

Breeding Finches In Captivity

by Jerry Jennings

THE SHAFTAIL GRASSFINCH



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Perhaps the most entertaining of all the Australian Grassfinches is the Shaftail or Long-tailed Finch (*Poephila acuticauda*). Of the three species of the genus *Poephila* the Shaftail

is the only one that is truly established in American aviculture.

The Shaftail has a gray forehead, crown, and nape. The lores are black, the mantle and back are pinkish-fawn, wings brown, upper tail coverts white while the long forked tail is black. The chin, throat, and upper chest area are covered by a black "bib". The remaining chest area is pinkish-fawn, lower abdomen and vent are white. The thighs are covered on the outer side by a black stripe (common to all three species). Legs, feet, and bill are orange and the eye is brown. The sexes are alike except the bill of the male is occasionally darker than in the female, while the male's "bib" tends to be more pear-like in shape and larger in size than the female's "bib". The best method of determining sex is through observation of behavioral differences during courtship.

In the wild the Shaftail has a yellow bill at one end of its range while at the opposite end the bill is red-orange with all variety of in-between shades observable as one moves from West to East through the range. Although the red-orange billed Shaftail has been dubbed the "Heck's Shaftail" or "Heck's Grassfinch", Immelmann states there are no other differentiating characteristics between the two so-called species and no way of separating them geographically. Immelmann therefore concludes that the

two races are in fact one. In captivity nearly all Shaftails have the red-orange bill, which is apparently dominant.

The Shaftail is strictly a tropical finch. Its range extends along the northern Australian coast from Derby in Western Australia to the Leichardt River in Queensland. It has been observed by Immelmann as far south as 16°25' S (perhaps the most southern record) in Victoria River Downs, Northern Territory in 1959-60.

The Shaftail inhabits dry savannah country staying close to rivers and streams. It is not common on open plains as it prefers to breed in tall Eucalyptus trees. Along the coast it frequents pandanus plains. The Shaftail prefers to avoid human habitation except when forced to do otherwise when food and water are scarce.

The native diet of the Shaftail consists of ripe and half-ripe grass seeds. During breeding season the diet is augmented with a variety of insects such as flying ants, flying termites, and flies which are taken on the wing.

It is believed that Shaftails in the wild pair for life. In captivity, if one member of the pair dies, the surviving member will accept another mate.

The key ingredient to breeding Shaftails is a compatible pair (it is not enough that a male and female are put together in a flight). There are two approaches to pairing birds. In the first method a group of birds, individually color coded by leg band for easy identification, may be placed in a flight and allowed to pair up on their own. Positive identification of a breeding pair requires fertile eggs or young in the nest. Once such a pair is identified it may be removed to another flight after breeding or the other birds may be removed instead and the process repeated.

The second method is accomplished

by placing one male and one female in a flight. If they have not paired up and nested after several weeks, either the male or female should be removed and replaced with a different one until a compatible mated pair has been established.

The first approach has the disadvantage that one of the pair members may be accidentally removed. Because of their social nature, it is not uncommon to see more than two birds visiting a breeding nest. On the other hand, the establishment of pairs is not significantly speeded up.

It is desirable to have only one pair of Shaftails to a flight. Additional pairs tend to interfere with each other. Furthermore it is difficult to identify those birds that are not breeding at all, due to incompatibility or other reasons. When pairs are housed separately it is easier to segregate young according to lineage.

Shaftails may be housed with any other species of Australian finches except Parson Finches as the two species will readily hybridize. The Shaftail is not at all pugnacious and will get along with the smallest waxbills. Overcrowding, however, must be avoided. A good rule of thumb is one pair of finches per 20 square feet of aviary floor space.

Shaftails are hardy birds and will do well in open, outdoor, planted aviaries. They readily tolerate temperatures of 100°F in the summer and 24°F on winter nights (average temperature extremes at Walnut Acres). Shaftails, like other finches, seem to thrive better in dry climates than in damp climates, especially during the colder months. Aviaries at my home are neither cooled in the summer nor heated in the winter nor are any measures taken to provide for inclement weather other than the provision of a shelter comprising one third of the aviary.

