

More on Breeding the Orange-cheeked Waxbill

by Levin Tilghman, Philadelphia, PA

[Editor's Note: Mr. Tilghman had an article on the Orange-cheeked Waxbill in the May/June 1995 Watchbird and described his early experiences breeding this species. Please refer to that article and add that body of information to what you learn in this article. SLD]

My initial success was with a pair of Orange-cheeked Waxbills (*Estrilda melpoda*) that bred for the first time in 1994 [see *Watchbird* article in May/June 1995 issue]. Since that time I have had success with other pairs.

The unusually short brooding period that was observed in the first pair was confirmed in all of the others that bred. Nearly all of them ceased to cover their young at night only three days after hatching. A hen who

attempted to brood five day old young was actually driven off the nest by her mate. The reasons for this are unclear but perhaps Orange-cheeked nests in the wild are vulnerable to predators that attack them at night. Since they nest on or near the ground, the number of potential enemies in the African savannah would be quite large. The young never suffered any ill effects and seemed able to keep themselves warm. However, if the adults are nesting in an outdoor aviary and the weather becomes cool and wet, the young will not survive.

Orange-cheeked nestlings grow very rapidly during the first week but tend to slack off after that. The need for large quantities of livefood is critical at first but a lot less is fed as the young approach fledging age. My Orange-cheeks accept a wide variety of livefood without showing much of a preference for any particular type. I always offer a variety, including small mealworms, whiteworms, fly larvae, and waxworms.

I found Orange-cheeked nestlings difficult to foster under Society finches. Most Societies will hatch the eggs, but raising the young is a different matter. The problem seems to be that the young Orange-cheeks are so very tiny that the Society Finches fail to respond to them and they starve. I have never had any success with fostering Orange-cheeks.

Orange-cheeked Waxbills are notoriously light sitters and will often leave their eggs at the slightest disturbance. I had a hen who appeared to abandon her clutch after 11 or 12 days. After that time I never saw her in or near the nest again. Finally, early one morning about three days later, I decided to check the nest. The adults seemed completely unconcerned and were enjoying their treats. Expecting to find only cold, long deserted eggs, you can imagine how shocked I was to find

three newly hatched nestlings and one egg actually in the process of hatching! I was lucky that the adults did not abandon them and that they were successfully reared.

Most of my Orange-cheeked pairs construct their own nests on the cage bottom rather than utilizing any sort of box or basket. The nests are pear shaped with the entrance being scarcely if at all visible. Most of my pairs are rather timid with their first nest of the season but tend to calm down with subsequent nestings. Fertility tends to be high with most eggs hatching.

Orange-cheeked Waxbills cannot be visually sexed. Many older books state that males have larger and more brightly colored orange cheek patches but this is definitely not true. The extent and depth of the orange coloring depends on many factors including age, nutritional status, and general health of the bird. Wild caught birds are said to fade after any length of time in captivity but I have not really noticed this tendency to any great degree. Males are very obvious as they come into breeding condition, when they perform their amusing courtship dance and sing their high pitched song.

Orange-cheeks are highly selective in their choice of mates. Pairs that are arbitrarily placed together will appear to get along but may not breed. Same-sex pairs form fairly frequently and I've had this happen with both males and females. I even had a male Orange-cheeked bird pair off with a Red-eared Waxbill despite the presence of other members of his own species.

For best results Orange-cheeks should be allowed to pair off naturally. Non-breeding birds that are kept together form a very rigid pecking order. The dominant position is often shared by two males who are usually brothers and who act as a pair. They preen each other frequently and clump together at night. The integrity of mated pairs is usually respected by the dominant birds but if a bird is removed for any length of time and then returned, it will have to work its way back into the pecking order of the group.

Orange-cheeks are generally peaceful in mixed flights except when they are in breeding condition. They are not ideal cage birds. Some of my birds

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developed weight problems when kept indefinitely in a standard 3 ft. cage. They are very active and rapid in flight and should be given as much space as possible.

Orange-cheeked Waxbills have become established on the island of Puerto Rico. I do not know the size and extent of this population, but it must be quite extensive, as large numbers of this species are now coming in from that island. This would explain the completely unexpected appearance of several Orange-cheeks at local pet stores in this area. How long this importation will continue is unclear but it may end at any time since Orange-cheeks are no longer legally imported from Africa.

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Identification of Cape Parrot Subspecies

by Rosemary Low, England

I was pleased to see an article on the Cape Parrot—a neglected species—in the May/June 1997 issue of A.F.A. Watchbird. The authors rightly state that more emphasis should be placed on breeding this declining bird. A major problem, however, is the identification of the subspecies. This can be difficult.

In the article it stated that the nominate race has a much browner head. This statement needs to be clarified. The color is not brown but nearer to khaki or golden-brown. The authors infer that the nominate race is not sexually dimorphic. However, adult males have no orange on the forehead and in females this color is less extensive than that of the other sub-species. Also, the nominate race has a noticeably smaller head and beak. It is almost non-existent in aviculture outside South Africa. I was surprised to learn that there was a pair in the United States. My photographs depict a pair in a private collection in South Africa.

The main confusion arises in identifying *suabelicus* and *fuscicollis*. Ron and Val Moat have kindly lent me excellent photographs of both subspecies to illustrate these notes. The photographs were taken at the same time under the same conditions. Note that the head is more silvery in adult *suabelicus* and that there is a dark patch on the shoulder in some birds. Size and beak size are the same. In young birds of both subspecies the head may be browner—more so than in an adult bird of the nominate race but gradually becomes grayer. In adult *fuscicollis* the head is darker gray or brownish-gray but not truly brown. In some birds the feathers of the lower cheeks remain quite brownish.

Some immature female *fuscicollis* have orange extending right over the crown. This is lost when they molt into adult plumage at about nine to 11 months.

Incidentally, identification by photograph can be difficult as an overexposed *fuscicollis* can appear like a *suabelicus*.

Dale Thompson and Eb Cravens mention the hazards of ringing this species. Because their beaks are so powerful in relation to their body size, they can remove almost any ring. In attempting to do so, they will place something between the ring and the beak to grip it better. I believe that this is why some birds pluck themselves on the side on which the ring has been placed—not due to an allergic reaction. They pluck a feather and place it over the ring. If acceptable to the relevant authorities, micro-chipping is preferable to ringing, where Cape Parrots are concerned. I have also seen Hyacinthine Macaws placing



Young Orange-cheeked Waxbills (center) are flanked by their parents.

Photo by Stash and Carol Anne Buckley