

# My Experience Breeding Gouldians

by Tony Bucci, San Pedro, California

**B**ack in the early seventies I had several planted outdoor aviaries where breeding Gouldians proved to be a greater challenge than I had expected.

We live close to the ocean where afternoon breezes and morning fog don't encourage the well-being of these delicate birds. I had many losses, especially during the molt. After several bad seasons I gave up the project.

With increased availability of new mutations and the challenge still there, in 1982 I decided to try breeding Gouldians again, and chose to cage breed indoors. Cage breeding offers the opportunity to use more pairs in less space under a controlled environment.

## Housing

For the Canary breeder who already has the bird room and breeding cages, it is an easy transition to make. Canary breeding season ends when Gouldians are ready to start. After routine cleaning of the breeding cages, they can be outfitted for Gouldian breeding. The only major change is the nest. The cup shaped canary nest is replaced with a nest box. The nest box is hung in front of the breeding cage with the entrance of the nest box facing the cage. Some modification must be made to the front of the cage to allow the birds access to the nest box.

My breeding cages are two feet wide, one foot deep and 18 inches high. I am sure these dimensions are not critical but that is what I have. The cage is a wooden box with wire in the front only. Perches are placed at each end, giving the birds some flight room.

I set up several pairs of Gouldians, and for each pair I set up two pairs of Societies. Society Finches are also housed in individual cages with a nest box as I described for the Gouldians.

Since breeding takes place during

the fall and winter, the night temperature drops below a comfortable level. To keep the temperature at 65-70 degrees F, I use an electric heater. The heater is a radiator-style with sealed oil and thermostat. This kind of heater is not harmful to the birds, as opposed to the type of heater with exposed hot wires. The hot wires burn dust particles which creates harmful gases. It should never be used in the bird room.

## Breeding

I set up for breeding Gouldians in late August and finish in January. At the beginning of breeding season I begin to extend the daylight with artificial light. The lights I use are Vita-Lite, by Dura Lite Co. The length of the day is increased gradually during the first month of breeding season, an increase of half an hour per week, until the length of the day is 15 hours long, which is sufficient to stimulate them to breed. For Societies, the length of the day does not appear to make any difference. At about five P.M. they are all in their nest boxes, whether the lights are on or off.

Placing a small amount of nesting material (dry grass) in the Gouldian nest box and in the cage for them to use will entice them to get going on nesting. Some will tear the newspaper on the bottom of the cage and take it in the nest box. Gouldians are notoriously bad nest builders. Some don't build a nest at all. They simply go in the nest box and lay their eggs. For that reason I have made wooden blocks that fit on the bottom of the nest box. The blocks have a concave surface to keep the eggs in the center.

Once Gouldians start laying eggs, I check the nest box every day. When the first egg are laid, I place a paper sticker on the nest box and write the date when the first egg was found. Then I keep track of each egg until the

Gouldians skip laying eggs for two days. This means they have completed this clutch of eggs. For the record, I enter the number of eggs laid after each date.

## Fostering

If Gouldians show an interest to sit on the eggs, I let them, and if they successfully raise their babies I will continue to let them raise their own. But if they fail, They are no longer trusted and their next clutch of eggs is placed under Societies. Societies will incubate the Gouldian's eggs, hatch them, and raise the baby Gouldians to full maturity. I must admit Society Finches are not infallible, but in 95% of cases they do their job of fostering flawlessly.

If the eggs are removed from the Gouldians immediately after they lay their clutch of eggs, they will rest for 10 days and start laying their next clutch. Again, I will write the date of the first eggs laid, and then for every first egg of subsequent clutches I will do the same. This record keeping gives me an indication of when to look for a new clutch of eggs and when to remove the eggs.

Most pairs will continue to lay the eggs until I stop them some time in January. I had hens that laid up to 85 eggs in a season. Unfortunately, not all of the eggs are fertile. Only a very small percentage are. At times, the whole clutch will be clear eggs, and the next clutch will be partially fertile (it appears that male Gouldians have frequent headaches).

As I mentioned before, Societies are housed much the same as Gouldians. The Society nest box also has the concave block on the bottom to keep the eggs in the center. There I place two or three fake eggs for them to sit on. If the Societies are compatible they will soon begin to sit on the eggs. Some pairs will spend lots of time in the nest box, but will not sit on eggs. Therefore, to assure myself that they are really incubating the eggs, I test the eggs by bringing the eggs to my lips, one at a time, to feel how warm they are.

If the eggs are warm, Societies are ready to accept the eggs from the Gouldians. If eggs are not available from Gouldians, the Societies will continue to sit on the fake eggs until they

are replaced with Gouldian eggs, and then continue to incubate until the eggs hatch.

When I set up Societies I take two healthy birds and put them together. The pair of Societies need not be male and female. Two males will incubate and feed just as well.

