

Estrildid Finches
in Aviculture...



The Violet-eared Waxbill

by Stash And Carol Anne Buckley
Magnolia, New Jersey

Photo by George D. Dodge & Dale R. Thompson



This photo shows why the Violet-eared Waxbill got its name. The male is on the right.

The Violet-eared Waxbill *Uraeginthus gramatina* is the third of three types of *Uraeginthus* we will be discussing here. Although generally regarded as the most beautiful and desirable, this is purely subjective and open to argument. We have worked with Violet-eared Waxbills for many years and in personal observation have found them to be extremely over-rated and feel the price to be unjustifiably high. For our money, we would much rather invest in the Purple Grenadier *Uraeginthus ianthinogaster*. The Purple Grenadier, in our experience, is by far more intelligent, responsive and easily bred. For those of you determined to work with the Violet-

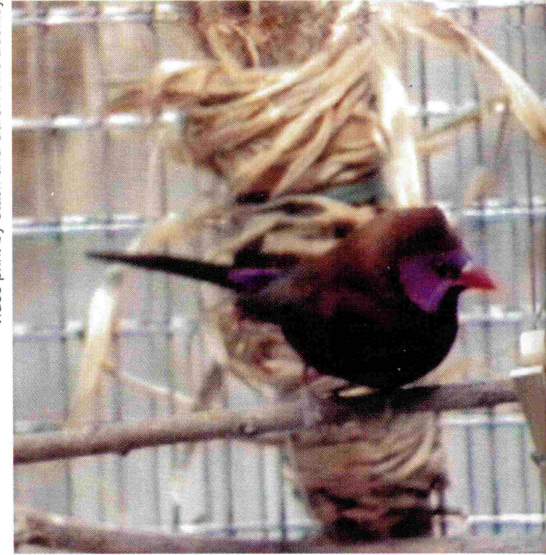
eared Waxbill, be forewarned—breeding is generally very disappointing, success sporadic, and generation-breeding unheard of in this country.

For the would-be breeder of this species, there are certain precautions and requirements about which you should be aware. The Violet-eared Waxbill is a solitary species and this trait must be respected. There must be just one pair to a flight. The flights do not have to be large, but must be well isolated (out of sight and out of hearing) from flights containing other birds of the same species. We recommend a minimum flight size of 4 ft. long x 3 ft. high x 2 ft. wide.

Unlike the Purple Grenadier, the

Violet-eared Waxbills do not bond for life but only for the breeding season. This presents another challenge to the potential breeder of this species. They must be monitored continually, for either sex can attack its mate without

Video print by Stash and Carol Anne Buckley



Violet-eared Waxbill with triangular head display - first time documented. This display occurs when cock is looking for nesting material but stops when preparing to mount.

Photo by Reg Riedel



Very rare example of a Violet-eared Waxbill building a weaver-type nest.

warning or provocation and, if the aggressor is not removed, the victim can easily die. (We have done studies on the aggressive nature of the Violet-eared Waxbill. Please refer to our video "*Understanding Behavior to Enhance Breeding in Estrildid Finches.*")

Once a pair appears to be living in harmony, make sure they have acceptable quantities of livefood. They have to have livefood to encourage breeding in captivity and we have found mini-mealworms to work best for this purpose.

Once pairs begin to sit, it is wise not to make any changes—the environment should remain stable. We have found that Violet-eared Waxbills prefer very warm temperatures—90°F. and above. Unlike Purple Grenadiers, Violet-eared Waxbills do not do well in humid conditions, but become subject to eye infections and respiratory problems. Remember: hot and dry is the key for successful husbandry of this African estrildid.

The nesting receptacle of choice appears to be a small wicker finch nest

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basket strategically placed in a grassy tussock. We did have one pair of Violet-eared Waxbills that built a free-standing nest in a ficus tree located within their 6 x 4 x 4 ft. flight, using burlap strands and dried grass as nesting materials. As is typical of estrildid finches, Violet-eared Waxbills are opportunistic and will gladly accept dried grasses and 4 in. lengths of burlap strands or what is at hand for nesting purposes.

One pair which nested for us in a wicker basket completely changed its habits when given to Reg Riedel. When Riedel set them free in a large outdoor aviary this pair built a free-standing weaver-like nest—something that was completely unknown and atypical of estrildids. And it was not a loose, vaguely constructed nest but a tight, well made ball hanging from a

branch. It satisfied all the requirements to qualify for a weaver's nest. If Riedel had not seen it being constructed, it would be hard to believe. Riedel tried to photograph the birds actually building but, unfortunately, the birds would not cooperate.

When we discussed this with Dr. Luis Baptista he was also puzzled by this strange behavior. His only comment was that birds in different environments build different nests. We cannot find a record of Violet-eared Waxbills in this or any other country building this type of nest. Unfortunately, Riedel was called to Costa Rica and the outcome of this unusual nest is unclear.

