

# an Owl Finch experience

by Pat Gullett



Photo by Jack Wanstrath — Long Beach

Owl or Bicheno Finch (*Poephila bichenovi*)

I have been a fancier of finches for several years. They have been a colorful exciting addition to a tropical garden here at my home in Southern San Joaquin Valley. The garden extends from the north side of our home and can be entered from the bedroom or my husband's study. I grow mostly tropical plants and have a watering system for fogging in the hot afternoons.

We started out with an aviary 14 feet long, 10 feet high and 5 feet wide. The aviary was just outside our bedroom's sliding glass door where we could watch and hear the birds and was started only as an interesting aspect to

my "private garden". All that I had read assured me that finches were difficult to raise in captivity. Since all I wanted was 10 to 12 pair of exotic birds to enjoy, no work was involved, so I thought! It wasn't long before I had birds all over the place. They loved the area. Every pair was nesting and I found I was really in the bird business. The little owl finch turned out to be my favorite.

In Australia these birds are called Double-bars; here they are called Bicheno or Owl finches, but I like the name Owl better. The face and head coloring and the black circle around the face does remind you of a small barn owl. I have found the owl to be a very fast flyer, very friskie and a pert bird. They really enjoy dive-bombing me when I am out working in the aviary and do not seem to be as nervous as some of the finches. Sexing is not easy, but can be done if you observe them awhile. In the male, the chest is much whiter than the female. Bars are sometimes more bold, and black feathers of the rump extend right up to the vent. The female is much grayer in the chest and her black rump feathers stop short of 1/8 inch of the vent. The male has a very definite song, which I really enjoy hearing, and he will often sing at dusk. Both birds pick a site to build with the male doing most of the building and the female re-arranging it. My owls nest mostly in the wicker finch nest but have nested in coffee cans and will sometimes build in dense bush or bamboo. They are very good parents. Both are very active in sitting (brooding) and feeding the young. After fledging, the young will always return to the nest at night. I have noticed that if the owls are forced to sleep on a perch at night, they will fall off, or almost off and on during the night. The clutch is 4 to 6 eggs. The pair will sit for two weeks and feed in the nest for two weeks.

The young come out strong flyers and the parents seem to allow only one out at a time until all are out of the nest. The parents are very solicitous of their welfare and will keep them all together in a safe spot.

I feed mealworms, fruit flies, egg mixture, soaked seed, all weeds gone to seed I can find, greens, cucumber, table salt, fresh orange, along with finch seed, small millet and cuttlebone. Crushed egg shell is something they really go after. Egg mixture and mealworms seem to be the main food fed to the young. Owls will breed all year. I have pairs in heated and unheated aviaries and both do as well. Temperature varies here in Bakersfield from 40 degrees to 60 degrees in winter and 65 to 100 degrees in summer with some temperature drops to 20 degrees for a few nights in the winter, so heat lamps are turned on and during fog and rain, the heat lamps are left on. The aviaries are protected from rain and wind by plastic covers. Both ends and part of the top of the aviary are covered; center top is left open. In summer the covers are removed. During heat of the day, foggers are turned on and the birds enjoy them as much as do the plants.

My first aviary is planted with bamboo, nandina, privet, and honeysuckle vine, ivy and virginia creeper. The virginia creeper is an excellent cover as it is fast growing and makes good shade and roosting areas. I have 20 to 40 finches in this aviary — one pair of each species.

After two years, I found I just had to have more room — so we extended the aviary 50 feet. This covered the entire garden for the birds. I added several willow trees in planters and one big feeding station where very little seed is scattered. I enclosed one end for keeping the young separated from the adult birds. I bought my original pair of owls

Aviary photos — Pat Gullett



Inside large planted aviary — 50 feet long.



*Nesting area in small planted aviary.*



from Mr. Siegfried Meyer in Alhambra, Ca. and within the month they had their first nest of young and have continued to raise young now for four years. Last summer is the only time they have rested and, as soon as it cooled off, they started in again and have raised 3 to 4 to a clutch this year. The first three years they averaged 5 to 6 young to the nest. As of today that original pair has raised ninety-four owls. I now have three other pair breeding. I had only one pair to an aviary but now I am trying colony breeding. I read in the Australian Aviculture Magazine that the owls are always found in small groups and will make several nests in a shrub without disturbing each other.

My aviary contains other Australian birds: the Shafttail finch, Lady Gould finch, Star finch, White Zebras; a few Mannikins: Society finch, White-Headed Nun, Bronze-Winged. The Waxbills are: Strawberry, Fire finch, Blue-Capped Cordon Bleu, Red-eared, Orange-Cheeked, Gold-Breasted, Lavender, Black Cheeked, Violet-Eared, and Peter's Twin-spot. For several years I raised Orange Weavers, but do not have any now. Other birds in the aviary are a pair of Rainbow Bunting and from the Serin family: the Green Singing finch. One Red Factor male Canary and a pair of Silver Button Quail round out my flock.

What was going to be an interesting addition to my garden turned out to be a fascinating hobby — a hobby that is very rewarding and I have made many new friends. It has brought several of us together and started a bird club here in Bakersfield — The Aviary Association of Kern, which now has a membership of about seventy.

The most important thing of all to me is the spiritual reward of growing a garden and filling it with birds ■



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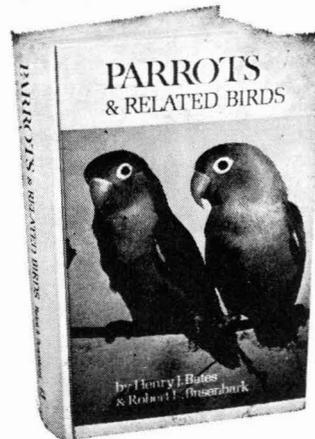
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