

Cage breeding the Red-cheeked Cordon Bleu

(or how I raised Cordon Bleus in spite of myself!)

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When breeding wild species of birds, there are certain procedures that, if followed, will give a better chance of success. Probably the most important are to know the natural environment and diet of the birds.

The Red-cheeked Cordon Bleu (*Uraeginthus bengalus*) is truly a bird of the African tropics. Its natural distribution is from Senegal on the west coast, eastwards to Ethiopia and then south down as far as Zambia. It is found inhabiting semi-arid thorn scrub and cultivated areas near villages. It may be found in very arid country if there is surface water available. The diet is varied but the young are usually fed on green seeds and termites.

Now that we have covered their natural environment, let's bring the birds into captivity and see what we have learned from this limited information. We can make the following assumptions: they are particularly susceptible to low temperatures and damp, requiring careful acclimation before they become tough and resilient to our northern hemisphere weather. Even when acclimatized they should not be exposed to temperatures below 60°F for any prolonged period of time. They do not need a dense forest and probably feel happier with just a little cover that will afford them some privacy and security. Being found near villages they are not particularly shy of human beings. The diet fed to the young would indicate that this species breeds after the rainy season.

This is one of the most popular of all African waxbills and a description is probably not necessary. However, in case there are any "parrot people" who are thinking of converting, the description is as follows: four and three quarter inches long; bill silvery pink edged with black; forehead, neck, back and wings soft reddish brown; face, throat, flanks and tail sky-blue; lower breast and abdomen pinkish buff; cheek patch crimson;

legs and feet horn colored. The hen differs from the male in having the blue areas paler and less extensive and she totally lacks the cheek patch.

Their diet in captivity should include a selection of mixed millets with the addition of small canary seed and some of the "high fat" seeds (e.g. maw, niger, etc.). Green seeding grasses are always popular and should be offered as often as possible. Millet sprays and soaked seed are valuable additions and fresh corn, greenfood, and various fruits are often appreciated. Livefood is essential to keep waxbills fit, mealworms and their pupae are ideal and may be varied with fruit flies, ants, waxmoth larva, etc. I also offer a small dish con-

taining grit; crushed, baked eggshells and shaved cuttlebone. When breeding the birds will also accept a fine grade insectivorous food and eggfood. On alternate days I sprinkle a good vitamin/mineral supplement (I use Supergreen) or nectar powder on the softfood.

I have bred this species regularly for three or four years but it is the start of the 1992 breeding season about which I specifically want to give details. If nothing else, it proves that if birds are ready to breed they will raise their family despite any assistance that man attempts to give!

The birds in question are a wild caught pair that I "rescued" from a local pet store. They have been in captivity for about four years. This pair is housed in a double breeding cage 48" x 15" x 18" high. Small cedar boughs were attached inside the wire to give some privacy. A wicker nest was filled to just below the opening with fine hay and the birds were given sisal teasings (cut in two inched lengths from a ball of sisal string) to finish the nest construction.

The nest was completed in a week and one bird remained in the nest at

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all times, even though no eggs had been laid. (I wonder if this is how they stop other birds from stealing their nest in the wild?) Four or five days later the first egg was laid and no further nest checks were made. After two weeks' incubation, the birds stopped sitting and the three small white eggs proved to be infertile. The eggs were removed and as the male was already whistling his little display song I knew that it would not be long before a new clutch came along.

About a week later the hen laid the first of four eggs. They usually start incubating after the third egg so I checked for fertility after ten days and all the eggs were infertile again! (The reason for this subsequently appears to be that the perches were too thick and the hen did not have a firm enough grip to be bred successfully.)

I do not like taking more than two or three nests in a year so I decided to remove the birds to a small, wire holding cage measuring 36" x 15" x 18" high. I would try breeding them later in the year in an outside aviary.

After a week, the hen laid an egg in the seed pot. I decided that if she was going to lay eggs anyway I should give her a nest and let her incubate

for two weeks, (at least she would stop laying eggs for that period). I put a wooden nest box in the top corner of the cage and threw some sisal on the cage floor. Within four hours the male had finished the nest. Four eggs were laid and both birds shared the incubation during the day. At night they would both sleep at the other end of the cage! Once I noticed this I moved the nest box to the other end and the birds shared incubation during the day. At night the hen would incubate while the male slept on top of the nest box.

As the previous two nests had been infertile and the eggs had not been incubated at night for the first couple of days I was not expecting them to be any good. After ten days I checked the eggs, one was infertile while the others were good. I went to return the three good eggs to the nest but dropped one of them on the cage floor and it broke. (I had never dropped one of the infertile eggs!) The adults returned to the nest and after an incubation period of 13 days both eggs hatched.

At this point I do have to state that all waxbills are liable to desert their eggs or young if the nest is inspected at all. This pair are exceptional and

cannot be considered "normal." If you are reading this article to gain knowledge of this particular species the advice has to be "do not interfere with the birds or inspect the nest."

The parents were fed egg food and insectivorous food as stated earlier. The only live food offered was mealworms. The birds preferred the small, soft skinned ones and chewed off the heads and appeared to "suck out" the flesh.

After seven days, the chicks had more than doubled in size and the pin feathers on the wings and tails started to appear. It is at this stage that most nests are lost as insufficient rearing food is offered. The two young were banded at ten days (again the advice is "do not ring the babies unless you are sure that the adults will not take exception to your interference"). I checked the nest again after two days to make sure the rings were still on.

Eighteen days after they hatched the two chicks fledged, or should I say almost fledged. The larger chick could stand up and hop around the cage floor while the smaller one could hardly stand and spent most of the day laying on the bottom of the cage. It appeared that this smaller

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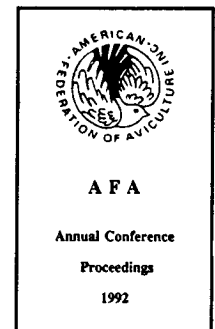
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chick had fledged a couple of days early. I decided to put the chick back in the nest and retire to a safe distance and watch. After about two minutes the chick did a very graceful "nosedive" down to the cage floor and joined its sibling. For three days the chicks hopped around but did not fly. They were growing well and had almost doubled in size. After five days they were both flying around and begging constantly for food.

When I have bred this species in previous years the young have always been feeding themselves within a week and have been separated from their parents at two weeks. However, these two had different ideas.

After eight days the hen started laying again and the adults settled down to incubate four eggs. The fledged young were still begging for food at 19 days old and the new nest was due to hatch in two days! I do not foster any young. In fact, I do not own any Society Finches at the moment. This is a personal choice as I have not found any foster parent to be as good as the natural ones. Anyway, the eggs hatched after 13 days and the parents started to feed them. The fledged chicks were not heard to beg for food from the day that the second clutch hatched. I was concerned that the parents may stop feeding the young chicks so after two days I decided to move the older chicks into a cage with other recently independent chicks.

I checked them later that evening and was horrified to find one chick dead on the floor and the other one huddled up against it. I realized that these chicks were still dependent on their parents, even though they were not heard to beg for food. I returned the remaining chick to the parents and the male proceeded to feed her. (Baby Cordon Bleus can be sexed soon after they leave the nest as the males have blue flanks and the females have greyish brown flanks.)

I am usually guilty of interfering too much with all the birds I breed, my wife gets quite upset when I give the birds a nest box and then check after four hours to see how many eggs they have laid! However, the birds get used to being inspected every day or two and it does give me a chance to intervene if there are any mishaps.

In conclusion, you can see why the alternative title should be "How I raised Cordon Bleus in spite of myself"! ●

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