. They are noted bad nest builders, some don't do any nest building at all, normally I start the nest building for them, giving them some burlap, coco fiber or dry grass and let them finish it.

Pairs should never be put in a breeding program unless they are in full breeding condition. Cocks birds, when ready for breeding have an almost white beak, with only the tip colored. A cock that is eager to nest will also be seen singing regularly and calling incessantly to the hen. Hens in breeding condition usually have an almost black beak; more reliable sign is when the hen becomes heavy with pronounced rise to the rump and with the tail held in a downward position.

Newly hatched Lady Gouldian chicks have no down and are flesh colored. Their eyes open at between 7 and 10 days and they have their set of juvenile feathers at around 22 days. They leave the nest at four to five weeks. About a week after the chicks have left the nest, the nest box should be removed to prevent the parents from going back to nest again before the young have weaned. If the cage is cleaned thoroughly and the nest box is put back at the moment the chicks are removed, the adults will go back to nest almost immediately. Left too long with out the nest box, the breeding pair may go into a molt.

Some Lady Gouldian finches are not good parents. They should be encouraged to raise their own chicks if at all possible. I have found them to be good parents if we give them the time to gain experience. If I am not familiar with the parenting skills of a particular pair of Lady Gouldian finches, I will foster some of their eggs with society finches. If they have the normal clutch of four or five eggs, I will split them with the society finches. This will ensure at least some hatching and the Lady Gouldian finches will get the experience they need. The society finches will incubate the Lady Gouldian's eggs, hatch them and raise them to full maturity. Imprinting does not appear to be a problem, providing young Lady Gouldian finches are separated from society finches at an early age.

If you decide to breed this wonderful and charming bird there are a few things you need to understand when it comes to color. The three basic head colors (red, black, and yellow) can also carry a hidden gene that when pairing the bird to other of the simi-



*Normal red-headed Lady Gouldian Finch
Photo by Matt Schmit.*

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lar genetic make-up can produce young of a different head color. An example of this is when two red-headed birds produce a black-headed or a yellow-headed young. In recent years many domestic color mutations have become available including, White-breasted, Yellow-bodied, Blue-bodied, Lilac-breasted and almost any combination of the above.

In 1995 the Lady Gouldian finch, known as “Jewel Finches” by North Queensland cattle graziers, was formally classified as an endangered species in Australia. It is sad to say that the Lady Gouldian finch, which once were a feature of the North Australia Savanna landscape, are now largely absent, the cause of this decline is not known, my own educated guess would be to say the air sackmites played a vital role in the decline. The air sack mites have affected the finches in Australia for many years, but also the loss of their habitat, coupled with disease and not enough bushfires have made quite an impact. Lady Gouldian finches are now down to fewer than 2,500 birds in the wild.

In March 2002, 20 juvenile Lady Gouldian finches were released into the wild at the Mareeba Tropical Savanna and Wetland Reserve, north-east Queensland, Australia, an area where they died out in the 1960s. The Mareeba Wetland Foundation has collaborated with the Queensland Parks and

Wildlife Service, James Cook University, and local amateur aviculturists to source, breed and monitor a local provenance, genetically variable population of finches for release on the reserve. Coupled with this, the Foundation will reintroduce a sustainable fire regime, similar to that previously used by the indigenous Muluridji people for centuries. ♦



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White-breasted yellow-bodied orange-headed Lady Gouldian Finch. Photo by Ron Castaner