



# Olde Tymer

## Conversations with Herschel Frey

an interview by  
Clio Poulykya, Roseland, FL

**Poulykya:** Your name has appeared in *Watchbird* in earlier issues but then it was as a contributor.

**Frey:** Yes, I've written on the breeding of Lady Gouldian Finches and on the Painted Finches

**Poulykya:** Both of those pieces (June/July 1979 for the Gouldian and Oct/Nov 1985 for the Painted) are well worth the trouble to find for those finch enthusiasts who want concise and excellent information. You have obviously had long experience. Did you begin with finches, and, if so, when?

**Frey:** I was born in central Texas, in a rural area where the vegetation was mainly scrub. This was an ideal habitat for a variety of the local birds. Some of my earliest memories involve a fascination with birds. I remember going out into the fields in early Spring to look for birds' nests. We bird keepers and breeders are often asked how we "got into birds," but I don't think there's ever a simple explanation for this. At some point I wanted to keep birds, so my understanding father built me an outdoor aviary for some Ring-neck Doves when I was about nine. The doves were followed by budgies, then canaries and finches. Breeding Zebra Finches by the hundreds — as I now recall the numbers — made it financially possible for me to acquire more expensive birds.

When I was 14 my generous and understanding father provided me with the materials with which to build a twenty-foot long, climate controlled aviary. Pursuing my undergraduate degree from a Fort Worth university, about 80 miles from my hometown of Waco, meant that I could continue to



Herschel Frey with pet Citron-crested Cockatoo.

maintain the aviary at home. But graduate school meant a move to far-off Wisconsin, then to North Carolina. During this time it was impossible to keep birds. And once I had a doctorate in linguistics I began a teaching career in Seattle, followed by Los Angeles (UCLA), then to my current position at the University of Pittsburgh. It was here that I went back into birds in 1973.

Finches had always been my primary interest, so an aviary for these was built in the basement of our home. In the 1970s it was all but impossible to locate Gouldians. I wrote many letters to all the potential sources that I could ferret out (there were no ads in the bird magazines), but received only one positive response, from a breeder in San Diego. She had had no experience shipping birds and wasn't inclined to start, but with the help of a fellow fancier and friend of hers there, I was able to convince her that this fellow in Pittsburgh was really desperate and perhaps even deserving, so two pair of Goulds took up their new home in Yankeeland. Thus began my reward-

ing experiences with this wildly colorful, beautiful finch. Only one of the two pair bred for me, but they were wonderfully and unexpectedly productive. I often speculate that had this one pair not proven to be good breeders, my long-term love affair with the Gouldian Finch, that began in 1973, would never have begun. I soon began to introduce new bloodlines and I have been working with them ever since.

**Poulykya:** You are known for breeding mutations of the Lady Gould, aren't you?

**Frey:** Yes, in fact I received an AFA silver AVY award for my work with the white-breasted variety.

**Poulykya:** How do you care for and breed your finches?

**Frey:** I use a two-tier system of both two-foot cages and large walk-in flights for colony breeding. The smaller cages have plywood side frames and 1/2 in. by 1 in. welded wire fronts, tops and backs. These are arranged so that the breeding pairs cannot see one another. The large flights are about 10 ft. square, with 3/8 in. aviary netting on frames. I normally house some five to

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seven pairs for breeding, often with mixed species, and as long as you don't crowd them — and many people do make this mistake — most of the smaller finches will be peaceful, if territorial, especially when breeding. Since Goulds copulate in the nest cavity (an atypical finch habit), you want to provide them with at least a 5 in. cube nest.

After experimenting with nest boxes, I determined that you'll have more breeding success if you off-center the entry hole at the top of the box, so that they can place their nest cup in the far corner of the box as far from the entry hole as possible. The incubating birds are thus less likely to bolt off the nest when disturbed. They make great nests out of a fine dried grass that grows in this area, with which I half-fill the box to get them started. By the way, I much prefer nest boxes, with lids for inspection, as Goulds take to boxes readily, unlike some finches that favor baskets, and they easily tolerate regular inspections that a breeder will want to make for a variety of reasons.

