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Cuban Melodious Finch Surviving Well in Australia

(*Tiaris canora*)

by Rob Johnston
Queensland, Australia

This extremely beautiful little finch with the scientific name of *Tiaris canora* meaning a finch with a turban, crown or helmet appearance and a melodious song survives extremely well in aviaries in Australia.

The Cuban melodious finch is of the grassquit family, a small genus of finches inhabiting the southern North American continent to central South American continent. The grassquit family comprises of the cuban melodious finch, olive finch, black-face grassquit and the jacarini finch. The first three bare the scientific name of *Tiaris* because of the helmet effect on the head except for the jacarini because both cocks and hens are of one colour all over.

First breeding results were recorded in Australia in 1935 by Mr. H. S. Sewell who was awarded a bronze medal for first breeding Cubans by the Avicultural Society of South Australia, the only club in Australia which recognizes such events. They have been reported to have been bred ever since in Australia ensuring the fact that we will have them in our aviaries for a long time.

Apart from their native land, Cuba, there would probably be more cuban melodious finches in Australia than any other country in the world. This is probably owing to the importation ban placed on birds by the Australian Government which was laid down during the 1940's but not enforced until the late 1950's early 1960's. Whilst there was legal exportation from Cuba there was either lack of interest in establishing the bird in aviaries of other countries or lack of expertise or local conditions could not have suited the birds. These last two reasons I would discount as Cuban melodious finches breed in all parts of Australia under all ranges of temperatures from below 0°C to 45°C.

The Cuban finch is stable in Australian aviaries today where they are a free breeder and in fact the supply sometimes is over the demand. This is not often as they are a popular finch and in my opinion in Australia are second only to Red-cheeked cordon bleu waxbills (*Uraeginthus bengalus*) in popularity. On a rough average one in fifteen Australian aviculturists would keep the Cuban finch.

Feeding the Cuban in an aviary is very simple, in fact, seed and water will keep them alive forever. Greens, such weeds as

dandelion and thistle and comfrey, finely chopped, are relished by these finches. I believe in feeding as many varieties of seeding grass that is possible to obtain, feeding different varieties of seed on consecutive days. This allows birds a variety, making their food as interesting as possible.

Cuban finches are always the first down to the green food or seeding grass when it is given so I feel it is extremely important to them.

Soaked seed is an appreciated supplementary food. Soaking normal dried seed mixtures (pannicum, jap millet, canary and small amounts of maw, red and black rape seed, niger and linseed) for twenty-four hours and drying (NOT IN DIRECT SUNLIGHT) for an additional twenty-four hours then feeding to the birds in small amounts each day. Eating sprouted seed is a learned response in cuban finches. If the process is dropped it can take up to a month to get them back to the routine of consuming it.

I don't believe that live food is all that necessary although I do feed it in order to obtain maximum results. Friends of mine raise cuban finches purely on egg food supplements having similar results to those of mine. Livefoods can be supplied in a number of forms and all are most acceptable to the Cubans, however if mealworms are used I would suggest feed only small mealworms about 1/2 inch long.

If you are using an aviary smaller than 20 feet x 6 feet x 6 feet it is only possible to house one breeding pair of Cubans to this flight. Cuban finches are simply not very sociable birds with their own kind. Both cocks and hens will fight other cocks and hens to the death. It usually only happens with cocks but hens are known to kill also. The cocks will even kill their own young as young as three weeks old, so it is advisable to remove all young at an age of two and a half weeks old. Should you wish to set up a second pair of Cubans and you have adjoining aviaries they will even fight through the wire and the end result will be at least one dead bird. Double wired partitions do not prevent this happening. Cubans will still attempt to get at other Cubans being so close and the outcome is that they will constantly be on the wire flights and not nesting.



Cock Cuban melodius finch.



Nest of the Cuban finch.

nesting material under where the spotted eggs are laid.

The Cuban prefers to place their nest in brush wood inside the aviary shelter and seldom in the flight. A wire basket filled with grass may be acceptable to use as a base but they will never accept a box.

