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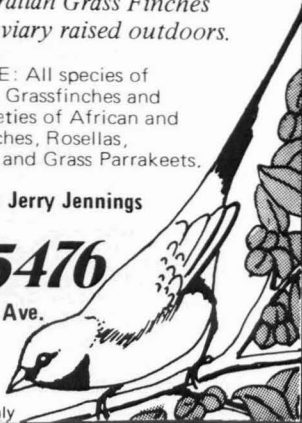
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Melba finch, photo taken by John Krell, photo contest winner, 1979. Full color print appeared on the front cover of June/July 1979 Watchbird.

## Three Successes With Exotic Finches

by John & Kristin Rounds  
Princeton Jct., New Jersey

Among all the pleasures of keeping exotic finches none compare with the satisfaction and sense of accomplishment which come from watching pairs nest and raise their young. We feel that we owe it to our birds to help them reproduce, and we take their successes as proof that the environment we provide for them is satisfactory. Hence we agree with the editor's statement in the June/July 1981 WATCHBIRD that it is the responsibility of successful bird breeders to share their experiences with others. Only in this way can we hope to learn what various species require.

In this article we provide some details on our successes in breeding three species of exotic finch — the Melba Finch (*Pytilia melba*), the Black-crested Finch (*Lophospingus pusillus*), and Schlegel's Twinspot (*Mandingoa nitidula schlegeli*). These three species are easily sexed by their mature plumage. All the individuals involved were purchased from local bird dealers, and we assume that they were all caught in the wild and brought in through quarantine.

### Housing

These successes took place in our planted greenhouse aviary, which measures about eleven feet on a side. Its north and west walls are walls of our house, while the other two are of two-by-four framing covered inside and out with translucent fiber glass. Two large windows

provide ventilation in summer. The fully insulated roof has two three-foot-square sky lights in it, providing much additional light. Day length is extended by four 40W fluorescent bulbs, which are on from around five in the evening until nine at night. A ten-foot electric baseboard heater helps maintain a minimum temperature of 70°F in winter.

About one third of the aviary floor is covered with flagstones, while the remainder is bare soil. The aviary is planted with six *Ficus benjamina* trees and two *Ficus repens* vines, as well as various small ornamental plants, such as *Clivia*, *Sanseveria*, and *Nephtytis*. The trees and vines provide most of the perching places, but in addition two long branches are suspended near the ceiling, and several 3/8" dowels are mounted at the highest part of the ceiling, where the warmth from the 40w night light gathers.

Various nest sites are available to the five or six pairs of birds in the aviary at any given time. These sites include a few cardboard nest boxes (the type Zebra Finches prefer) mounted on the walls, several woven nest baskets mounted in the trees, and several cone-shaped frames made of welded fencing mounted high in the corners and on the walls. The vines form thick mats close to the walls, and the ceiling height trees provide privacy and many places for the birds to build their own nests from scratch. For nesting material we provide 6" lengths of yarn, dried grasses, and wooden packing material.

We enter the aviary twice a day, morning and evening, but we confine our movements to one quarter of the room, and we stay as briefly as possible. We do not examine nests; bitter experience has taught us that to approach an active finch nest is an easy way to cause it to fail.

### Diet

We provide the standard small finch seed mix which the local bird store offers, to which we add more Siberian, German, and large white millets. The result is a mixture that is roughly two parts of each of these three millets, one part canary seed, and one part a combination of linseed, thistle, and oats. The seed is served in 8"-diameter plastic plant saucers, and it is refreshed every other day. The saucers are washed once a week in detergent and Clorox.

The main element in the diet is a soft food made fresh every day from one part moistened Purina Chick Growena, one part crumbled "bird bread", one part germinated Siberian and large white millets, and 1/8 part cod liver oil. Our bird bread is made from a standard corn bread recipe, to which raw wheat germ and a Wheatena-like cereal (from the local health food

store) have been added. The millet is soaked for a full day, then rinsed, drained, and placed in a covered container for another day. By the time it is added to the soft food mixture most of the seeds have broken open and started to grow. The aviary receives a total of a third of a cup, served in two dishes, each topped with 1/2 teaspoon of mashed hard-boiled egg.

Water is provided in a 10"-diameter plastic plant saucer. The saucer is scoured, rinsed, and refilled with fresh water every morning. Once a week the dish is washed in detergent and Clorox.

