

# Mixed Species Aviary Breeding

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When I first started breeding birds, I built typical aviaries, rectangular in shape, perches at each end, and one pair of birds per flight. While this is still the best method for commercial and/or large scale bird breeding operations for the hobbyist breeder, I have found that mixed species aviaries not only are as productive as single species flights (and in many cases more so), but they are infinitely more interesting to watch and enjoy, and I believe more "stimulating" for the birds. Combine this with a planted flight and you can bring the hobby of bird breeding and bird watching together in one! One problem most bird breeders eventually end up with is not enough space to build all the aviaries or cages they need. Mixed species aviaries is one solution to this by putting several pairs of birds in the same flight. This can only be done as long as the aviculturist practices the first cardinal rule of bird keeping, "using common sense and close observation"!

I have found over the years many books, magazine articles and conversations with "bird people" stating emphatically that you cannot keep this species with that species or more than two of this kind of bird in the same aviary. Sometimes they were

right but, just as often, I have found them to be wrong. Common sense and close observation are the keys in mixing species! Also, if possible, I believe a planted flight helps as it distracts visually so that birds are not staring at each other across the length of the aviary where the usual configuration is one perch at each end.

I know some of you are saying that you can't put birds such as Scarlet-chested Parakeets in a planted flight because they chew the leaves off everything (I am sure central Australia was a rainforest before Scarlet-chesteds arrived and turned it into a desert), but I have found that by trying different plants and trees there are some they won't destroy.

Also, I use some fast growing plants such as the cape honeysuckle. The birds like to chew on it and I feel it provides them more natural environment and therefore more stimulus to breed. For the hookbills, chewing on leaves and branches is a natural activity and I believe utilizing live plants has nutritional as well as psychological benefits.

Let me share several examples of birds which many past authors have stated emphatically "cannot be kept with any other species" but which I have found will live and breed to-

gether, of which I am sure there are many more. Two species of birds that virtually all references say are very aggressive and should not be put in with other birds or with their own kind except in pairs are the Australian Hooded Parakeet and the Blood (or Crimson) Finch, also from Australia and New Guinea. Often it appears the authors are repeating what they have heard or read and have never tried to verify the truth of these rumors but take them as "gospel" and pass them along.

I currently have three breeding pairs of Crimson Finches (white-bellied), one pair of which has been in a communal aviary for almost one year. One pair is in with a colony of Lady Gouldians, and the third pair is in an aviary with various *neophemas* and parrot finches.

The communal aviary is 12' x 12' x 8' high, planted with a ficus tree, bottle-brush and cape honeysuckle. The following birds are currently residing in this flight: one pair each of Blue Cap Waxbills, Peter's Twinspots, Yellow Turquoisines, Hooded Parakeets and Rosey Bourke's, three pairs of Lady Gouldians, and one pair of Crimson Finch. Young were raised from all pairs in this flight with the exception of Peter's Twinspots which were obtained after the breeding season. As of this writing, the Hoodeds fledged five young three weeks ago and the Lady Gouldians are currently fledging babies. As I write this article, the Blood Finch are going to nest with the male picking the molted small feathers from the Rosey Bourke's off the wire to line the nest. Their nest is less than two feet away from the nest where the Blue Caps nested and never has there been a fight.

The only aggression ever seen is when I put eggshells in for the birds. The female Blood Finch will try and keep all the other birds away from them while she eats, but since there are so many, while she chases one the others eat and, in fact, she probably ends up with the least of anyone. The pair of Crimson Finches sharing an aviary with a colony of Lady Gouldians has never shown any aggression, yet the literature states you cannot keep them with any birds that have red on them! There are Red-headed Lady Gouldians as well as Red-headed Parrot Finches in with them! The point of this is, if I believed

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everything I read I never would have put them with other birds and would have had to use separate housing for them unnecessarily. While I cannot attribute the breeding success in this aviary to a particular fact, this communal aviary which houses the Rosey Bourke's pair and the Yellow Turquoise pair in this mixed flight have, for the last two consecutive years, been my most productive pairs, much more so than the ones I have that are in flights of their own. Whether this is caused by the stimulus of other birds in the flight I don't know. I am not saying there are never any skirmishes, but never anything serious. More like mock battles to show "this is my branch."

Certainly a key factor in downgrading the risk of aggression is the size of the enclosure! A Crimson Finch that would attack a Gouldian in a 4' long cage would ignore him in a 10' long aviary. Also, multiple species in a flight distract an aggressive bird from concentrating his attack on the single occupant of an enclosure. Another example is the Scarlet-chested Parakeet. One pair to a flight is the rule, because when the breeding season starts, the males start chasing each other. However, when I put two pairs in an aviary larger than 10' long by 6' wide, this was significantly reduced and each pair successfully nested. There was also a pair of Blue-capped Waxbills, several pairs of Lady Gouldians, and a pair of Crimson Finches in this aviary.

In my opinion, the Hooded Parakeet is one of the most beautiful of all the parakeets! However, the limited information available on them, most of which is fairly dated, indicated that they are very aggressive and cannot be kept with any other birds. I now have Hoodeds to the third generation and have from the start kept them with not only finches but also with the *Neophema* parakeets such as the Scarlet-chested and Bourke's.

What is true is that both the Hoodeds and the Crimson Finch cannot be kept with their own kind once they mature and pair off. They definitely are aggressive then. That may be where the historical data on their aggressiveness comes from. In my experience, they are only aggressive to their own kind or closely related species. (I would not put Hoodeds with Redrumps or Many-colored Para-

keets as these are too closely related.) Certainly not all combinations you try will work. I tried the African Fire Finch with the Crimson Finch and I had to remove them immediately. This was a case where there was immediate aggressive behavior. But when I tried putting two pairs of the Red-winged Pytilias in, there was no problem even though I had anticipated it because the Pytilia males have a red cheek area similar to the Crimson Finches.

During the week of Christmas, I had a pair of Hoodeds fledge five young in the same flight, at the same time, as two pairs of Lady Gouldians fledged babies and many times you would see one of the parents feeding a young Hooded on the same branch as a Gouldian was feeding its youngster.

So again, it is important to observe the birds. Don't ever release a new group or introduce new birds without keen observation. Try different groupings to see what works for you. I have found these multiple species aviaries to be not only productive but also much more interesting for us to view and enjoy. I know the birds enjoy it much more also.

One added note to setting up these "mixed species" flights. In each of these aviaries we have a standard size "wild bird" bird bath, the cement type you can usually buy at nurseries. Literally every bird in these flights take baths every day! What I find very amazing is that in winter time here in southern California, where our night time temperatures will go to 40 degrees, you will see the various African finches, in particular, taking baths and really soaking themselves at 8:00 a.m. in the morning when that water is really cold! Once a week I pour a cup of bleach into the baths, wait 10 minutes and spray it out with the hose, and it will remove any algae that has built up. We also have water misters set up in the hanging plants to water them. These are attached to 1/4" black tubing. All the birds, from the Hoodeds on down to the smallest finches, will grab onto these lines and swing from them (and pull them out of the hanging plants). It is very surprising how the birds like to hang from these vertically hanging hoses, but they all do it and it gives them another activity to engage in.

Try the mixed flights. I promise, you will enjoy them almost as much as your birds. ●

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