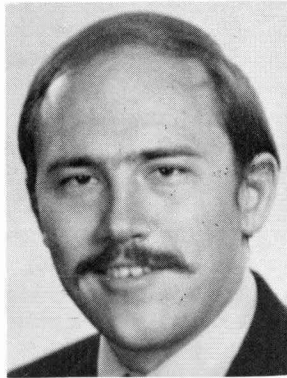


Breeding Finches In Captivity

by Jerry Jennings



Jerry Jennings



-  PARSON FINCH DISTRIBUTION (approx)
-  SHAFTAIL DISTRIBUTION (approx)

THE PARSON FINCH

The Parson or Black-throated Finch (*Poephila cincta*), the second of the three species of the genus, is much less common in captivity than the Shaftail, though more readily available than the Masked Grassfinch. The relatively fewer numbers of Parson Finches is probably due to a lack of popularity amongst breeders because of their less colorful similarity to the Shaftail.

The adult Parson male is almost a carbon copy of the Shaftail except the grey area of the crown and nape is darker in tone with a hint of silver. The back also appears to be a darker shade of brown. The most obvious differences are the Parson's black beak and the absence of the elongated tail feathers.

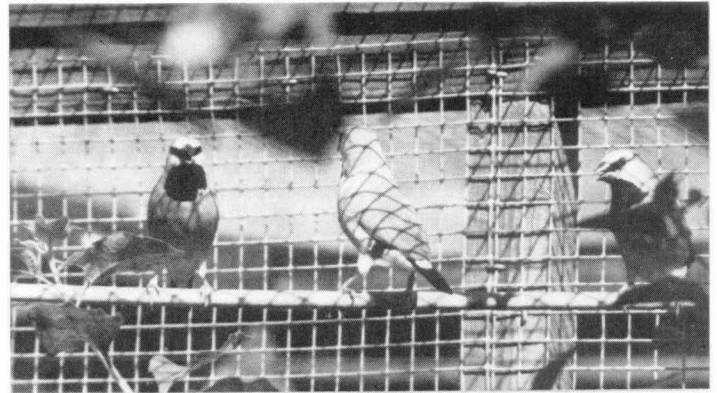
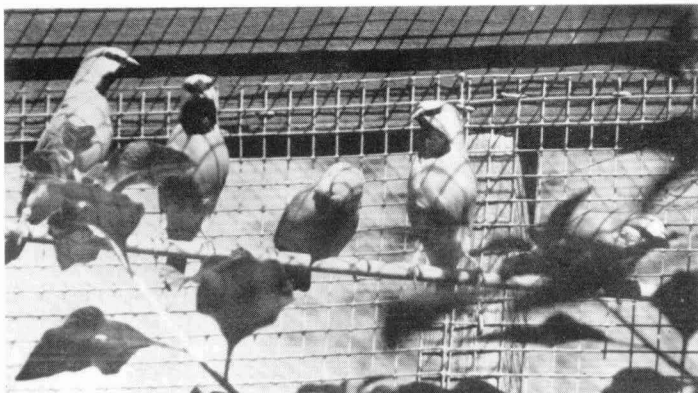
The female Parson is identical to the male except the throat "bib" is usually smaller than the male's. Newly fledged Parsons are identical in every way to young Shaftails — both having black beaks. The Parson's beak remains black, while the Shaftail turns red-orange as the birds mature.

Two subspecies of the Parson Finch have been identified: the Black-rumped Parson or Diggle's Finch (*Poephila cincta atropygialis*) found in the Cairns-Normanton area of Queensland, has a lighter grey color on the crown and nape, a richer fawn color on the back and breast, and has black upper tail coverts instead of the white. *P.c. nigrotecta* differs from *atropygialis* in the breast color, which is dark brown.

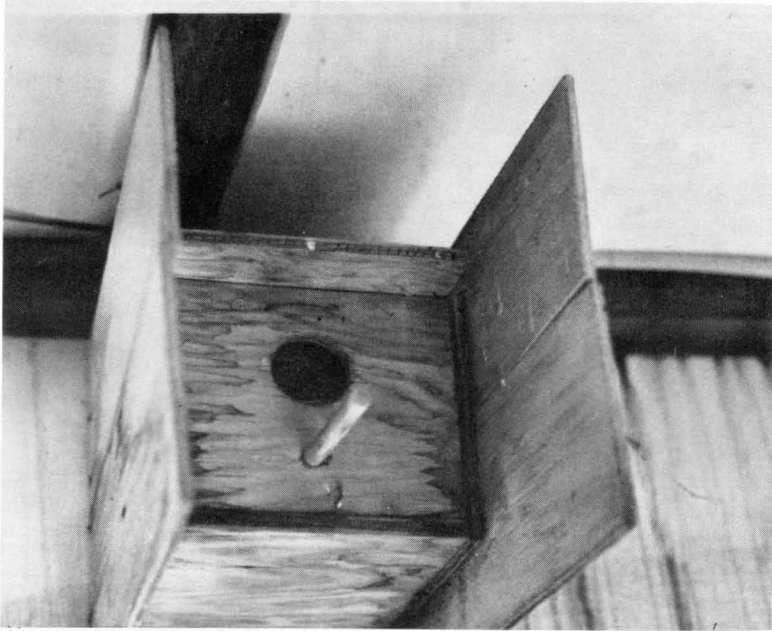
Immelmann has described the Parson and Shaftail as "...sibling species, replacing each other geographically..." indicating their evolution is a relatively recent phenomenon.

