



In the Jan/Feb 1996 Watchbird, Nancy Bent's excellent article on fledging cages (page 20) is illustrated with two photos. Bent was erroneously credited as the photographer. The photos were actually taken by Mike Greer, the official zoo photographer, who spent hours waiting for just the right shots. Good shots, Mike, and apologies for the error.



Estrildid Finches
in Aviculture...

The Purple Grenadier

Uraeginthus ianthinogaster

by Stash and Carol Anne Buckley
Magnolia, New Jersey

Of the three types of *Uraeginthus*, the Purple Grenadier is the second which we will be discussing in this column. The first type which we covered was the Red-cheeked Cordonbleu *Uraeginthus bengalus*, *AFA Watchbird*, Vol. XXII, No. 4 - July/August 1995, which was an example of the Cordonbleu waxbill portion of this genus, the others of course being the Blue-capped *Uraeginthus cyanocephala* and the Blue-breasted *Uraeginthus angolensis* Cordonbleus. Without a

doubt, Purple Grenadiers are more difficult to propagate than Cordonbleus, but not quite as difficult as Violet-ears *Uraeginthus granatina*, the remaining member of this group. Grenadiers are the most intelligent of the genus and indeed one of the most intelligent of all estrildids. For this reason, they are among our favorites. They become very attuned to the keeper's feeding schedule, plastering themselves on the side of their cage while you distribute live food to other birds and letting you

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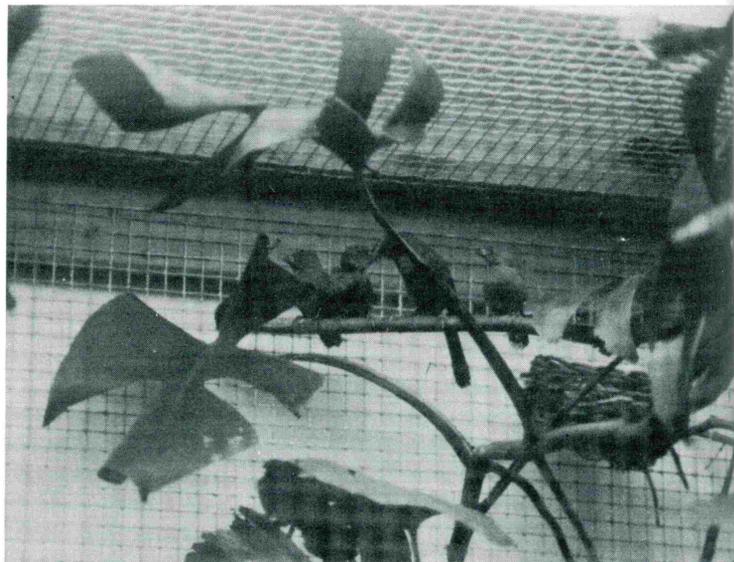
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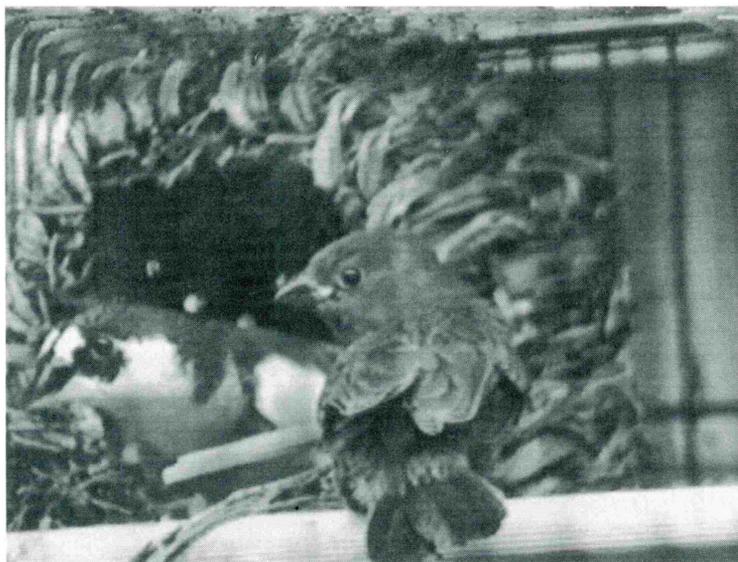
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Hen Purple Grenadier (left) preening cock (right). Notice the eye rings. The hen's is a pale bluish-white, while the cock's is a lovely purple. The feathers in this eye ring are the first to come in during the adult molt, making sexing of young Grenadiers easy.



