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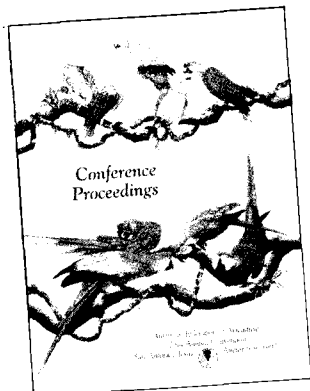
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# OPINIONS

## A Viewpoint

### *Conan the Aviculturist?*

by Stash and Carol Anne Buckley

Magnolia, NJ

**S**ayeth the wizard, "let us tell you of the days of high adventure," as he recounted tales of Conan.

We first began keeping finches about 10 years ago. Before that were the days of wholesaling reptiles. Back then, breeding reptiles was practically unheard of. Since stock was so easily accessible and prices were so low, why bother? When we first started doing birds, the same was true for finches, except for the Australians. Breeding the African and Asian Estrildids was practically unheard of since, once again, prices were so low and replacement stock readily available. Besides that, it was far too difficult.

Regardless what the so-called experts say, the Australian finches we have today in this country are in no way due to the expertise and diligence of American breeders. If one checks the list of current importers of birds, there generally seems to be an overemphasis on Australian blood. If it were not for the European breeders, we would not have these birds today.

Go one step further. If it were not for the constant influx of these birds for replacement stock, we still could not keep them going. In fact, America has been called the great consumer of birds, importing more than any other nation. Where do they all go?

We have heard it stated that the Europeans do it better because they

have been doing it longer. Wrong! The Europeans do it better because they do it better.

In America, birdkeeping is a hobby. In Europe, it is a passion. Americans usually don't like the word "passion." It seems to imply some sort of fanaticism. Here in America, if it is not full of "fun and facts" or implies work rather than playtime, then it is something which somehow must be avoided.

Remember, in Germany after World War II, German aviculturists still had flocks of Red-headed Parrot Finches (*Erythrura psittacea*) in their aviaries. To this day, Germany is probably still the world leader in breeding wild-caught birds.

Günter Enderle, the owner of Nekton in Germany, and a man we found very personable, inviting us to see his facilities, has one of the world's most impressive collections of Estrildid finches. He breeds the rarest of the rare from wild caught stock and passes the offspring on to his fellow breeders in Germany. We could certainly use an aviculturist of his caliber in this country.

For years now the threat of the closing of importation has loomed over our heads. There still has been no serious attempt to get domestically-bred strains established. Now we are receiving more and more phone calls and letters asking us where to get the birds of which we write in our articles. Sadly, more often than not, these birds are no longer available. We have had

ample opportunity to breed them in the past, but too many aviculturists have gone for the quick fix of fleeting glory at the shows as opposed to the daily grind of stay-at-home diligence.

In the U.S., any breeding is incidental—here “the show is the thing.” Even more disturbing is the more these people claim to be different, the more they seem to follow the same consistent pattern. They claim now to be “serious” about these birds. They want to breed them and need information on where to get their stock. When we tell them the prices importers ask, they are stunned. A prominent importer once told us, “Americans simply won’t pay more than \$100 for a pair of finches.” This obviously reflects on an insecure attitude towards the breeding and general husbandry of their charges.

In fact, the trend seems to be, if an aviculturist is fortunate enough to breed a difficult finch, the offspring are quickly sold for financial gain, the breeding hen dies and the aviculturists are left with nothing. Is this finch aviculture?

We have taken a look at what is currently happening in the world of reptiles and were pleasantly shocked. We can recall no magazine on the subject 10 years ago. Now there is a wealth of publications dealing with reptiles and amphibians (the “herps”)—some national, some international, and some published by local societies. Most are good and some are very good.

We have spoken to several of the major importers and to some of the better known herp breeders and we are actually astonished at what is happening. As many countries close down and their fauna is no longer available, other countries have opened up and their native wildlife is now available for export.

The American reptile people did not let the challenge go unanswered. As they saw a country closing its doors to the reptile trade, they jumped into action. Reptiles no longer allowed in international trade are now being domestically bred in this country and are offered for sale.

Some striking examples for turtle lovers are: the European Pond Turtle (*Emys orbicularis*), the Reeve’s Turtle (*Chinemys reevesii*) from southeast

Asia, the Indian Star Tortoise (*Geochelone elegans*), the Radiated Tortoise (*Geochelone radiata*) from Madagascar, and the Australian Snake-necked Turtle (*Chelodina longicollis*).

Even frogs are being bred, most notable, the Poison Arrow Frogs (*Dendrobates* species), many of which are no longer being imported.

For those interested in mutations, the herp people working with snakes have produced a bewildering variety of colors rivaling the Gouldian Finch (*Chloebia gouldiae*) in their diversity.

The list of herps being bred goes on and on. It appears that while the finch people have been pursuing their hobby, the herp people have been aggressively pursuing their passion to get as many of their charges breeding and established in captivity as possible.