At the time Societies are feeding babies, in addition to the modified finch mix, I supply them with nestling food. I do the same for Gouldians if they are feeding. I continue offering nestling food to the babies after they fledge, and during the molt.

### Diet

The basic diet which I provide for my Gouldians and Societies is a modified finch mix. The mixture is made of one part commercial finch mix, one part canary seed, and one part large white millet.

I supplement the above seed mixture with a daily ration of nestling food (see nestling formula below). Cuttle bone is a must, especially during the breeding season. I give them greens almost every day.

### Nestling Formula:

- 2 cups game bird starter crumbles.
- 2 cups bread crumbs (whole wheat).
- ½ cup 35 % protein Gerbers baby cereal.
- 1 tablespoon Vionate (vitamin-mineral powder).
- 1 teaspoon Tri-calcium-phosphate.

Mix the ingredients thoroughly, and store in a dry place.

To prepare the final nestling food, boil ½ cup of modified finch mix for two minutes. Drain the water, and place the boiled seeds in a bowl. Add one teaspoon of wheat germ oil or cod liver oil, and mix thoroughly (I alternate wheat germ oil with cod liver oil every time I make the nestling food). To this, add one cup of the previously prepared dry mixture, one grated carrot and one grated hard boiled egg (I use a food processor for grating). Mix, and save in the refrigerator. I do not keep this moist mixture longer than five days.

The reason for the use of cod liver oil is because I did experience problems with rickets and soft-shelled eggs. The sign of rickets in young Gouldians

is weakness of the legs, and difficulty in flying. Softshelled eggs cause egg binding. These problems come up when breeding indoors where sunlight is very scarce. Sunlight effects conversion of provitamin D3 to vitamin D3.

Cod liver oil is a good source of vitamin D3 which is needed to synthesize calcium. Cod liver oil did solve the problem of rickets and egg binding.

Wheat germ oil is a good source of vitamin E. It has been suggested that vitamin E will improve fertility. I must admit, lack of fertility is still my biggest problem.

### Miscellaneous Data

Below is a typical egg laying pattern for a pair of Gouldians when eggs are removed at the end of each clutch.

#### Cage #1

Hen: Black head, split for white chest

Cock: Black head, white chest

Date of 1st egg	Eggs in clutch
07/05/84	6
07/30/84	5
08/13/84	6
09/07/84	6
10/02/84	5
10/13/84	5
11/01/84	4
11/15/84	6
11/27/84	5
12/06/84	5
12/12/84	3
12/18/84	1
12/22/84	2
01/01/85	2
01/09/85	1
01/26/85	5
02/18/85	3
02/27/85	2
Total	75

Out of 75 eggs laid I managed to raise 21 young. This same pair, the previous year, laid 73 eggs, and I saved only 15 young. The main reason for low yield is unfertile eggs.

All other pairs exhibit the same laying pattern, and low fertility. My Gouldians are either white-chested or split for white-chest. They are always paired white-chest to a split to white-chested. Perhaps I need to cross more white-chested back to normals to get more vigor and fertility. When fostering canaries, using the same method, I don't experience unfertile eggs. Who knows, maybe male Gouldians need more time to recharge their batteries?

### Weaning

After the young Gouldians fledge I have found they should remain with their parents or foster parents for at least eight weeks. After they are weaned, they are placed in a small flight with other young Gouldians. In order to prevent pair bonding, the males are kept in a separate flight from females.

The size of the flight is of utmost importance. If a young Gouldian is placed in a very large flight after being removed from his parents or foster parents, there is a good chance it will die. The reason, I assume, is stress. Therefore, a small flight and good high protein diet should take them through the molt. My small flights are two by two by four feet. What I consider a large flight is four by eight by eight feet or larger.

### Imprinting

Yes, Gouldians get imprinted on to their foster parents. I have seen young male Gouldians courting and displaying to the Societies. To prevent pair bonding I keep Societies in a separate flight. When breeding time comes, the selected pair of Gouldians are placed in a breeding cage all by themselves. There are no others for them to choose from and he or she gets what is available in the cage. Perhaps if I gave them the choice to choose partners (colony breeding) I would have better fertility. Unfortunately, it would no longer be a selective breeding situation.

Imprinting does not appear to be a problem, providing young Gouldians are separated from Societies at an early age. I have fourth generation fostered Gouldians that are still breeding.

### Conclusion

This article was not intended to tell a success story, but to document my experience in breeding Gouldians. I am not happy with the results as compared to the results I get in breeding Canaries. Perhaps in the near future I will be able to tell you how I solved the problem of infertility. Can you imagine raising 75 young from one pair? In the meantime, I will not give up trying to improve my methods and, hopefully, someday, we will be able to purchase Gouldians just as cheaply as Zebra Finches. ➤

*From the Watchbird, June/July 1986*