



# ESTRILDID FINCHES IN AVICULTURE...

## Breeding the Brunneiceps (Firefinch)

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[Note: This article has been submitted as part of the nomination procedure for a U.S. First Breeding Award. Anyone having good evidence of a successful breeding of this species prior to the dates noted in this article, please contact the AFA Business Office in Phoenix, Arizona.]

We were, not too long ago, informed by an importer friend that a consignment of birds had arrived from Europe. Among these birds was a species he could not identify. Being most curious about its identity, we took the three birds.

They were obviously some type of firefinch but one with which we were not familiar. This bird was smaller than a Senegal Firefinch (*Lagonosticta senegalensis*), had a much deeper red, and had no white dots. Most curious of all, however, were its vocalizations. These were most un-firefinch-like. They were high, shrill and haunting. In the only book we consider valid—Derek Goodwin's *Estrildid Finches of the World* (1982)—we once again reviewed the vocalizations of all known firefinches but could find nothing which we considered “dead on.”

We called a good friend, Dr. Luis Baptista, a noted finch expert in

California, who was quite excited about the prospects of a possible discovery of a new species, particularly since he is in the process of researching for his new book on estrildid finches. He graciously offered to send us copies of German research papers on firefinches.

We were rapidly congealing our beliefs and we gave Josef Lindholm of the Fort Worth Zoo a call to discuss our theory. We felt that this was not an unknown species but one that had been previously misrepresented as a subspecies (*Lagonosticta s. brunneiceps*) of the Senegal Firefinch—a mistake we felt needed to be corrected.

We believe the *L. s. brunneiceps* deserves full species status as it will not interbreed, nor even live in harmony, with the Senegal. Also, the aggressive nature of the Brunneiceps rivals the nature of far more aggressive firefinches. In fact, we lost a hen Brunneiceps when a cock Senegal was housed close enough for her mate to see him. Since the cock Brunneiceps could not get to the cock Senegal, he killed his own mate in frustration.

As we were relating the story to Josef Lindholm, we were relieved but not surprised to learn from him that Dr. Jean Delacour, a well known bird taxonomist and author, had considered the *Lagonosticta s. brunneiceps* a separate and distinct species many years ago but no one took the idea seriously.

We also contacted a noted show judge and asked him about his experiences with this bird here or abroad. He informed us that he was unfamiliar with the bird we described and was sure it was unknown on the show circuit. This lent credibility to our feeling that this bird was unknown in this

country and deserving of further study.

We collected and sent a series of vocalizations to Dr. Luis Baptista (a world class expert on vocalizations) but, sadly, there is no “smoking gun,” so to speak, that would determine a separate species either genetically or otherwise. We feel, however, that the evidence of vocalizations and behavior is quite heavy enough to prove that *Lagonosticta s. brunneiceps* is indeed a separate species. Curiously enough, this bird is as bright a red as the Dark Firefinch (*Lagonosticta rubricata*), but is the only one we know of in which the color fades when not kept in bright light.

In our efforts to breed the *L. s. brunneiceps*, we considered its breeding needs to be similar to those of the other firefinches and acted accordingly, i.e., nests located within dry grassy tussocks tied into cage corners, etc., with cage set-ups placed within the jungle birdroom.

After misting for a few months, we found them ready to breed, building the typical estrildid domed nest of grasses and lined with finer grasses and burlap. Live food was provided in the form of mini mealworms. The birds still remained very aggressive, not tolerating any Senegal Firefinches to be placed near them. We did not observe aggression towards other species of firefinches housed near them.

The pair laid the last of a three-egg clutch on 5 April 1995. Only one was fertile and hatched on 17 April. The parents raised the chick to fledging on a diet of seeds and mini mealworms.

We invited Jayne Yantz, her husband Larry, and Levin Tilghman—all knowledgeable finch fanciers—to a barbecue to share some good times and to serve as witnesses to the breeding of the *Lagonosticta s. brunneiceps*. The general consensus was that this was, indeed, a different bird—one which they had not seen before.

We have heard from Josef Lindholm that there are more *Lagonosticta s. brunneiceps* in this country but we have not seen them. It is sad to state that as rare as this bird is, there is no serious effort to breed it for the sake of building up numbers. By now it is probably all but gone. ➤



Cock and hen Brunneiceps. Notice the dimorphism in this species. This is probably the first published photo of this species. This juvenile Brunneiceps (right) is slightly browner than its sibling which may indicate juvenile sexual dimorphism.