In the wild the Parson inhabits open Eucalyptus forest with a heavy ground cover consisting of grasses and shrubs. Parsons prefer to be near watercourses. Along the coast they occupy pandanus plains. Parsons, particularly the white-rumped variety which prefers dry country, have been extending their region. Although they are primarily a tropical species, temperatures in part of their range in northern New South Wales frequently drop below freezing on winter nights.

Parson Finches subsist on a variety of half ripe and ripe grass seeds. Flyg termites and other small insects round out their diet.



Parson Finch, group composed mostly of males.



Nest box, with privacy shields, contains 5 parson eggs.

The identity call and conversation call of the Parson are nearly identical to the Shaftail's. Courting and mating behaviors of the Parson and Shaftail Finches are nearly identical as well (see *Watchbird*, Vol. III, No. 4, August 1976).

Immelmann has stated that Parsons have been observed nesting in Eucalyptus trees five to forty feet from the ground, in Pandanus Palms along the coast, and occasionally in parrot breeding holes in termite mounds. Parsons are also frequently found nesting among the sticks of the nests of birds of prey. The Parson's nest is dome-shaped with an entrance tunnel built from grass stems. The clutch size varies from five to eight.

Like most Australian finches the Parson breeds immediately after the rainy season, which occurs twice annually. If there are plenty of half-ripe seeds available, the Parson will breed at any time.

Parson Finches have been bred in captivity for more than a hundred years and in the U.S. for most of the twentieth century at least. They are nearly as prolific as the Shaftail, but because of the fewer numbers available, it is more difficult to establish good breeding pairs. Parsons may be housed in colonies, but single pairs per flight is best as they interfere with each others breeding nests.

Since it is fairly easy to visually distinguish males from females, as opposed to Shaftails, individual pairs can be quickly set up. If there is no nesting activity after a few weeks, pairs may be split and re-mated.

Parson Finches should never be housed together with Shaftails as they will readily hybridize. Unfortunately, many of the

"Parsons" being imported into the U.S. are NOT pure blooded Parsons, but Parson/Shaftail crosses. These crosses are readily identifiable, having an orange spot on the beak, or a maroon tinge to the beak instead of a pure black beak. Occasionally these hybrids will also feature a rudimentary shafted feather or two in the tail.

Parsons can be fairly pugnacious around other finches. I have observed them catch and shake Lady Gouldians by the wing, which resulted in the death of the victim on one occasion. Housed with birds of equal size and temperament, however, Parsons will do well. I currently keep them mixed with Diamond Sparrow and Crimson Pileated Finches, which have bred and reared young, too. An alternative might be to house Parsons together with grass parrakeets.

Parson Finches at Walnut Acres are provided a variety of nest sites including boxes, wicker baskets, tumbleweeds, and naturally growing plants. They generally choose nest boxes, which measure 5½" x 5½" x 5½". These boxes are stuffed to the top with pieces of Bermuda or Crab-grass.

In captivity Parsons lay four to seven eggs. Fertility does not appear to be as high as in Shaftails, however, I find few people breeding Shaftails with whom I can compare notes. Incubation of the eggs lasts approximately fourteen days. Young fledge in approximately three weeks.

Parson Finches will not tolerate interference with their nest in my experience. If the box is handled even before the eggs hatch, the young will be tossed out either

immediately or just after they hatch. This has happened in every instance without exception. The only young to be successfully raised were reared when the birds were left completely alone.

In addition to the standard fare of finch mix and spray millet Parsons will voraciously devour mealworms, which are offered at a daily rate of 10 to 15 per pair. Greens are limited to what grows in the aviary — including millet which has sprouted and grown on the aviary floor. Plants in the aviaries containing Parsons at Walnut Acres include Brazilian Pepper Tree, Honeysuckle, and Potato Vine, a member of the nightshade family. Cuttlebone, grit, and eggshell which has been boiled and crushed are provided for calcium.



Female Parson in tree.

Drinking water containing Headstart Vitamins at the ratio of one teaspoon per gallon is provided fresh daily year round.

Parson Finches are fairly nervous at the approach of people, especially when kept in a colony. Care must be taken to not unduly disturb them in order to avoid injury and abandonment of nests.

There have been a number of hybrids occurring in the Parson including crosses with the Shaftail, Masked Grassfinch, Owl Finch, Zebra Finch, Society Finch, White-headed Nun, Spice Finch, Cutthroat Finch, and Red-headed Parrot Finch.

Mutations in the Parson appear to be limited. I currently have an all grey female, which may or may not be a true mutation. A pied Parson male appeared in the collection of H. Hounslow in England and was successfully reproduced this year. The pied male was mated with a normal appearing daughter which resulted in two more peds in the f2 generation.

Much remains to be done if the Parson is to be firmly established in American aviculture. I hope other breeders take an avid interest in this bird lest the species disappear.

In the next issue I will discuss the rare and beautiful Masked Grassfinch. ■