



Waxbills and Their Allies

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PART II

Housing

As waxbills are birds of tropical and subtropical regions it is essential to prepare their accommodation differently to the way we would for finches from temperate zones, such as British *Cardueline* species like the Goldfinch, Greenfinch and Siskin, etc. First and foremost, a birdroom must be constructed and this can be made out of, for example, brick, concrete, or preservative-coated wood; or by merely converting a spare bedroom, garage, or shed. The birdroom should be insulated against the cold and the interior painted in a light colour, such as white, eggshell blue or light green.

If possible, natural daylight entering via windows in the roof is excellent, otherwise it could mean supplying electric lighting throughout most of the day, even in summer, as side windows don't always admit enough. I also like my birdrooms to have regular air changes, particularly during hot weather spells, and have found it a good idea to have air vents at one end of the room and a good extractor fan at the other. The fan should be thermostatically controlled so that, over a certain temperature (mine is set to come on at 22°C [70°F.]), stale air will be expelled while, at the same time, fresh air will be sucked in and travel right across the room.

An outside aviary attachment, no matter how aesthetically pleasing it might appear in one's garden, is completely unnecessary for the keeping of waxbills and usually ends up proving positively harmful. As is to be expected, the birds we are considering thrive in temperatures of 22°C (70°F) and above,

and while it is appealing to consider one's birds flitting about an aviary on a warm summer's day the vagaries of the British weather mean that such days can quickly change to ones of cold and damp. Cold and damp are the captive waxbill's biggest enemies!

In the birdroom some form of heating is essential and my preference is for tubular heaters. These should be wired up to a thermostat and set to come on if the temperature falls below 15°C (60°F), and even 22°C (70°F) for some species. Waxbills also need at least 12 hours of daylight in winter, so it is essential to set up a dimmer unit so that this extra light can be achieved artificially by way of electric "speciality full spectrum" fluorescents and tungsten light bulbs. My own dimmer unit has been programmed to perform the following actions automatically: at 6:00 A.M. the light bulbs come on very gradually, so as not to startle the birds, until they reach full brightness, whereupon the fluorescents immediately come on. A second or two after the fluorescents light up, the bulbs go off. In the late evening, just before roosting time (around 9:30 P.M.), the bulbs come on again, really bright, and the fluorescents go off. Then, in the space of half an hour, the bulbs start to dim down gradually, again so as not to startle the birds, until they are all roosting comfortably in the dark. Some breeders prefer to leave a night-light on throughout the dark hours in case their birds should become startled, whereupon the bulb gives out just enough light to enable them to re-find their perch if necessary and thus to settle back down.

I also use a light sensor attached to my dimmer so that if during the day it should start to go overcast outside, the fluorescents come on automatically to compensate. Should the day turn bright again, the fluorescent lighting switches itself off.

If one is really serious about breeding waxbills, then it is essential to house one pair of birds to a cage. The only time cages are unnecessary is if one intends breeding some of the timid colony nesting species, such as most of the *Estrilda* species, the Goldbreast and the avadavats, which



Photo by Ian Hinze

Cages designed by Ian Hinze and used with great success.

reproduce extremely well in a free-flying birdroom.

For some considerable time I pondered over the best design of cage that would suit both waxbills and keeper. I decided that the cage had to provide the birds with space enough in which to live contented lives – and not just to exist! – and it was essential that an ambience could be created that encouraged breeding; on top of this, it also had to be practical. After constructing two early prototypes I finally settled on a cage which I believe fulfills all the criteria I set myself.

My cage measures 1.17 meters (46 in) x 58.5cm (23 in) x 58.5 cm (23 in) and, conscious of the fact that all birds need to feel safe from predators, I elected to construct it out of plywood and give it a solid back and sides - but birds also require plenty of light.

With this in mind, and like most box-cages, my cage has a wire-mesh front, but it differs from the norm in that it also has an all-wire roof instead of a solid one. The reason for this is that the "open" roof allows extra light, be it nat-

ural or emitted from full spectrum fluorescents that can be placed from 2-4 feet overhead, depending on whether one uses a single or double fitment. Full spectrum lighting placed directly on top of a cage, or lower than that recommended, can cause visual and endocrine disturbance (Thrush, 2000).

If one is considering using full spectrum lighting it is best to employ "specialty full spectrum" rather than "general full spectrum." Such light is also beneficial to plants, and my cage allows for a pot-plant to be placed in either side of it.

I use 2.5 cm (1 in) deep galvanized metal trays for ease of cleaning and these merely have newspaper placed in them as a lining. I prefer to use galvanized metal trays over wood or hardboard ones as the former don't become sodden or buckled due to absorption of water from spillages, such as from the birds' bath.

During cleaning operations I place a divider in a central slot, gently persuade the birds into one side and then completely slide the divider in behind them. The empty side can now be cleaned thoroughly as, unlike conventional cages, the cage doors open fully. Once the compartment is cleaned, I close the door, pull the slide back half-way and gently persuade the birds to enter the now vacated side. Once they do, the slide is inserted fully again and the whole procedure repeated. When cleaning is over I pull out the slide so that the birds have a full run again.

