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Breeding the Shafttail Finches

By Jerry Jennings
Woodland Hills, California

The shafttail grassfinch (*Poephila acuticauda*) is a native of Australia, distributed along that country's northern coast from Derby in Western Australia to the Leichardt River in Queensland. Although its entire range lies in the tropics, it inhabits dry savannahs, avoiding grassy plains and scrub areas, and is found most numerous near streams and waterholes.

In their native habitat shafttails prefer to breed in the highest branches of eucalyptus, sometimes constructing their nest inside a clump of mistletoe. Shafttails have also been found nesting in palms and even bushes and tussocks of grass in areas lacking tall trees. The nests are generally constructed of dried pieces of grass lined internally with plant wool, feathers and other soft materials. During the non-breeding season simpler roosting nests are constructed, which lack the soft linings.

Breeding season in the wild corresponds to the rainy season, when there is a prevalence of half-ripe grass seeds available to feed the young. Consequently the breeding season may be very short or non-existent during dry spells and very extended during prolonged rainy seasons. Shafttails are capable of breeding any time of the year and commonly raise two to three broods annually.

The native diet of the shafttail consists primarily of ripe and half-ripe grass seeds. During breeding season this is augmented with assorted insects including flying ants and termites, which shafttails will hawk in mid-air.

The shafttail is one of three similar appearing finches; the other two are the related parson and masked grassfinches.

The shafttail has the crown and nape grey, mantle fawn, back and wings brown, band across rump and the tail feathers black, upper tail coverts white, and there is a vertical black stripe on each leg. The lores are black as is a throat patch, which is pear-shaped and larger in the male than in the female (otherwise sexes are alike). The breast and abdomen are pinkish fawn, the vent and under tail coverts are white, the legs and feet reddish orange and the eyes are brown. The bill varies from yellow to red. The parson and masked are similar in that the color patterns are identical from the breast down including the leg stripe. The parson, in fact looks like the immature shafttail in that both have a black beak, although the parson's crown and nape are darker grey than in the shafttail. The masked has a lemon yellow bill with a brown crown and nape. The masked's bib is very small as opposed to the shafttail's and parson's.

It has long been believed by a number of breeders that two subspecies of the shafttail exist: the "shafttail" (yellow bill) and the "Heck's" (red bill). However, there is little evidence to support this taxonomically, since there is no other variation and no geographical boundary between the two "races." The westernmost population features the yellow bill and the easternmost the red bill, but there are all manner of variations in between. In captivity most birds feature a red or reddish orange beak, which is more attractive.

Of all the finches cultivated in captivity perhaps none, other than the zebra, are more prolific than the shafttail. They may be colony bred, but are more productive when housed one pair to a flight.

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Flights may vary in size from as small as a flight cage 4' x 2' x 2' to as large as the breeder can contemplate. Shaftails are not very discriminating in nest sites and will use boxes, baskets, plants, etc. so long as they have nesting materials sufficient in quality and quantity. Dried grasses, preferably devil or bermuda (which retain their strength when dry), along with feathers, clean dog hair, plant wool, etc. (for nest lining) amply satisfy that requirement.

Shaftails will lay 4-6 small white eggs, with one or two eggs often proving infertile. Incubation lasts approximately 14 days, sometimes a day less during warm weather. Newly hatched young are covered with natal down, which disappears as feathers develop. The young will fledge the nest at approximately 21 days of age and will continue to beg food from the parents for 10-14 days. At about three and a half months, the

Two excellent views of a male shafttail.
(*Poephila acuticauda*)



Photos by Craig Mole, El Cerrito, CA

young have acquired their adult plumage, and the beak has turned from its natal black to red.

The basic diet for shafttails is fairly simple and inexpensive. They, of course, require a good seed mixture, which should contain 10%-15% canary seed, 10%-15% large proso millet (white), and about 10% each of another seven or eight types of millet. If the locally available finch mixes lack canary, as they often do, then that mix may be supplemented with parakeet mix, which is high in canary and proso. Shafttails are also fond of spray millet and delight in working the seed out of the sprays.

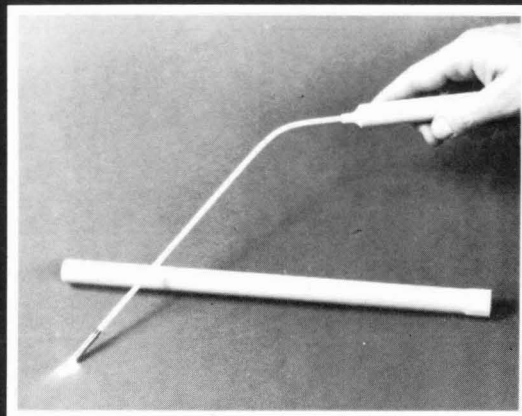
In addition to the basic seeds, shafttails should also receive some insect food, most importantly during the period when young are in the nest. Such insects as mealworms, waxworms, corn grubs, fly larvae, ant eggs, etc. do nicely and are commercially available. In outdoor aviaries, shafttails will take advantage of naturally occurring insects such as sowbugs, earwigs, ants and spiders. This may not be a good source of insect food, with exception of spiders, as the first three live on the ground and are suspected vectors of intestinal parasites in finches. However, if the aviary has never been infested with internal parasites, the problem is probably non-existent, since these ground dwelling bugs must consume parasite eggs that pass out in the finches droppings.

Finches must always have fresh water available. They should be offered a supply of grit, preferably a mineral grit or oyster shell. Additional calcium should be provided via cuttlebone or sterilized ground chicken shells. Vitamins may be offered to outdoor birds, but are more essential to indoor birds. Vitamins may be administered in the water or sprinkled on soft foods.

The diet cited above is basic and will assure healthy birds, young and old. However, the aviculturist should feel free to add whatever items, such as fruit, peanut butter, and conditioning foods (Petamine, K-T Trill), he desires and can afford. Half-ripe seeds, so important in the wild, may be obtained by planting seeds from the finch mix and taking the growing seed head while green. Half-ripe seed heads may also be found on various native grasses during the spring and summer in most states.

Shaftails are not only attractive in appearance, but also in behavior. They are very gregarious and have developed interesting greeting postures, which consists of a rapid up and down jerking of the head, when meeting. These birds will richly reward the aviculturist. ●

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