



ESTRILDID FINCHES IN AVICULTURE...

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Identifying Firefinches in American Aviculture

Until recently, the genus of estrildids known as firefinches, *Lagonosticta*, was not taken seriously here or abroad. We can recall reading, not too long ago, an article in a foreign finch publication which stated that there are at least 30 species of firefinches which have been bred together and distilled into just one species.

In this country we received a phone call from a fancier inquiring about firefinches. When asked what kind she had, the answer came back, "A male." Obviously, she did not understand the question, as we meant what species, not what sex.

This type of comment reveals the prevailing ignorance about firefinches. It is quite frustrating when people lump all firefinches together as if there were just one species.

The truth is, there are 10, possibly 11, species of firefinches of which eight or nine are known to have been imported into this country. We shall discuss them in order of their availability in the U.S.

Firefinches are easily broken down into two trees of development—the red-beaked and the black-beaked varieties. First we shall discuss the red-beaked.

RED-BEAKED VARIETIES

Senegal Firefinch

The most common and the one with which most people are familiar is the Senegal Firefinch (*Lagonosticta senegala*). Pick up any book on finch-

es and the illustration of the firefinch will undoubtedly be this one. Generally described as a good aviary subject, it does well in a community setting. With this we hesitantly agree although we are not fond of mixed aviaries. This bird has been established in Australia (the only one to be so) due to its ease of housing as opposed to other species in the genus. We do not like the term "beginner's bird" as this species has had its share of abuse, but it is the easiest of all the firefinches to house and propagate. We know of many fanciers who do well breeding this bird in community settings, proving its durability and potential to become an established species.

Not a particularly impressive bird in coloration (the hens, in particular, have a distinct yellowish cast, and both sexes have white dots on the upper belly and chest) or size, there is not much to draw the breeder of rare finches to this bird. Rather, it is a species which is cast aside when rarer *Lagonostictas* are offered.

Black-bellied Firefinch

Less common than the Senegal is the Black-bellied (*Lagonosticta rara*) which is far more common than its scientific name implies. This species is generally the same size as the Senegal but with a richer red, a black ventral region and fewer white dots. The hens tend to be a paler red than the cocks. This species should be kept one pair per flight, as numbers are declining rapidly, and now serious efforts are required to propagate this and the rest

of the firefinches.

Bar-breasted Firefinch

Generally a little smaller than the Senegal, the Bar-breasted Firefinch (*Lagonosticta rufopicta*) is very aggressive. As the name implies, this bird is generously peppered with white dots which may form small bars and may be quite variable.

This species borders on being non-existent in American aviculture. This is a difficult species to sex and difficult to generation breed. Breeders must learn to cooperate to keep this species going.

Brunneiceps

The only other species with a red beak in American aviculture is the *Lagonosticata s. brunneiceps*. We believe this to be a distinct species, not just a subspecies of the Senegal. We will offer our evidence for this in a separate article elsewhere in this issue of *Watchbird*.

BLACK-BEAKED VARIETIES

Jameson's Firefinch

Next we have the darker billed types starting with the Jameson's Firefinch (*Lagonosticta rhodopareia*). This is the only firefinch with a distinct pinkish or flesh-colored hue. The hens tend to be much paler than the cocks. When excited or nervous, it makes a curious "raspberry" type of noise as it flies from perch to perch. Unfortunately, many breeders who claim to have this bird do not. They merely have a color variety of the Senegal or a Dark Firefinch, or have only one Jameson's, incorrectly paired with another species of firefinch. The Jameson's is on the verge of disappearing from this country.

Dark Firefinch

The Dark Firefinch (*Lagonosticta rubricata*) is easily twice the size of the Senegal, a very rich blood red, and, as if that isn't enough, is blessed with a beautiful song. In fact, its vocalizations are so musical and loud that, when one becomes familiar with it, the song is the most distinctive characteristic of this species. Sadly, we know of no serious effort to establish this bird in spite of its notable size, beautiful coloration and remarkable song. This bird is rapidly vanishing from American aviculture.



Lagonosticta larvata hen. This is possibly the rarest finch to have been documented in American aviculture.

well in a small flock of their own kind.

It is our firm belief that when import restrictions finally put an end to the influx of new stock, the firefinches will be among the first finch casualties. Despite the relative ease of propagating firefinches, American aviculturists do not seem to care enough about these attractive African estrildids to even learn of their wonderful diversity of species, let alone work together to keep bloodlines pure and gene pools liquid and vibrant.

We cannot afford to take any estrildid genus for granted, least of all one which represents so many unique yet, sadly, mainly unknown species.

Kulikoro Firefinch

Practically identical to the Dark Firefinch, the Kulikoro Firefinch (*Lagonosticta virata*) lacks a notched second primary feather which the Dark has. The best way for the uninitiated to distinguish between the two is by the vocalizations. The Dark produces a rich assortment of bells, whistles and grunts which is lacking in the Kulikoro whose song is basically bells. Hen Kulikoros tend to be slightly paler than the cocks.

Black-faced Firefinch

One of the truly rare forms of firefinch is the Black-faced Firefinch (*Lagonosticta nigricollis*). It has always been difficult to obtain. Its striking basic gray pattern is accented with a black face mask which, however, is absent in the hens. Cocks have been available in the past but hens have always been a rarity. Curiously, this bird differs from the other firefinches in that it is almost a community bird in nature. Small flocks of three or so individuals will stay together while wandering around the bird room.

These birds have an unusual vocalization. Their courtship involves one sharp note which is produced endlessly, but which is soon elongated and bent producing an interesting variation.

Unfortunately, it is our belief that this bird will not be established in this country. The Black-faced is about the same size as the Kulikoro but more streamlined in body shape, similar to the

Violet-eared (*Uraeginthus granatina*).

Vinaceous Firefinch

Probably the rarest and most striking subspecies is the Vinaceous Firefinch (*Lagonosticta v. vinacea*). This bird has been described as a cross between the twinspace (*Hypargos*) and the firefinches. This appears to be not too far from the truth. This is the largest of the firefinches, and its mannerisms allow the novice to confuse it with the Rosy Twinspace (*Hypargos margaritatus*).

The Vinaceous is also a masked variety with the mask absent in the hens. The overall color is of a beautiful rosy hue. These birds have come into the country in the past with shipments of Rosy-rumped Waxbills (*Estrilda rhodopyga*), however, the Vinaceous is a much larger and far more striking bird. Even so, in consignments of hundreds of Rosy-rumped Waxbills it does indeed take an alert eye to spot one or two Vinaceous individuals as this firefinch is imported only in small numbers and, even then, accidentally. With the advent of the recent restrictive laws, the importation of this unusual firefinch is rapidly drawing to a close.

FIREFINCHES IN THE FUTURE

Sadly, all the races of firefinches are rapidly disappearing from American aviculture. In particular, we grieve the passing of the black-masked varieties *L. nigricollis* and *L. larvata*, as these are far less aggressive than the stereotypical *Lagonosticta* and do surprisingly



Two distinct subspecies of the Black-masked Firefinches. The grayer *Lagonosticta vinacea nigricollis* in the rear with *Lagonosticta vinacea vinacea* in the foreground. Both are cocks.



Cock Dark Firefinch (*Lagonosticta rubricata*).

