



Estrildid Finches in Aviculture...

The Crimson-winged Aurora

(*Pytilia phoenicoptera*)

by Stash Buckley and Carol Anne Buckley
Magnolia, New Jersey

We have been studying the behavior and breeding of estrildid finches for approximately eight years now and have kept many rare and unusual species. But when we consider its elegant beauty, ease of breeding, and charming personality, we know the Crimson-winged Aurora must be one of our favorite finches. Although not as flashy as some of the other African estrildids, this is more than compensated for by its many positive attributes. Since it achieved its CITES III status in 1976, there has been increasing interest in the propagation of this little bird. This is very fortunate since importation of this species has now stopped and all we have are the bloodlines already in the country. Since there are no strains in Hawaii or Puerto Rico, there seems to be no "loopholes" for any further importations.

We have worked with this species through several generations and its requirements in captivity appear to be quite basic. Most of the literature on this species claims it to be easily bred, readily raising its own young, and doing fine in a community setting. Our study of its behavioral traits leads us to disagree with some of this. It is indeed easy to breed in captivity, but we would stay away from a community setting. *Pytilias*, by nature, are aggressive and territorial and this aspect must be addressed. We have found the Crimson-winged Aurora reluctant to raise its own young, at least in the environment which we provide, if not kept in four-foot flights (4 feet long, 3 feet high, and 2 feet wide) or larger. However, the urge to breed was not diminished in our standard three-foot flights (3 feet long, 2 feet high, and 2 feet wide). Like most of the dry grassland finches, nesting sites should be supplied with

dried grass tussocks with a splattering of green foliage—living or silk. We have done a great deal of research concerning the willingness of estrildids to accept silk foliage in the place of living plants and have found that the birds show no preference. This makes the housing of finches much easier, since you are probably more interested in the raising of estrildid finches as opposed to the maintenance of live plants and trees.

If you keep your finches in two areas, one for the tropical jungle types and one for the drier, grassland types, we would suggest the latter environment for the housing of the Crimson-winged Aurora. Although this species is surprisingly tough and adaptive, we see no point in stressing it to make it fit into an environment which is alien to its natural habitat preference. Crimson-winged Auroras are surprisingly tolerant of their own kind, providing each breeding pair has its own territory. If breeding pairs are kept in the same room, they show little interest in the mating calls and displays of other cocks, provided that they are separated by hardware cloth.

These are primarily ground-dwelling birds and food, water, millet sprays, etc. should be placed directly on the ground. This bird has a long, pointed beak which is indicative of an insect-eater or ground-feeder, with the need for poking about in fallen debris easily being met by the provision of dried grass or hay as a bedding. Auroras seem to have a particularly high requirement for protein in their diet. This need is easily met by mealworms. There has been much conjecture as to the dangers of chitin (the hard outer skin) and since this species seems to eat them skins and all, this could be cause for alarm. However, our birds seemed to suffer no ill-effects

from this and we feel there is no need for undue concern. Supplied with a good quality finch seed combined with canary mix, and given Romaine lettuce clipped with a wooden clothespin onto a horizontal perch, we feel the dietary needs of this species will be easily met.

Some may disagree, but we find the song of this finch varied and charming, ranging from short, staccato "chucks" to whistles and musical trills. Singing cocks announce their readiness to breed and seem quite willing to accept a chosen mate, making the breeding of selected bloodlines an easy matter for the keeper. Cocks will entice a hen to copulate by repeatedly pecking at her nape until her tail twitches rapidly, and then, hopefully, proceeding to mount. This pecking about the head and neck is not the serious feather-plucking behavior exhibited by such birds as the Red-headed Parrot Finches (*Erythrura psittacea*), but rather a harmless stimulus which leaves the hen's feathers in their usual immaculate condition.

Notice the video print showing cock and hen. Obviously, the cock is the Red-faced mutation, but normals, too, are dimorphic – the hen's belly being much paler than the cock's. The cocks are a richer gray and the stripes are more sharply defined. This cock is poking the hen's neck to excite her into mounting posture. What was unknown and previously unobservable at the standard 30 frames per second was the triangular head display of the cock. While preparing video stills for this article we noticed the triangular head display which we had never seen in this species in standard

Video print by Buckley and Buckley.