An ideal set-up for parent-rearing Purple Grenadiers. Notice the cock feeding three fledged juveniles. The nest was in the upper right-hand corner, hidden by a philodendron leaf.



know in no uncertain terms with their staccato chatter that you need to serve them theirs now. Juveniles of this species are particularly endearing and will follow you around the birdroom (if allowed to fly free), perched on your shoulder with head cocked to one side, waiting for you to give them a treat. In our experience, nothing buys their loyalty like mealworms. However, once their adult molt sets in, they begin to lose their innocent trust in their keeper and

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Recently fledged juvenile Purple Grenadier. These birds are easily fostered, provided Societies are properly conditioned and given an adequate eggfood (See page 41 of our Red-cheeked Cordon-bleu article in the July-August 1995 issue of Watchbird).

acquire true Grenadier behavior patterns. This is not a species for beginners. In fact, we can find no country in the world where this species is on its way to becoming established in aviculture. Along with the heartaches of keeping this species, we believe you will find true joy in its delights.

This is a large-bodied bird and best housed in a good-sized flight. We recommend a minimum of 4 ft. long x 2 ft. wide x 3 ft. high. Being an African dry grassland species, you would expect that this bird would do better in a dry envi-

ronment, but our best breeding results were obtained in our indoor tropical bird-room. These birds did not suffer the afflictions of eye problems and respiratory distress which so often occurs with dry grassland species kept in such an environment, but actually bred very well and stayed in good health. Indeed, the constant high humidity appears to be a great stimulus in encouraging these birds to breed. A four-foot shop light fixture with two vita-lite tubes fits quite conveniently on top of this size flight, and this is the kind of lighting we recommend. If you wish to place live plants in this flight, we would suggest a split-leaf philodendron (there are many varieties). This is essentially a vine, and should be trained along the back and sides of the flight to create a dramatic effect, but positioned so as not to restrict flight space. Although philodendrons are reportedly poisonous to birds, our birds have eaten the edges of mature leaves and have destroyed growth spikes, with no ill effects. Grassy tussocks can be strategically placed in corners, but in our experience these locations were rejected in favor of greener sites. Large wicker baskets should be placed under the philodendron leaves high in the flight so that the leaves provide a measure of security in the form of cover. These birds are not particularly acrobatic, so remember to place an access perch a few inches away and down from the nest opening. If you can't wait for your philodendrons to grow, weeping figs *ficus benjamina* are a good alternative, since stems and branches can be easily trained to suit your nesting requirements. If you're not particularly good with live plants, silk foliage is a good alternative and will work equally well.

This species is far more aggressive than the Red-cheeked Cordonbleu, so this behavioral trait must be taken into consideration first for successful breeding. This is definitely a one pair per flight species. If you keep more than one pair in the same room, as pairs come into breeding, cocks will constantly threaten their neighbors and, in frustration will kill their hens. In the wild, this is a solitary bird and cocks with breeding desires will not tolerate others in their territory, chasing them away. So, too, with birds in captive situations, only with more disastrous results. A displaying cock, trying to seduce a hen in a confined space, such as a cage (no matter

how large), will act as a catalyst to trigger an aggressive reaction in any Grenadier cage within earshot where a bonded, nest-building cock will try to get to the offender to drive him off. In frustration, he will take out his aggression on his hen. This can and often does lead to her death. For this reason, Grenadiers are best housed *one pair per room*. This may sound a bit extreme, but we feel it is necessary if one is going to generation breed these birds and not con-

tinually start at point zero. In fact, when we first started working with this species we thought we could keep our first two pairs in separate cages next to each other with a bath towel hung between them so they couldn't see each other. This was not good enough. The cocks soon discovered, or made a small hole in the towel which they enlarged so they could see each other and then tried to attack each other through the hardware cloth of their

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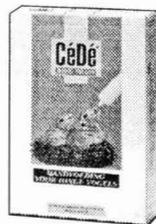


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cages. Our friend, Levin Tilghman, who is beginning to work with this species, is finding their territoriality overwhelming and is already planning to separate his pairs to different rooms. Fortunately, in a captive state and maybe in the wild, Purple Grenadiers will mate for life. It is interesting to note that if one arbitrarily puts a cock and hen together, within a month they will either be preening each other to strengthen pair bonds or ignoring each other, with perhaps a small dash of aggression, particularly around the livefood dish. It appears these birds are far more selective about their mates than the average estrildid. If they don't bond within a month, then chances are they will not bond at all. Try for a different pairing.

This bird is also graced with the most beautiful song of all the *Uraeginthus* species. The cock's song is quite intricate and is actually more softbill-like. Although the Violet-ear's song is very similar, it is much softer and does not have much carrying power. The song of the Purple Grenadier is a beautiful whistle of flute-like notes, interspersed with clicks which, curiously enough, is reminiscent of the pre-mounting song of the Crimson Seedcracker *Pyrenestes sanguineus*. The hen Grenadier also sings, but her song is not as flamboyant as the cock's.