Strips of fresh lettuce are provided daily, and a slice of fresh orange is set out every other day. Millet sprays, cuttlebone, health grit and crushed egg shell are always available. Mealworms are placed in the soft food dishes and scattered on the floor twice a day. The numbers vary with demand, but usually twelve worms and twelve pupae are given out each time. Approximately fifteen 1/2" crickets are tossed onto the floor each day, this quantity also varying with demand. A fruit fly culture sits on a shelf near the door. This is simply a large plastic margarine tub with many holes punched in the lid and upper edge with a paper punch; 1" sections of banana are added every other day. Various finches hawk for the flies or pick them off the walls, plants, and dishes, and some have been observed stamping about on the lid and picking up flies as they emerge through the holes.

The diet is further enriched by the food we provide the pair of Red-legged Honeycreepers housed in the aviary. This consists of mashed moistened dog kibbles, mashed fruit, and nectar (one part honey, five parts water, plus 1/8 teaspoon Ambrosia Base per pint; with protein powder added at serving time.)

### The Three Successes

Members of each pair were separate until introduced into the aviary. The Melbas were there from April 1979 to September 1980, the Black-crests from December 1980 to April 1981, and the Schlegels from April 1981 to the present (August 1981). Several other pairs of finches were housed in the aviary while these pairs were breeding there. Among these were pairs of Auroras, Lavenders, Gold-breasts, Crimson-rumps, Blue-caps, and Orange-cheeks, as well as the Honeycreepers mentioned above. The total number of mature individuals present at a given time was around fifteen. Only the Honeycreepers are as forceful as the breeding pairs, and with this exception the breeding pairs were the dominant birds of the group. The Melbas and the Black-crests were a bit aggressive, and probably interfered with the breeding efforts of other pairs; indeed the



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By Dr. James E. Rich

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Melbas definitely interfered with an effort by the Auroras. The Schlegels, on the other hand, were quiet and unassuming, hardly interacting with other species. In a face-off situation, however, the other birds backed down before them.

Of the six individuals involved here, only the male Schlegel had been previously set up to breed since joining our collection. With a different female he built an untidy nest in a cardboard nest box in a flight in our basement bird room. Eggs were laid and incubated, but they did not hatch.

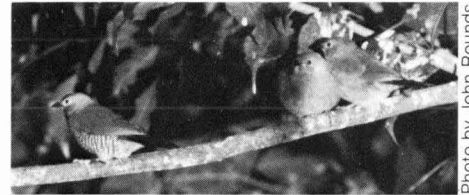
All three pairs started a nest within a month after entering the aviary. The Melbas suffered a few failures before finally, after seven months, fledging two young. Three and a half months later they fledged two more, and then, only a month after this nest, they fledged four more young. We separated the pair when the third clutch was independent. The Black-crests succeeded right away, fledging two young only nine weeks after entering the aviary. Five weeks later two more babies were fledged. A month later, when we removed the birds, two clear eggs were found in the nest. The Schlegels, too, succeeded right away, nine weeks after they were introduced into the aviary. Sadly, the male disappeared three days before the two babies fledged. We have yet to find his body.

We never saw the successful Melba nests (we assume they were high in the trees), but in an earlier unsuccessful attempt they built a standard globe-shaped waxbill nest in plain sight. The male would deliver blades of grass and lengths of wooden packing material to the hen, who, sitting inside the nest, would press the material against the inside of the thickening ball. The Black-crests built their nest on top of an abandoned Lavender nest. This latter had been built in an inverted cone of welded fencing mounted high up on the far wall of the aviary. Lined with fine grasses, the Black-crests' cup-shaped nest had an inside diameter of 1 3/4". The eggs were 3/4" long, pale grey and finely speckled with dark grey and black. The Schlegels built an untidy closed nest, in all about 8" high and 15" across, high in a tree, to which they continually added all sorts of plant debris — leaves, bits of wilted lettuce, etc. The opening was at one side.

The Melba babies were very quiet, and we never heard them in the nest. Nevertheless we knew the pair had nestlings because of the eagerness with which they hunted the crickets we provided in large numbers — over forty a day. In the evening, when I sat in the aviary collecting mealworms from the culture buckets, the Melbas would come within 2 or 3 feet chasing the crickets I had tossed out. The

crickets seemed to suffice for the babies, for the parents have never been seen to take a mealworm.

