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# the Black-crest Finch

by  
Ken Smith  
Holiday, Florida

The first time I saw the Black-crested Finch (*Lophospingus pusillus*, according to Harman and Friends, *All About Finches*, T.F.H. Publications) was on a trip to Rhode Island in 1976, where I saw them in a pet shop. I bought the pair, brought them back to Florida — and watched the “hen” moult into a beautiful male. It was four birds later before I finally located a true hen. All the birds were imported specimens, so their ages can only be guessed at.

I kept the true pair in a cage for two years without results. Being fairly new to aviculture and reluctant to experiment, I made no changes in their housing or diet for those two years. I had spoken to a few people who had raised them and followed their advice.

*(Ed. Note: The Black-crested finch has been cage-bred, on a least a few occasions, in conditions similar to those used to breed canaries.)*

By 1979 I was raising Australian finches successfully in cages and realized the cage space was too valuable to waste on the Black-crested finches, so I retired them to an outside aviary.

The aviary was three feet wide, six feet long and seven feet high. It is planted, but the Black-crested are not shy birds: they seem always to be on display rather than hiding in the shrubbery. The aviary is shared with breeding pairs of African Fire Finches, Green Singing Finches, Bourkes Parakeets, Diamond Doves and Button Quail.

In the aviary their diet year-round consists of finch and parakeet mix, small black oily sunflower seed, safflower seed (the Bourkes crack the two preceding seeds and the finches help themselves

thereafter), and greens, daily. Three times a week they are fed canned corn; on alternating days they get sprouted seed. Also fed daily are hard boiled egg food (mixed with Vionate and “Supplement for the Birds” and fed half a teaspoon per pair of finches) and about four mealworms per finch per day. Bekfin Sluis Insectile Mix, grit and cuttlebone are always present.

I do not trust automatic waterers so fresh water is given once a day. I gave up trying to keep drinking and bathing water separate as they always use every bowl or cup for bath water anyway.

The birds made no attempt to breed in 1979, but in March of 1980 the male’s behavior began to change. His color got much blacker and his song could be heard 30 feet away, over the sounds of cockatiels and other hookbills.

On April 3rd an egg was found in a standard closed finch basket. The nest was poorly lined with straw and white feathers; the egg was light blue with brownish splotches and was about the size of a Diamond Dove egg. Additional eggs were laid on the 4th and 5th, though at no time did I see either bird building the nest or incubating — whenever I entered the building which houses the aviary the birds could be seen sitting near the nest. They would not enter it until after I had left. (I call it a building but the aviary is actually exposed to weather on all sides and is adjoined by another flight the same size and three others twice as large. White cockatiels breed in the next flight and do not disturb the finches. Temperatures in Holiday, on the Gulf Coast of Florida, have ranged from the upper twenties to mid-nineties during the time the Black-crested finches have been in the aviary).



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*Black-crested finches, the male on the left, the hen on the right.*

On April 20 two eggs hatched. The next day the third egg hatched. The parents were not aggressive, except at the meal worm dish. I had increased the worms to about 20 a day but they were gone in a matter of minutes, with the Black-crested male fighting any other bird that approached the dish. I finally had to throw meal worms on the ground for the other birds while putting about 50 worms in the dish for the Black-crested finches each morning and again in the evening. Even with the increased supply, the male would not allow any of the other birds near the dish until the female had taken all of the

worms to her young.

On May 1 the first of the rapidly-growing young fledged. The other two left the nest the next day. They were not fully feathered, had short flight feathers and experienced great difficulty trying to fly around the aviary. The first three evenings both parent birds could be seen getting the young back to the nest. Thereafter they were on their own except for continued feeding by the cock bird.

On May 1 I had noticed the hen leave another finch basket. I found an egg there and another on the second day. The female paid no attention to the young

after that.

I left the three immature birds with the parents until May 15, when the second clutch of eggs hatched and the male became aggressive towards the young. I thought it best to separate them. They survived nicely after being with the parents only 26 days.

This procedure continued for two more clutches. The third clutch was again two eggs; the fourth clutch contained four eggs. All of the eggs were fertile.

The only problem encountered with the young, which were put into a cage upon their removal from the aviary, was

that they got wet bottoms when given mealworms. They were raised in the cage without mealworms until the spring of 1981, when they were set up in aviaries of their own. Under the same conditions outlined here the subsequent generations have continued to breed successfully. I am now keeping year-old birds set up in cages in the hopes that I can eventually establish these birds as free breeders in cages as well.

I have a fairly good bird library, and I find it very useful in helping solve problems. However, I have come to the conclusion that while books give a good *basic* knowledge, most of the books' contents proved to be wrong when it comes to breeding seasons and diets. The problem, as I see it, is that most authors are either English or European. Their diets cannot be duplicated here and breeding seasons are quite different. This is not meant as criticism, but it seems we have enough breeders in the U.S. that some of them could write useful books. I have learned more from some of the Watchbird's articles about certain types of birds than I have from some \$50 books.

Experience, of course, is the best teacher. Some of my observations on the Black-crested finch:

1. Hens seem always in short supply. A local importer sold about a dozen pair in the fall of 1980. So far I've received calls from at least five of those customers seeking hens to replace the ones they bought and which subsequently died. Of the first 11 birds I raised, only four were hens. Two of the hens died, while all of the males survived.

2. Having seen more than a dozen young birds now, I can distinguish immatures from hens fairly easily. The young have a blotchy gray-black chest whereas the hens' chests are solid gray. This should help other breeders avoid my initial mistake in sexing birds bought for breeding purposes.

3. Black-crested finch cannot be raised under societies because the young beg with their heads held straight up instead of twisted to the side like most of the common finches.

*(Ed. Note: Siskins and Canaries beg in this fashion. It would be interesting to try fostering Black-crested finches to canaries)*

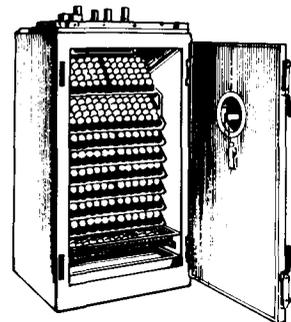
4. Breeding season for the South American bird has been April to August. Average temperature during that time is about 90°F in the aviary. I credit most of my breeding success to the "Supplement for the Birds" eggfood mix. The Black-crested would devour it to feed their young. I mix a week's supply (48 eggs) at a time and freeze it in daily portions. ●

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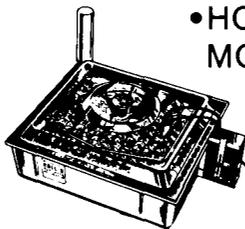


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