One to four eggs are laid, with two to three young common out of a nest. Four young are rare. The young usually are good fliers when leaving the nest. However they can sometimes leave the nest up to three days before they are due to come out. In most cases they are not good fliers then and some are not fully feathered. In winter and when the weather is cool it is advisable to place such young back in the nest for the first three nights.

The best way to place these young back in the nest is firstly, catch all of them, then by holding each bird between your thumb and middle finger, place it's head in the hole of the nest, push gently with your forefinger. Do the same for all the young holding your hand over the hole of the nest whilst positioning the next bird. Hold your hand over the entry of the nest for two minutes after the last bird is placed in the nest to allow them to settle down so they won't leave the nest as soon as you leave the aviary.

Here in our local area in southern Queensland Cubans breed nearly all year around. The months which they don't are usually December and January, these being the mid summer months. The nest may have something to do with this as it would be fairly warm inside, constructed of tightly woven materials. I have noticed that when we have cooler summers similar

Large well planted aviaries is one way to get around the problem of having more than one pair to an aviary. Aviaries measuring 30 feet x 20 feet x 10 feet have been known here in Australia to contain up to four pairs living happily together with no fighting. It is most likely that being well planted and large that the Cubans are able to find a place to hide should a problem occur with others of their kind.

Nest building is conducted by both the cock and the hen consisting mainly of coconut fibre, coarse underfelt, cotton wool, feathers and very small amounts of fine dried grass. The nest is domed or egg-shaped measuring five inches long and about two inches in thickness. The entry is about one inch from the top of the nest and from the outside goes up inside the nest that one inch almost to the top of the nest then it plunges straight down three inches to the egg chamber. Unlike most finches the Cuban nest is not lined heavily with feathers. The thickness of the walls are 3/8 inch to 1/2 inch and there is 3/4 inch of



Five flights containing three pairs of Cuban finches at Lawnton Aviaries.



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to that of 1979-1980 Cubans will breed right through the summer.

Cubans prefer warmer weather to breed successfully. They will breed in our southern states but not in the cold of winter. Our cool to mild winters suit them very well and winter here usually doesn't effect their breeding. In Melbourne and most of Victoria where the weather doesn't suit the breeding of waxbills in quantity they find it ideal for the breeding of Cuban finches during their spring, summer and early autumn.

During my last breeding season, 1980, I had three pairs only set up owing to aviary reconstruction and results from these were as follows: Pair No. 1, six nests of 13 young, Pair No. 2, six nests of 13 young and Pair No. 3, four nests of nine young. This made an average of 2.2 young to each nest for the three pairs.

For 1981 I am conducting a cage experiment to find out whether a single pair in a 6 feet x 6 feet x 1 1/2 feet cage will breed inside the birdroom. I have now set up three pairs like this and I am very confident of the outcome. After the first week all three pairs have started to build. An additional experiment to this, one pair is fed only on soaked seed and dried seed and seeding grass — NO LIVE FOOD. This is to determine the difference in not feeding live food.

The export of foreign finches out of Australia is allowable by the Australian Government and of all the finches which are foreign to Australia it would seem the Cuban to have more appeal to the overseas aviculturist. This would most likely be because a number of African and Asian finches are still available through trapping and direct export from these countries. Thus more availability and cheaper but not necessarily reliable breeders.

I have exported Cuban finches from Australia on a number of occasions. It takes time (anything up to two full days) and involving a number of permits and inspections which can increase the value of the birds to the overseas buyer. Although this does increase the price, Cuban finches are apparently still cheaper when buying from Australian aviculturists rather than aviculturists in other countries.

Truly a delightful finch to have in an aviary. Friendly to it's keeper, peaceful amongst a mixed collection (other than their own kind) and a fairly free breeder in most conditions. I have kept the Cuban for almost ten years continuously now and I would personally recommend anyone to try this loveable finch.

Should anyone like any additional information I would be only too pleased to answer any question •