Shaftails will build their nests in virtually every possible nesting site. Some pairs will only nest in boxes, others only in wicker baskets, while some prefer bushes or tumbleweeds. Preferences seem to be related to the type of nest site and nest in which the birds themselves were reared. A few pairs will use a variety of sites yet others will use the same nest over and over again, pausing only to add new materials.

The construction of a nest may not be indicative of breeding activity. Shaftails, like many other grassfinches, build a roosting nest in which they sleep outside the breeding season. A breeding nest is usually a separate structure, although a roosting nest may be refurbished for breeding on occasion. The two types of nests differ physically in that the breed-



Adult Male Shafttail

ing nest is more substantial and often lined with feathers, string, etc. Newly fledged young will roost in a nest different from the one in which they were reared. The young will roost together as a group until pair formation occurs.

Shaftails lay 3-8 eggs, the average clutch size being five. Usually four young will be fledged with five not uncommon and six less frequently. The eggs are completely white and take approximately fourteen days to hatch. In extremely warm weather they may hatch a little earlier.

Young hatch covered with a white natal down, which they lose as they develop feathers. In the first days of life the beak is horn color changing to black as the bird develops. Young have distinct specific mouth markings.

Shaftails fledge at about three weeks of age and are weaned one to two weeks thereafter. They should not be removed from the aviary and their parents, however, until their beaks have turned at least 1/3 orange. The stress of premature removal can cause loss of appetite, weight, and death.

At approximately three months of age Shaftails have completely moulted into adult plumage. Their beaks are then solid orange. At five months of age they will begin to breed given the opportunity. It is common for a group of young birds housed together to begin breeding before the aviculturist is aware. Do not attempt to prevent this behavior by removing nesting facilities and material. The absence of roosting nest facilities will unnecessarily stress the birds and en-

courage them into panicked flight at night with the slightest disturbance.

Aviary diet for Shaftails consists of a variety of millets and canary seed. Spray millet is relished and may be fed dry or you may grow your own and feed half-ripe (green). Other seeding grasses found in the garden or in fields, along streams, etc., produce seed heads of varying shapes and sizes that Shaftails and the other finches will enjoy. During breeding season it is advisable to feed large quantities of mealworms. Some Shaftails will only eat the head of the mealworm, while others will eat the whole thing.

Naturally occurring flying insects that enter the aviary will round out the Shaftail's diet. However, I highly recommend ground-dwelling insects, i.e. sowbugs (pillbugs), earwigs, small beetles, and ants be eradicated as they are suspected of acting as intermediate hosts for such parasites as Gizzard Worm, Dispharynx Worm, and Tapeworm. Included in this precaution is the prevention and elimination of any accidental mealworm culture in the aviary floor.

A good pesticide for the ground-dwelling insects is one containing 5% Malathion dust and 95% inert powder. Liquid Malathion comes in a 50% solution, which may be diluted to 5%. However, some breeders have had unfortunate experiences with the liquid. The dust, on the other hand, works quite well and is harmless to birds even if eaten directly or inhaled. In fact, the 5% Malathion dust has been used with mixed results in the control of Air Sac Mite in Goulds and Canaries.

It is helpful to begin with a half dozen birds when attempting to breed Shaftails. This increases the odds of putting together compatible pairs and insures against the possible loss of potential if only one pair is acquired and one of the birds expires.

Shaftails have produced two mutations in captivity. While visiting England in October 1974 I visited Les Clemow in Kent who had produced a white Shaftail. The bird was all white except for a speck of black in the area of the "bib" throat patch. The bird was otherwise completely white and had the long forked tail. To the best of Mr. Clemow's and my knowledge that bird is the first white mutation in the Shaftail.

A brown-headed mutation in the Shaftail has also occurred in England and seems to be well established in several aviaries. In this mutation the crown and nape are pinkish-fawn rather than gray and the "bib" is chocolate brown instead of black.

A number of hybrids have occurred with the Shaftail, the most common being with the Parson Finch. They have also occurred with the Masked Finch, and Star Finch in this country. For a complete list see Klaus Immelmann's book, "Australian Finches".

Shaftails are fairly prolific perhaps as much so as the Zebra Finch under the proper conditions. They are an excellent bird for both the beginning and advanced aviculturist.

In the next issue I will discuss the Parson Finch.

Fledgling Shafttail

