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Cage-breeding the African Gold Breasted Waxbill

by Clifford Brane
Staunton, Virginia

There seems to be very little information in print dealing with the specifics of breeding the gold breasted waxbill. Several of the popular texts available even disagree on the latin name for the bird, although the one I found most often listed is *Estrilda subflava subflava*. Having been successful in getting my pair to raise a nest of four youngsters in a relatively small cage, I thought I would pass along some of the circumstances surrounding the breeding.

The mainstay of my pair is a male purchased in October of 1978. The original female he was paired with died suddenly, and it wasn't until the fall of 1979 that I was able to purchase another. These were housed in a small round ornamental cage about two and a half feet high and twelve inches in diameter. Over the winter months, when the temperature of the house was kept in the sixties, he sang regularly each morning when the house reached a certain level of light intensity from the morning sun. Far from a melody, his song was more like a monotone chirp. Sometimes I would let the birds out of the cage to fly about the house. At such times the male was observed driving the hen about and dancing up and down in front of her. The hen layed several clutches of eggs in a small wicker-globe nest, but no interest in brooding was shown.

In the winter of 1980, I moved the pair into a larger cage and into a room in my home devoted to finches. There were about twenty-five other birds caged in the same room. The cage was still an ornamental one about two and a half feet high and eighteen inches in diameter. The wire was black, and the bottom of the cage slid into a stand that raised it a foot and a half off the floor. I packed the top part of the cage with dried grass so the wicker nest had plenty of privacy, and then draped the cage with a dishtowel that covered nearly halfway around the top two-thirds of the cage. The bars at the edge of the door were slightly wider than the others, and one day the hen escaped and was injured. The next morning she was dead.

I found another female in April of 1980. I fixed the cage door, removed the dry grass, which was a nuisance and kept falling to the floor of the cage, and placed the new hen with the male. In late June, she began indiscriminately dropping eggs from the top perches of the cage. I added some burlap nesting material to try to discourage that. After the male took the burlap into the wicker nest, she deposited four eggs there. This time the two started brooding with the cock being the most worked of the pair. Nest relief was direct. Although the gold breasteds are very skittish, when one of them was on the nest and I was near, it stuck tight. The cage bottom had several thicknesses of paper. I could pull out one layer and leave the clean layer below without having to take the bottom off of the cage. The paper was changed only every four or five days to minimize disturbance.

I prepared for the discouragement of somehow not having a hatch or having the clutch hatch and then the parents abandoning the nestlings for lack of proper diet. I scouted the yard for insects, and found a few aphids and lots of baby crickets.

The four young did hatch, and I began a feeding program of regular finch mix (I use Hagen, as its smaller seeds seem easier for the small waxbills to take), aphids, meal worms, baby crickets and egg food prepared according to Mr. Robert Black's formula. (Mr. Black is an aviculturist, who lives in Franklin, North Carolina. His booklet, "Society Finches as Foster Parents", details this mixture which incorporates hard-boiled egg, vitamins, Vionate and powdered protein supplement). The seed, egg-food and crickets turned out to be the most successful diet. The parent birds took few meal worms even though I boiled the worms three minutes and then chopped them. The aphids were simply not plentiful enough. I dropped the feeding of both soon after hatching. The water for all my birds is supplemented with Headstart for poultry and a small amount of sea salt.



The gold-breasted waxbill is the smallest and perhaps prettiest of the African waxbills.

Feedings were morning, noon and about six each evening necessitating three hands-and-knees searches for crickets each day. During the first ten to twelve days after hatching, sixty and more crickets per day were consumed. The number required dropped steadily until the babies fledged at eighteen days. Crickets were then phased out of the feedings.

In late September the pair started another clutch, but this time success was limited to one young hatched out of four eggs. When I examined the other three eggs, I found them to be clear. I located a commercial source of baby crickets. These were fed heavily by the parents, but when the young fledged, it became apparent it

had rickets. The feet were weak, and curled. My less than educated guess is that the commercial crickets, which I kept in a dark basement, did not have the nutritional value of the wild ones.

One of the developments from the first clutch to the second is that the female sat tighter, and spent more time incubating than she did with the first eggs. One day when the male bird was off the nest I raised the plastic cage top to try and catch a glimpse of the eggs. The male darted out and flew about the room for some time before I could net him. The hen continued to stay on the nest covering the eggs. It should be noted that the birds are most open to disturbance when they are out of the nest gathering food. For that reason, I

try to limit my time in the bird room when one of the parents is off the nest, and I know there are nestlings to be fed.

In conclusion, I think the key to having these small birds go to nest in a relatively small cage is the period of acclimatization letting the birds get used to their home. Since the male serves as the impetus to the breeding cycle, often coaxing the female into the nest with a rapid and soft call somewhat like morse code, his comfort in his surroundings can shorten the time it takes the hen to settle down to business. One suggestion to anyone trying to duplicate these results, when the birds show tendencies to nest, keep working with them and adjust conditions. The next step you take might bring success ●