heads back over their shoulders. Interestingly enough, old time Gouldian breeders used to call that "twirling" and thought it was a disease of the middle ear. Another interesting, not commonly known fact, is that the Gouldian cocks each sing a song different from every other Gouldian, songs which they make up as they go along—although many of the younger cocks will pick up certain phrases of the dominant cock's favorite stanzas and include it in their song. Presumably, they think this will be more attractive to the females. At the end of six weeks most if not all your birds will be ready for breeding.

It is important to pair up immediately they come into breeding condition. If you do not, they will assume the opportunity to breed has passed and recycle by going into a quick molt in preparation for "good times" again. Always remember that Gouldians are opportunistic breeders. This means that in the face of any adversity they will go into a molt in order to be prepared for a snap opportunity to breed. If they were seasonal molters like many other species of they might miss that year's opportunity to breed if the haphazard rains just happened to come along during the seasonal molt.

Pairing up is simple, just put a cock and a hen in a cage, in any order. Sit back and observe quietly. If a cock and hen display to each other and end up head bobbings together, they definitely are a compatible pair and will more than likely lay eggs within three weeks and have a high likelihood of being good self-rearers. Fertility is also usually high in compatible pairs. Failure to display to each other does not necessarily mean that a pair will not breed and will not even be good self-rearers, it just means they are less likely to.

Having paired up the birds, I then give them a start by putting some dried grass in the nest box and then let them finish it off by themselves with coconut fibre. It is important to let them do it themselves and not try to be kind by making their nest for them. It is this nest building procedure which consolidates the pair bond and stimulates the release of the hormones which cause the gonads and ovaries to grow, bringing the pair into final breeding condition. The above procedure is usually infallible and can only go wrong if;

- The birds were too well fed, ie., too much soft food during the austerity/maintenance stage.
- Not enough exercise, i.e., kept in small cages during the maintenance stage.
- Too old or poor stock, diseased etc.
- Incompatible pairs.

There is a trick that you can use on pairs which will not get down to the job in hand. If after six weeks a pair has not got eggs or at least nest buildings then introduce a spare cock. The competition will activate the original cock and both together will drive the hen into breeding condition. Rather unfairly, both the original cock and hen will then turn on the introduced intruder so be prepared to take him out as soon as he starts to take a battering.

In more than 35 years of Gouldian breeding (I must be getting old) I have never had a hen accept the introduced cock. In a future article I will cover the next phase in the Gouldian breeding cycle.

In the meantime—good luck.

Letter to the Editor

(A hole in the wire equals success)

Concerning the recent Watchbird article by Levin Tilghman on breeding Orange-cheeked Waxbills, I knew a gentleman 15 to 18 years ago who bred Orange-cheeked Waxbills. He worked at a full time job and was unable to provide livefood to his birds during the day. When his Orange-cheeks began hatching he would cut a hole in the cage and allow the parent birds to forage for insects in his yard. He would close the hole a day or so before fledging. He had good success for several years without losing many babies.

Toby Hutchinson

The Whydah Finches:
Birds of Paradise in Small Packages

by Nancy Mindlin, Edison, NJ

Mankind's fascination with plumage is ancient. The interest can range from child-like wonder to a greedy kind of self ornamentation. In times past, many bird species with the most impressive plumage were almost exterminated by our "fascination" and now have to be protected. Perhaps on a smaller scale, I feel that the same fate has befallen most whydah finches in aviculture today. Though they are not endangered species, is it any less significant when they are wasted? But I don't mean to be hypocritical...

My own love of whydahs began in a pet shop. I saw a fully plumed male Pin-tail in a large flight. His tiny body size, his sharp colors and, most of all, those four kite-like tail plumes seized my attention. There was no leaving the shop without that bird. Thus began my interest in African finches.

Photo by Nancy Mindlin

The bouncy hover of this male whydah is proven by the angle of his wings on the upswing.

Our home was graced by this bird's exotic appearance. Visitors, who had never before had any interest in birds, would stop in front of the whydah cage and say, "Look at that bird's tail! What kind of bird *is* that?" Great fun.

