

Pin-tailed Parrot Finches

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When most of us decide to add new species to our collections, we start by looking at our accommodation and the species currently under our care. Once the decision has been made, and the birds have been located, we find all the information we can about our future wards from books, magazines etc. Armed with all this literary knowledge we feel quite confident and eagerly await the arrival of the birds. After all we have the benefit of all those experts, what could possibly go wrong?

I found myself in this situation last year when I was awaiting a pair of Pin-tailed Parrot Finches. I had previously kept them in my teen years, but in those days the birds were so cheap that nobody seriously tried to breed them. Anything I had learned about them had been filed in my subconsciousness and appeared to be irretrievable. I turned to my collection of books and eagerly read up on the birds. After reading ten books and several magazine articles, I can honestly say that the basic knowledge I had of these birds had changed — to utter confusion!

One book advises “do not feed them rice - it leads to death”, while another states “rice is included in the diets offered by most successful

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breeders." Advice on breeding is equally erratic varying from "rearing is usually accomplished without difficulty" to "much care and trouble are needed to rear them successfully." Now I realize that individual birds vary considerably, and allowances should be made for that, but some of this information available is very contradictory. Staying true to form, I have decided to add to the confusion by offering one further set of experiences.

First, let's get some background information on the species. The Pin-tailed Parrot Finch *Erythrura prasina*, often called the Pin-tailed Nonpariel, has a rather scattered range that includes Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Sumatra, Java and Borneo. It is a lowland species (usually below 5,000 feet) occurring in bamboo thickets and along forest edges. They have reached plague proportions over some of their range where they are often found feeding in the rice plantations.

The male Pin-tail is one of the most beautiful members of the genus. The nominate species has a bright cobalt blue forehead, face and throat; his upper parts are a rich grass green; upper breast and flanks are straw colored; breast, belly, rump and tail are scarlet; the bill is black while the legs are flesh colored. The female has more subdued coloring and lacks the blue face mask and the red breast and belly. There is one subspecies from Borneo (*E. prasina coelica*) which is more colorful with the blue extending into the breast.

My birds arrived in good condition and settled in quickly. They were housed in a breeding cage 48 x 15 x 18 inches high and their diet consisted of plain canary, oats and mixed millets with small amounts of hulled sunflower, safflower, hemp and mung-beans added. When the diet is offered dry, the mixed millets are usually ignored, but when it is soaked for a day or so all the seeds are readily taken. They are also offered fresh corn and soaked brown rice on a daily basis (against the advice of some of the experts). Livefood was offered but it was always ignored.

After a month the male was observed courting the female. His display involved perching next to his mate and hopping sideways towards her, his tail turned in her direction at

an angle of 90 degrees. This was followed by a crackling song (typical of the parrot finches) and a rhythmic little dance that soon had his whole body shaking.

A nest box 5 x 5 x 5 inches with a half open front was added and hay, sisal teasings and coconut fibre were offered as nesting material. The birds filled the box with coconut fibre, closing in the front and building an entrance tunnel about three inches long.

The male continued to display and both birds would retire to the nest box where, presumably, copulation took place. After several days the first of five eggs appeared. Incubation started after the clutch was complete with both birds sharing the duties during the day. At night both birds would sleep on the nest but I do not know if the incubation duties were shared.

After 13 days two eggs hatched, followed the next day by a third. The remaining two eggs were infertile. Young parrot finches possess four reflective papillae at the junction of their mandibles. These aid the parents in finding the chicks in the nest and are said to be reflective. When the chicks beg to be fed the four papillae open into a square and the parent knows where to put the food. In most species the papillae range in color from turquoise to cobalt but in this species they are silvery white.

On day 5, the smaller chick was found dead in the nest and was removed. The remaining chicks were growing well and were extremely active. On day 9, I was working near the cage and heard a "thump". I looked into the cage and saw one of the chicks - still blind, crawling across the floor. I returned it to the nest and noticed that both chicks were cold to the touch. The temperature in the birdroom was about 65°F, so I raised it to 80°F. During the next 24 hours that same chick was returned to the nest three times!

On day 11 the adventurous chick was found dead in the nest; its crop was full of food. The remaining chick was well fed but was still cold to the touch. I realized that the parents had stopped brooding the chicks and that some drastic action was needed if the last chick was to survive. (For a brief second I regretted not having any Society Finches to use as foster parents — but then common sense

prevailed!)

I attached a heating pad to the bottom of the nest box, set it on high and brought the temperature in the nest up to 90°F. This was maintained until the chick was over three weeks old. The parents continued to feed the chick but did not brood it anymore during the day; the hen always slept in the nest at night. The chick was banded at 13 days and fledged after 26 days. It was raised on the soaked seeds mentioned earlier with the addition of chickweed, dandelion etc. Once again, livefood was always ignored.

The day after the chick fledged, the first of five eggs was laid in the second clutch. After 13 days incubation, two eggs hatched. I had left the heating pad in place so that I could just switch it on after seven or eight days and, thereby, avoid losing either of the chicks. Upon entering the bird room on day 3, it was noticed that both parents were off the nest — they had already stopped brooding! One chick was dead (with food in its crop) and the other was very cold so the heat pad was used once again.

On day 15 the bird was banded and its eyes opened. On day 17 a very surprising thing happened; the hen laid the first egg of the third clutch. It is no wonder that these birds are a pest in the wild if they have a clutch of eggs and a clutch of chicks on the go at the same time!

The chick fledged in 26 days and was completely ignored by the first round chick that was still being housed with the parents. He was almost 2-1/2 months old and was just starting to show the blue face and red breast of a young cock bird. It will be interesting to see if any of the third round hatch. (At the time of writing it appears that two eggs are fertile).

In conclusion, I am surprised at how easily these birds went to nest, because they are flocking birds. I had assumed that I would need several pairs housed together but it appears that so long as they are within earshot of other parrot finches their flock requirements are satisfied. (I keep some pairs of Blue-faced Parrot Finches in the same room). I am a little concerned at the low rate of fertility (between 40 and 60 percent) but now I know they will raise their own young, I can start experimenting with the diet to see if fertility can be improved. ➔