I always place a plant-pot (usually containing a weeping fig, *Ficus ben-jamina*, as it turns into a nice bushy tree-like plant) in the left-hand side of

the cage and I only feed and water my birds in the right-hand side. So as to prevent escapes when replacing food receptacles, I designed a smaller door inside each large door. If the birds are timid they hide behind the pot-plant and soon come to realize that this side of the cage offers them a safe haven. If for some reason I should need to pull a tray out quickly for cleaning but do not want to overly disturb them, such as at breeding time, the birds are prevented from escaping by a flap that allows the tray to be removed but keeps the birds inside.

At breeding time, a nest-box, basket or nest-pan is placed behind the pot-plant (the birds' "safe" area). The birds are able to remain in "their" side while I daily replenish their food, having come to realize that I only put my hand in the right-hand side.

The beauty of these cages is that they can be housed one on top of the other, or side by side. They allow me to keep numerous different species or those of the same kind all in the same room, and all are protected from interference or aggression from other birds. Mannikins and waxbills are currently being housed in the cages outlined and all are looking immaculate and thoroughly content. In essence, I have been able to create miniature planted aviaries – as opposed to the stark, unappealing boxes with wire fronts that are frequently sold as bird homes. I have yet to find a waxbill or finch that doesn't quickly settle down and enjoy life in my cages, which enable the occupants' characters to be displayed to the full.

In North America all-wire cages

seem to be quite fashionable and much success with breeding waxbills and other estrildids has been achieved. However, some breedings have necessitated a light cloth being draped over the top and sides of these cages for extra privacy, which makes me feel that my type of cage is better. It is up to the individual to decide whether or not to paint them. If painting is selected they are best done in a light gloss paint, such as eggshell blue. A primer and an undercoat will be required before applying the gloss, otherwise it will just soak into the wood.

When deciding on the type of wire to use for box-cages or flights it is important to cater for the smallest species, even if one has designs on keeping larger ones. So often keepers chop and change and, therefore, it is as well to keep the cages uniform and not regret matters later.

I believe 1.2 cm (1/2 in) by 1.2 cm (1/2 in) wire is preferable because the likes of goldbreasts, and particularly their young, have been known to squeeze through anything larger. Green PVC-coated Twilweld is excellent and has the added advantage of being maintenance-free and, being dark, the occupants are clearly seen. Plain wire obscures a bird's image and having to paint it black is an unnecessary chore.

Metal trays 2.5 cm (1 in) deep are to be preferred over wood or hardboard trays as the former don't become sodden or buckled due to absorption of water from spillages, such as from the birds' bath. Hinged front lids should cover the entrance for the trays to prevent birds escaping when the trays are removed, such as during cleaning operations. The trays need only to have old newspaper placed in them for ease of cleaning, although some breeders prefer to use sawdust.

Perches are usually made of dowling and the thickness is really dependent on the size of the feet of the birds one intends to keep. If dowling is to be used it should be of two thicknesses, in order for the birds' feet get ample exercise. The pieces of dowling should be placed at either end of the cage, so that the occupants have to fly rather than hop. Natural perching, however, is far more aesthetically pleasing. Perches

Photo by Claire Hinze



Ian Hinze sound-recording vocal calls of Pin-tailed Parrot-Finches. Note the observation window to the right.

will need to be checked regularly for any soiling and either be changed or cleaned thoroughly when it occurs. Dirty perches can cause serious foot problems, and also eye problems should the birds be inclined to rub their faces against them, which they all like to do at some time, such as to rid themselves of an itch.

All foodstuffs and water should be positioned near the centre of the cage so that they cannot be fouled from the perching bird. Even so, the utensils will still need to be checked daily. Many modern manufactured cages, such as "Terenziani" from Italy, allow food pots to be inserted into drop-trap holes in the cage-front, which is an excellent idea and one I prefer. This allows for the food to be changed without having to put one's hand inside the cage; especially important if one's birds are breeding. Such cages also allow for a birdbath to be hung on the front. Again this is an excellent idea as it prevents the need to place a water dish on the inside of the cage.

There is no need to have separate drinking and bathing water as birds invariably drink from their baths. I use only one water receptacle and this is cleaned and replenished daily. Dishes should be washed in warm, soapy water and, at least once a week. I like to leave them soaking in a bucket of water containing a few small drops of bleach for at least half an hour. One can never have enough dishes at one's disposal and a rotation system usually comes into force, whereupon while some dishes are in use others are being cleaned or have been dried and stored.

Once the birdroom is completely set up and the birds installed it is important not to startle them, as they could easily injure themselves. To help prevent this, it is important for the birds to get used to one's presence and movements as quickly as possible. I always lightly knock on the birdroom door before entering, whereupon I give a few whistles and utter some familiar phrases such as "Good morning my little beauties, it's only me." It really is amazing how one's birds, including new additions, quickly come to recognize their owner and soon settle down under such due consideration. 