In conversation with Josef Lindholm of the Fort Worth Zoo, we sought confirmation as to whether or not this is really what is happening in the world of reptiles and amphibians. He confirmed our suspicions. It seems that while the finch people were gazing

into their ever diminishing aviaries, sipping an iced tea, the herp people were working very hard. It appears the herpetoculturists have surpassed the finch aviculturists both in credibility and results. It would seem now that we should be embarrassed to be counted among the group that has failed miserably at achieving their professed goal of establishing avian species to be enjoyed by future generations—an admirable aspiration in light of diminishing wild populations.

A further proof of this failure is to be found in the currently available literature. In the 10 years we have been involved with Estrildid finches, most of the periodical articles seem to focus on the same few species, with the same caliber of writing, containing the same misinformation rehashed over and over again. A friend once commented that if people would stop buying these inferior, redundant publication, they would no longer be published.

Concerning books, since Derik Goodwin’s classic work *Estrildid Finches of the World* (1982) there have been



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no truly noteworthy books published on the subject of finches. In the world of herpetology, however, *Practical Encyclopedia of Keeping and Breeding Tortoises and Freshwater turtles*, by A.C. Highfield (1996) is only one of the highwater marks in herp books published during the last 15 years.

Even further proof of the failure of Estrildid finch aviculture is to be found in the classified ads of various periodicals. There are fewer and fewer of the rarer Estrildid finch species available for sale or trade, while the herpetocultural periodicals are offering more and more—a reflection of the successes of herp people in breeding from stock acquired from the wild while it was available.

On a more positive note concerning literature regarding Estrildid finches, we are pleased and honored to have our work published in the *AFA Watchbird Journal*. Undoubtedly the *Watchbird* and the *Estrildian* (out of England) are the two premier English-language finch publications in the world today.

As we speak to finch people about the plight of aviculture versus the triumph of herpetoculture, we are amazed by the number of bird fanciers who were formerly reptile people. There seems to be a real similarity of interests between the two groups, although, apparently, the barbaric-looking, cold-blooded, evolutionarily lower-scaled reptiles have won the breeding race.

*As the wizard continues his saga, Conan the Aviculturist rules his own kingdom beneath a troubled brow. But that is another story...➔*

## Another Viewpoint

by Peggy Dalrymple, Galesburg, IL

Dear Buckleys,

Your view of American Estrildid aviculture is inaccurate and narrow minded.

Since 1972, breeding finches has defined my life. I am not complemented with words like “dedicated” or “passionate.” Instead, I am scrutinized by neighbors and zoning boards. I am regulated by USDA and USFWS. I am hated by animal rights advocates. The county health department and the Humane Society might even get involved if they knew that I have several hundred birds in aviaries in my basement. There is no “Rosemary Low” type fame associated with breeding finches, no matter what species, and no famous publication waiting to publish my accomplishments. Few people that I come into contact with know or care that I started breeding finches in the early 1970s in Georgia,

U.S.A., moved to Denmark in the 1980s and returned to the U.S. in the 1990s, breeding Estrildid finches all the while.

In the past I have visited finch breeders and dealers worldwide. I’ve bought finches, imported finches, and exported finches. I have exhibited and taken awards for my birds on two continents. But most importantly, I have bred lots of perfectly beautiful finches on a continuous basis.

I therefore take great offense that a couple of former snake handlers and rather new-comers to the finch fancy think that I and all other American finch breeders are failures. It is equally offensive that you have a national forum for your tasteless comments.

My experiences on several continents tells me that you are easily impressed by those eager to impress. European finch breeders may well be excellent at their craft but the bird collections of wealthy men and the availability of unusual Estrildids are not necessarily the results of good breeding practices, nor even of dedication or altruism.

Perhaps they are the results of varying import regulations in the many countries that make up Europe—and unwatched borders. In other words, some European passion (and heavy money) eagerly pays well for less than legal birds. Some European finch *dealers* are, perhaps, better than the European finch *breeders*.

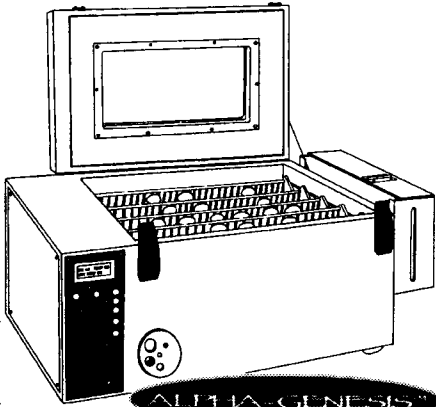
Part of your message, however, does have some validity. The U.S. does need more finch breeders — breeders who propagate more finches and more species and who are willing to publish their avicultural experiences. We finch breeders need to stop being upstaged by breeders of hookbills for the pet trade and softbills for the zoo trade.

Unfortunately, your criticism of novices (*Watchbird* July/August 1997) and breeders of Australian finches (*ibid.*) as well as your disparaging remarks about American Estrildid aviculture in general does little to accomplish this.


And, by the way, concerning your embarrassment at being part of American finch aviculture — possibly *you* are just as embarrassing to us as we are to you. ➔

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