But it soon became apparent that whydahs are not very happy in cages, particularly the hens. Over the past several years, my whydah collection has grown and so have their accommodations.

If there is one important thing I've learned by keeping and observing four species of whydahs, it is that hard and fast rules—that may hold true in the wild—are not necessarily true in aviculture. Rigid thinking makes the outlook for breeding whydahs seem dismal. But given generous space and excellent care, the whydahs' desire to reproduce is not hindered. After watching eager males of four species, seeing receptivity in hens and many successful copulations (Paradise Whydahs), I am an optimist about whydahs. Only if we have already given up, are they doomed in American aviculture.

The photo accompanying this article shows the eager hovering display of a Queen or Shaft-tailed Whydah (*Vidua regia*), now very rare in aviculture. In May of this year, the pictured pair came very close to breeding and participating in the nesting activities of a pair of Yellow-winged Pytilias (*Pytilia hypogrammica*). The whydahs watched and followed the Pytilias intently through three changes of nest sites. The Queen Whydahs behaved as a pair, using vocal contact calls when necessary.

Finally, the Pytilias were satisfied with a nest and began to incubate in ernest. The whydahs were well tolerated by the Pytilias. Unfortunately, this pair of Yellow-wings, unfamiliar with the live foods of captivity, did not feed their two hatchlings and abandoned the nest. They left a third, infertile egg behind. Remarkably, the Queen Whydahs, who, like the other species had proven to be avid egg eaters, never attacked that last egg, though it was left visible and unattended.

The Queen hen was so stimulated that she ovulated. Unfortunately, the single egg, probably infertile, was damaged. This hen had ovulated last year, simply in response to the onset of spring weather. These activities of the Pytilias and Queen Whydahs occurred in a room measuring 13 x 14 feet. However, I have had other species of whydahs breed in a 3ft. cube cage. I would not recommend the cube cage as a breeding set-up, but the birds had other ideas and took me by surprise.

I cannot comment on Queen Whydahs in a flock, but the Fischer's (*Vidua fischeri*), Paradise (*V. paradisea*) and Pin-tails (*V. macroura*), all form cohesive communities. I have witnessed no serious hostility and highly recommend allowing them to live as flocks year round. There is usually a dominant male, whom the hens and young males pay close attention to. One of my young male Paradise Whydahs imitates some of the display elements employed by the alpha cock. Many whydah species are reputed to perform in leks (a place where males assemble to perform in competitive displays) at the onset of their breeding seasons. Most likely, horror stories about whydahs' aggressiveness arise out of too little space or incompatibility with other species housed with the whydahs. Under captive conditions, if another male becomes a rival to the *alpha* cock, one of them should be removed. The male's behavior can inadvertently disturb and tire the rest of the flock, so it is important to offer plenty of feeding, watering and resting locations.

I don't think there is anything unusual about the diet I provide to my birds. A good seed mix with Lafeber's granules, soaked seed, Romaine lettuce dusted with Skipio's soya musca protein powder and a few mealworms, keeps my birds in excellent condition.

There are some points I have noticed about housing, however. My birds know the difference between Vita-Lites and the sunshine of the outdoors. I do recommend full spectrum lights, but the birds clearly take their cues from outside. Sunlight, even filtered through glass, has a very positive effect on their behavior. Good ventilation is of primary importance. The sounds that drift in through open windows stimulate my birds. Rain, which my birds can see and hear through open (screened) windows, is a powerful stimulant.

So if you can't house your whydahs outdoors, at least try to emulate nature as closely as possible. I have found that my own enjoyment and feelings about keeping birds are multiplied a hundredfold by watching their happiness in a spacious, natural environment. Please consider giving your whydahs their own little paradise—a room or a genuine aviary—in which you will be privileged to observe their aerial courtship displays.

Personally, I think it is inappropriate at this time to maintain any kind of whydah for ornamental purposes, including exhibition, without any realistic hope of breeding. Please consider contributing to, or working with, the Weaver and Whydah Network of the Waxbill-Parrot Finch Society. If we don't pursue breeding whydahs, we will only view these birds on educational television, zoos or bird parks.