The Black-crest babies were also silent in the nest. Our first hint of nestlings was the hen's eagerness for mealworms. She would gather up three or four as I threw them to her and then carry them up to the nest and put them in it. Hearing no baby voices, we joked about how the pair had left out a step: didn't they know they had to hatch babies first? Apparently they did, but they hatched very quiet babies. In contrast to the Melbas, the Black-crests have not shown any interest in crickets.



*Male Melba and two young.*

Photo by John Rounds

The Schlegel babies were very noisy in the nest. We could hear them begging when they were quite young. Although the parents do eat mealworms, the number they took did not increase when the babies were in the nest. Nor were they observed hunting crickets. They did spend a great deal of time searching about on the floor, scratching in the dirt among the leaves, but we don't know what they found there.

The Melba babies emerged as fluffy waxbill-type babies, muted in color, "out-of-focus" versions of the hen. Both cock and hen fed them. The babies would follow the parents around as they hunted crickets, demanding any catch. Soon they began trying to figure out what their parents were finding, trying out dried droppings, bits of leaf, anything about the right size and color. Puzzlement was easy to read in the way they would worry at an object, drop it, examine it, walk away and return to it. Finally, after a few weeks they were able to catch their own crickets.

Male Melbas are intolerant of other males, and two cannot be kept together. Hence it was no surprise that as soon as red began to appear on the faces of the young males the father began to harrass them, and they had to be removed. Female offspring were tolerated, and we left them in the aviary with the parents.

The Black-crest babies, like the melbas, emerged as fluffy, foreshortened versions of the hen. Once they fledged the male took over feeding them, giving them mealworms and soft food. The female was somewhat intolerant of the fledglings, but she was soon occupied with the next nest.

The male Schlegel disappeared when the babies were about two weeks old, three days before they fledged. He had been

weak for a period of time after the earlier, unsuccessful nesting attempt, and although he was fat and full-chested when he was put into the aviary it may be that feeding the babies proved too much for him. Fortunately, the female was able to carry on and finish the job alone.

When the Schlegel babies fledged they had none of the fuzziness we have come to expect in baby finches. Instead they looked like little hedgehogs, covered with feathers still growing in their sheaths. Unlike other finch babies, which tumble out of the nest all in a rush, the Schlegel babies emerged tentatively and in stages, taking two full days to fledge. On the first day they ventured out for short periods, sitting on branches near the nest opening, stretching, flapping their stubby wings, and exercising their legs and feet. At times when they were in the nest the hen sat near the door, murmuring a soft insect-like churring sound, as if encouraging them to come out. On the second day they emerged more often and for longer periods, spending several minutes at a stretch clambering around on the roof of the nest and hopping about on nearby branches. On the morning of the third day the babies were seen sitting placidly in a tree on the opposite side of the aviary. Now fully fledged, they were more coordinated and self-confident than other finch babies are on their first day away from the nest, clearly benefiting from their two days of practice. Once fledged, they were fed by the hen for about two weeks before they started to feed themselves. She fed them whatever she was finding on the floor along with seed she hulled for them.

#### Main Points

We have learned a great deal about keeping and breeding exotic finches since buying our first pair of Red-ears thirteen years ago. We feel that the main factors contributing to the successes described above are:

1. the planted aviary, providing privacy and a variety of live foods;
2. the population — not too many birds, and most of them quiet and unassuming relative to the successful pairs;
3. the varied diet — the soft food and the live food, as well as the usual seed and lettuce; and
4. a minimum of human interference.

We hope that others will share their successes by writing articles such as this or by filling out the AFA Breeding Checklist. Reports of a number of successes for a given species can lead to conclusions about what that species needs, and such conclusions will help us all assure that that species will always be well represented in aviculture. ●

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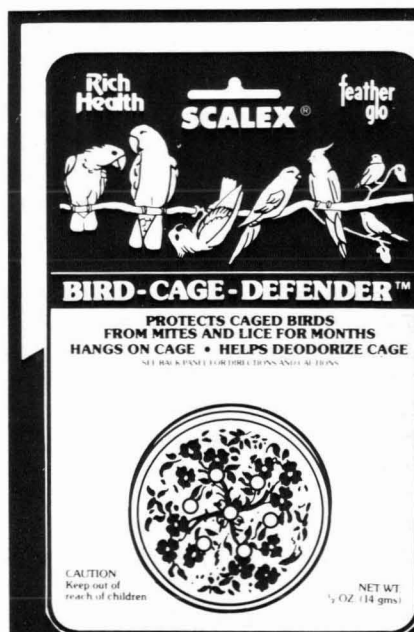
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