Courtship among Violet-eared Waxbills begins with the cock displaying to the hen. A hen which is receptive to a given cock will solicit by throwing her head back and hopping up and down on a perch, uttering a short musical song. This is quite similar in the cock but his song is somewhat louder than hers. The Violet-eared Waxbill's courtship song is one of the most beautiful produced by estrildid finches, rivaled only by that of the cock Crimson Seedcracker *Pyrenestes sanguineus*, produced while content with his mate and about to mount.

Cock Violet-eared Waxbills are quite interesting in that while looking for a symbol to use during courtship they will exhibit what is known as the "triangular head display." Interestingly, this differs from other species such as the Crimson-winged Pytilias *Pytilia phoenicoptera* which produce the triangular head display only while pecking their partners and preparing to mount. We have observed the Violet-eared Waxbill showing this display only while searching for and collecting nesting material for use as an appropriate symbol in the courtship display. When the appropriate symbol is found the cock abandons the triangular head display and begins his ritualistic bobbing to entice the hen. At this point, she responds by soliciting copulation.

If she is not receptive, she may respond with harsh shrieks in the direction of the cock and actively flying from perch to perch. The cock

generally responds by starting his display over again, trying to convince the hen. If she still does not respond, the cock can get ugly and attack her. It is at this point that the keeper must watch carefully for signs of fighting, for in a limited-sized flight the victim has nowhere to flee and the cock's advances could easily result in death. Remember, if breeding advances were initiated by the hen, it could easily be the cock that is victimized and he, likewise, should be removed for his own safety.

After cock and hen have accepted each other, nest building begins in earnest. Nesting material is supplied by the cock and used by the hen in building. Unlike Purple Grenadiers, pairs will generally not sit in a nest that does not contain eggs, but will begin laying soon after nest construction is completed. We do not recommend parent-rearing as Violet-eared Waxbills are notorious for abandoning chicks. Pairs are generally tight sitters and will not abandon eggs during the incubation period, which is about 12 to 14 days. They will sit on eggs until the entire clutch is complete. The would-be breeder should not be fooled as eggs hatch one per day and incubating birds, waiting for the last egg to hatch,

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may not be feeding any of the chicks but just waiting for all the eggs to hatch before abandoning the entire clutch. It is at this point, or before, that we recommend the breeder foster the eggs.

Average clutch size is three or four eggs, sometimes five. Eggs tend to be quite small and fragile so extreme care must be taken while handling them for they crack quite easily. We recommend using a plastic spoon and a cotton-lined Canary nest for transport to the foster nest. Be sure to include any broken eggshell fragments as the fos-



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For information about contacting any of these member clubs, please call that club's state coordinator.

ter parents will eat these and reinforce the bonds between them and their new charges.

We also recommend using only well conditioned Society Finches as foster parents. Violet-eared Waxbill chicks are a very dark blue and are extremely quiet in the nest. They exhibit a pronounced head-twisting begging posture and potential foster parents should be accustomed to such behavior. We recommend European Society finch bloodlines which have been developed expressly for the purpose of fostering such difficult birds.

Eggfood that is supplied to the foster parents should be two-thirds eggfood and one-third Skipio's Soya Musca, which contains 69% protein. Use this mixture for the first two weeks only, as continued use of such a heavy concentration of protein could burn out livers. After the first two weeks, reduce the Skipio's to a mere sprinkling over the eggfood. The requirement for protein greatly decreases after the pinfeathers emerge.

Surprisingly, we have discovered that Violet-eared Waxbills will incubate, hatch, feed and raise to independence Society chicks which we supplied to them in the "great egg switch." Interesting to note, though, is that Violet-eared Waxbills that raised Society chicks still refused to raise their own young.

Juveniles can be kept with their parents until they are self-feeding but then should be removed to separate quarters as male offspring that begin to color up may be taken for rivals and attacked by their father and injured or killed. Juveniles are easily sexed, as the cheek patches are the first to color

up—the males' being blue and the females' whitish.

Even though we prefer the Purple Grenadier to the Violet-eared Waxbill, the latter is definitely a prize addition to any serious aviculturist's collection. We recall our excitement upon being presented with our first pair of Violet-eared Waxbills—a gift from a past president of the NFSS. It forever lives in our memory as "V-E Day."

Over the years the price of Violet-eared Waxbills has fluctuated according to availability and is sure to rise as importation becomes more difficult. Domestic birds have been priced as high as \$800 per pair in the mistaken belief that they will be easier to breed. The fact is, domestics have very often proven to be infertile or even more difficult to breed than their wild-caught forebears. There are no known mutations.

...it is vitally important that all keepers of Violet-eared Waxbills become breeders of Violet-eared Waxbills...

At this point in American and international aviculture it is vitally important that all keepers of Violet-eared Waxbills become *breeders* of Violet-eared Waxbills or this elegant estrildid will quickly disappear from our aviaries.

The beautiful Violet-eared Waxbill can be a difficult species but certainly is not impossible to those with the drive and dedication to persevere. ➤

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