Mutation cock stimulating hen to copulate.
Note the triangular head display of cock.



Hen Crimson-winged Aurora feeding juveniles. Note the nest in tussock in the background.

playback. Apparently the family of *Uraeginthus* (Violet-ears, Purple Grenadiers, and Cordon Bleus) and a few others do not have a monopoly on this. However, *Pytilias* do not do this while prancing around looking for a display symbol like the *Uraeginthus*, and we have not observed the Violet-ears triangular head in pre-copulation activities. So there is still much to be observed and learned in the study of estrildid finches as to precisely when such behaviors occur, but they seem to be linked to sexual excitement.

Large wicker nest baskets placed within a grassy tussock are readily accepted. These birds are surprisingly good sitters, tolerant of the keeper's comings and goings and daily routines, provided there is no nest inspection or disturbances of any kind. Clutch size averages three or four and we have often found the need to foster eggs and/or young to Society finches due to some pair's reluctance to feed chicks in captivity. Hatchlings are very dark-skinned and have a pronounced back-and-forth head-swing begging posture. Therefore, it would be wise to foster to Societies that are accustomed to raising dark-skinned African species. Once the juveniles are weaned and independent of their foster parents, they should be placed in a holding cage placed next to their own kind, thus preventing their becoming imprinted on Societies.

Juveniles are surprisingly tolerant of one another and may be kept together literally for years, until the breeding urge hits. When cocks sing to announce their desire to breed, they should be immediately removed to separate quar-

ters set up for that purpose. We have not noticed any hostility among the hens, however, we have not left cocks together long enough to see if they would actually kill each other over territorial disputes, since we see no need for such dangerous research. Juveniles of this species, regardless of whether Society-reared or hand-fed, as indeed many of ours were before we developed good fostering birds, are surprisingly tame and will readily perch on your finger. However, this trust fades as they grow older and reach maturity.

An interesting behavior of this bird is that when startled, they will freeze and raise their tails almost perpendicular to the ground. We believe, regardless of what direction they are facing, away from or towards the perceived threat, this is typical of most animals which have the classic warning color in nature—red. The upturned tail reveals the red color of the rump and is a warning flag signaling “stay away,” just as with some insects and snakes displaying red coloration. This behavior becomes less frequent as individual cocks and hens become more accustomed to their keeper and their captive environment and will virtually disappear in succeeding domestic generations.

We know of only one mutation of the Crimson-winged Aurora—the red-headed mutation. Derek Goodwin in *Estrildid Finches of the World* (1982) quotes Immelmann as saying the red face mask variety doesn't seem to have been seen in the wild. This is apparently incorrect since we received wild-caught

stock which exhibited this mutation. A researcher in Michigan also received some of these wild-caughts, bred them, with none of the juveniles exhibiting the red face mask, nor was he successful in breeding for this mutation. This implies it may be a recessive gene and thus easily lost. Perhaps we were extremely fortunate, but when we paired our wild-caught mutation cocks with wild-caught hens, half of the cock juveniles exhibited this red face mask. This implies that our wild-caught hens may have been splits for this mutation. We never observed, nor could we breed this red face mask in hens. The face mask becomes apparent upon the first adult molt. These mutations were very rarely imported. Hand-picking through the large consignments of the past turned up only a handful of visibles.

The future of the Crimson-winged Aurora finch in aviculture looks uncertain at best. Although there has been no serious census of this bird in the U.S., this will soon be undertaken by the newly-formed Waxbill-Parrot Finch Society (WPFS). We urge those working with this species to contact Levin Tilghman, president of the Society, at 6419 N. 15th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19126-3503, Phone 215-924-6252, in an effort to get an approximation of the current population to ascertain just how dire the situation actually is at this point. Hopefully, if we can work together and pool our dwindling reserves, we can maximize our efforts to save this delightful, personable *estrildid* a place in aviculture into the future.



Video prints by Buckley and Buckley.



Mutation cock demonstrating upturned tail signaling behavior. Translation: “Stay away.”