Don't hesitate to mist these birds, for as in most finches, it is a powerful breeding stimulus. With the addition of more livefood, your birds should prepare to nest-build. Like most estrildids, Grenadiers are opportunists when it comes to nesting materials, so a handful of cut burlap strands and dried grasses should be sufficient. We cannot recollect any of our Grenadiers ever building a free-standing nest, but consistently chose a large wicker finch basket in which to build. Sometimes a cock will sit in the nest for days on end seemingly incubating eggs. However, upon examination the nest proved to be empty. We do not fully understand this behavior, but it seems to be a testing period, proving to the hen that the site is free from predators. When cock and hen both start sitting, then you can presume that the hen has laid.

Clutch size appears to be small, averaging 3 to 4 eggs. Hatchlings have a very dark purple skin with bright blue gape tubercles and exhibit an exaggerated back and forth head-swing begging motion. This begging posture makes this species very difficult to

handfeed and, indeed, many Society finches find it difficult to accept this bird's chicks. If you wish to foster this species, we would advise using a young pair of Societies which has only raised one clutch of their own – to prove their nurturing abilities – the second clutch being the Purple Grenadier eggs. If they fail the first time, try them again immediately upon recycling, for they will be more likely to accept them the second time around. We would advise that you start with good Society stock. Try to obtain some of the dark chocolate "selves" recently imported from Europe, bred expressly for their fostering abilities. Although the juvenile Purple Grenadiers are very insectivorous, they are easily reared on a good standard eggfood recipe supplied to the Societies.

If you plan on parent-rearing, this is a tricky procedure at best. We have successfully parent-reared these birds on mealworms and eggfood as the only sources of protein. Obtain mini-mealworms (about ¼ to ½ in. in length) and choose only the newly molted ones (which will appear white) to offer to the parents. These should be introduced to the birds before the eggs hatch, so they will become accustomed to them. We feel that our birds accepted these white mealworms, perceiving them as some sort of strange termite – a food that they are undoubtedly very familiar with in their homeland. It would also be wise to offer them other livefood such as waxworms and white-worms in separate dishes. If you're fortunate enough to have a constant supply of termites and brave enough to bring them into your house, then by all means try them. We do not ration mealworms when chicks are present, and offer the parents hundreds every few hours, from lights-on (about 7 AM) until lights-out (about 10 PM). Upon fledging, we would advise you to take great care when servicing these birds. This is the only estrildid finch that ever attacked us in defending its young. Levin Tilghman has also noticed this hostility while one of his pairs was nest-building. Obviously, they are too small to inflict injury upon an arm reaching for a dish, but the experience can be quite startling.

Juvenile Purple Grenadiers may be left with their parents until weaning, but you must remove them before they begin the adult molt. Failure to do so may cause the cock to kill a perceived rival – his own son or sons. Juveniles

begin their molt around the head, so it becomes an easy matter to sex them. Clutch-mates may be safely kept together on their own until the breeding urge hits. If these juveniles are fed on eggfood as a protein source, they will be more inclined to raise their own chicks without livefood, thereby beginning the domestication process. However, there is very little chance of having their aggressive behavior being bred out, so still be careful to observe proper guidelines when introducing domestics for breeding.

There is a theory that temperature may affect the sexes of the developing embryos – more females being produced at warmer temperatures, more males at cooler temperatures. In our experience with the Purple Grenadiers, this appears to be true. When we kept our birdroom very warm (thermostatically controlled to not drop below 86°F, even at night), we produced only hen offspring – at least seven in a row, no cocks. When we lowered the birdroom temperature to about 80°F, we started to get a mixture of cocks and hens. It would be interesting to know if others have experienced this phenomenon.

In our opinion, the Purple Grenadier is the most desirable of all the *Uraeginthus* species. Many people prefer the Violet-ears, but we found them to be lethargic, lacking in intelligence and interest in comparison with the Grenadiers. Although the Violet-ears are, without doubt, very attractive, we believe the less formal but every bit as colorful markings of the Purple Grenadiers to be somehow more natural and vibrant. Physical beauty, personality, intelligence – the Purple Grenadier has much to offer the serious aviculturist. There are no known mutations of this species, either in captivity or in the wild. Not too many years ago this bird wholesaled for \$125 a pair, but now goes for \$250. Doubtless, the price will continue to escalate until the end of importation.

We know of a few breeders making a serious effort to establish the Purple Grenadier. However, it will take more than a few individuals to establish a species. For those of you who feel up to the challenge, we urge you to take up this delightful bird and add to the limited number of people who are trying to establish domestic strains before it is too late. The disappearance of the Purple Grenadier in aviculture would indeed be a regrettable loss. ➤