All the birds are fed fresh, fertile seed including plenty of canary seed. I also offer them romaine or spinach, grit, eggshell, and whole wheat bread. And sprouted seed (the regular finch mix) is offered daily, as is egg food. I have never had much luck getting them to eat mealworms or other live food, and surmise that they don't really have a high protein requirement. This assumption perhaps contradicts what one reads about their dietary habits in the wild. I use Avitron as my vitamin supplement, with water given in open containers.

Down through the years I have handled a number of different finch species. Though a bit tedious, I have found this to be a rewarding experience, as a number of finches, the Gould certainly among them, make wonderful pets. I use a pureed mixture of hulled millet, boiled egg, soya powder, cuttlebone and Avitron and use just enough water to produce the consistency of thick pancake batter that will work in an eyedropper with a somewhat large opening. (Someone told me recently that this recipe had made its way onto the Web.)

Some people still are reluctant to try their hands with Goulds based on the bad information that most of the older printed sources contain regarding how delicate this species is. True, they're not as hardy as, say, the Zebra or the Society, but if one starts with good stock and manages them well, most will thrive and breed. They are more vulnerable to bacteria and candida and air sac mites than some of their cousins, but these three problems, when they do arise, are quite readily dealt with.

**Poulykya:** How varied is your experiences with finches?

**Frey:** At one time or another I have kept most of the available species, and bred many of them. While some have only rarely been bred in captivity, only a few species resist survival. Most of my experience has focused on the Australian finches, but I have worked with those from Europe, Africa, South America, and the Caribbean. I especially enjoyed the challenge of breeding the Painted and the Blood, both Australian. Unfortunately, neither is much available in American aviculture; we very badly need new bloodlines.

**Poulykya:** You have written for *Watchbird*. Have you contributed work to other publications?

**Frey:** Yes. I've done articles for *Bird Breeder*, *American Cage Bird Magazine*, and *Bird Talk*.

**Poulykya:** Does teaching allow you any time to be active in bird clubs?

**Frey:** I have been involved in the bird show circuit for many years, both as an exhibitor and a judge, at the local and national levels. I've been active in AFA and was a founder of the Greater Pittsburgh Cage-Bird Society, serving as its President for many years.

**Poulykya:** Is there presently a strong interest in finches?

**Frey:** Interest in finches, as with other birds, seems to be cyclical. In the 1950s breeding and showing cage birds was very popular. This was followed by a lull in the '60s, then an upswing again in the 1970s and '80s.

But there will always be a core of avid fanciers, who will insure the availability of many popular finches and, down the road, may even determine the survival of a few species that might otherwise disappear altogether. ➔

# The Breeding of Regent Bower Birds

*Sericulus chrysocephalus*

by Neil Hamilton, Perth Zoo,  
Western Australia

## Introduction

A total of 14 known bower birds species are found throughout Australia and New Guinea. Six of these are found within Australia. The most popular two species in captivity today are the Satin Bower Bird and the Regent Bower Bird. They are very striking in color and are presently in demand by aviculturists. There are usually also one or two other species, but they are not available in great numbers, .e.g., Great Bower Bird and Western Bower Bird.

Bower birds can be considered very hardy in captivity and are usually used as display species in many bird collections. Their overall husbandry and breeding techniques have long been taken for granted with most bower birds coming into captivity directly from the wild. This trend of collecting birds directly from the wild has slowed down somewhat so the pressure is on all of us to breed, record, and maintain many softbilled species. This, in turn, will increase our understanding, knowledge, and, who knows, may even help support the wild population in some way.

## The Regent Bower Bird

The Regent Bower Bird *Sericulus chrysocephalus* is found along the east coast of Australia from New South Wales into Southern of Queensland. A second sub-species *Sericulus chrysocephalus rothschildi* is believed to be found further north in Queensland.

## Description

The male Regent Bower Bird has a forehead, crown, nape to mantle rich golden yellow, suffused with orange-red on forecrown and hindneck. The two outermost primaries and their coverts black, remaining flight feathers, golden yellow with black tips becom-