I know that this article raises more questions than it answers. There is too much to say about the whydahs to be contained in one article. I hope I've shown that the status of whydah finches in aviculture is precarious, but not hopeless. If there is enough interest, I hope to share more detailed information through this publication and the Waxbill-Parrot Finch Society's publication, *The Finch Breeder*. Best of luck to all!

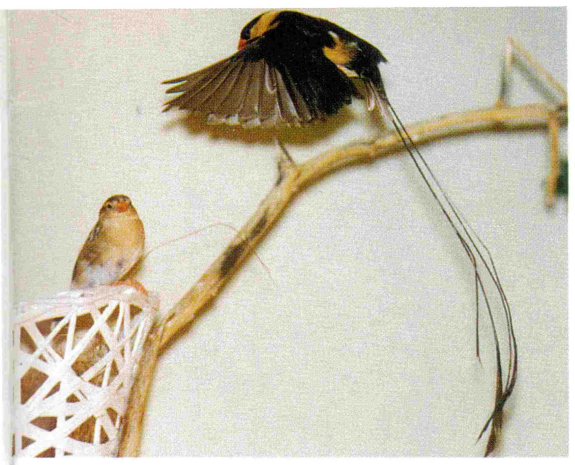

Photo by Nancy Mindlin

A male Queen Whydah displays by hovering before a hen. Though the average hover display is not even one minute long, the display is repeated on and off all day for the weeks or even months of the breeding season.

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ESTRILDID FINCHES IN AVICULTURE...

Stash and Carol Anne Buckley
Magnolia, NJ

The Java Rice Bird

The Java Rice Bird is one of the largest of the Estrildid finches rivaled, perhaps, only by the seedcrackers (*Pyrenestes*) and bluebills (*Spermophaga*) in size. Its big, chunky body and its comparative ease in housing and propagation make it one of the most popular finches for beginners. In fact, this is the first finch I (Stash) kept as a child growing up in Glasgow, Scotland. My mother referred to them as "those stupid Javas," a result of their seeming lack of intelligence and responsiveness—the complete opposite of the seedcrackers and bluebills which we consider to be among the most intelligent of the estrildid finches.

The fact that the Javas were readily available in pet shops 40 years ago attests to the fact that this birds has domesticated for quite some time. Wild-caught individuals are very difficult to get now, reflecting on the lack of desire on the part of the trappers to obtain them. They are classified as mannikins (*Lonchura*) but this is still open to debate.

As the name implies, they are native to the islands of Java and Bali in Indonesia but have been introduced on many of the surrounding islands.

In aviculture, the Java Rice Bird has proven itself to be sturdy, reliable, and long-lived, leading to its being declared illegal in many of the milder U.S. states where it is considered a crop pest.

Housing for this species is comparatively straightforward. A cage size of 3ft. x 2ft. x 2ft. is considered sufficient for a breeding pair, although we have had good results in an 18in cube commercial cage.

These birds should be supplied with a mix of larger seeds than would be suitable for the average finch. A mixture of ⅓ parakeet, ⅓ canary, and ⅓ finch mix should be appropriate for these birds, owing to their massive beak size. Javas seem to enjoy their cuttlefish bone a great deal so make sure they have a large one available. It is certainly preferable to have them chew on the cuttle fish bone rather than on one's finger as they love to do during their necessary periodic nail trimmings.

As with all birds, fresh water should be available at all times.

Sexing these birds is straightforward. If possible, observe the individuals in a small colony and select the pair with the most radical differences. Cocks will have a broader, more massive, redder-tinged beak and will also tend to have a redder eye ring. Hens have narrower beaks and only a pale pink tinge to beak and eye ring.

Vocalizations tend to be a mixture of growling noises, certainly not what one would consider melodic. Although we have not observed these birds allopreening, their plumage usually looks immaculate, with every feather smoothly in place adding to the classic attractiveness of this distinctively marked gray, black, and white bird.

Cocks perform a mating ritual in which they incline their heads downward at a 45° angle, hop up and down on the perch, and grown towards the

Photo by Buckley and Buckley

These birds were successfully bred in an 18-inch cube cage.Note the size of the wooden nest box and its placement outside the cage.