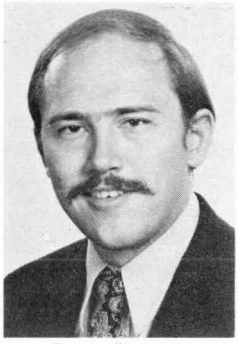
Breeding Finches In Captivity

by Jerry Jennings



Jerry Jennings

THE MASKED GRASSFINCH

The Masked Finch or Masked Grassfinch *(Poephila personata)* is the third and the rarest in aviculture of the three species of the genus Poephila. It is a striking bird with an interesting personality and displays a remarkably well developed "social behavior".

Like the Shaftail and Parson Finches, the Masked Grassfinch is a tropical bird inhabiting northern Australia from just north of Derby in the state of Western Australia to the Cape York Peninsula in northern Queensland. Immelmann has observed them as far south as Victoria River Downs (16° 25' S).

The Masked Grassfinch is a light reddish brown on the crown, nape, back, and breast. The lower stomach area and vent are creamy white while the rump and upper tail coverts are bright white. The tail feathers are black. The thighs have a black stripe down the outer side typical of the genus. The legs and feet are light reddish orange.

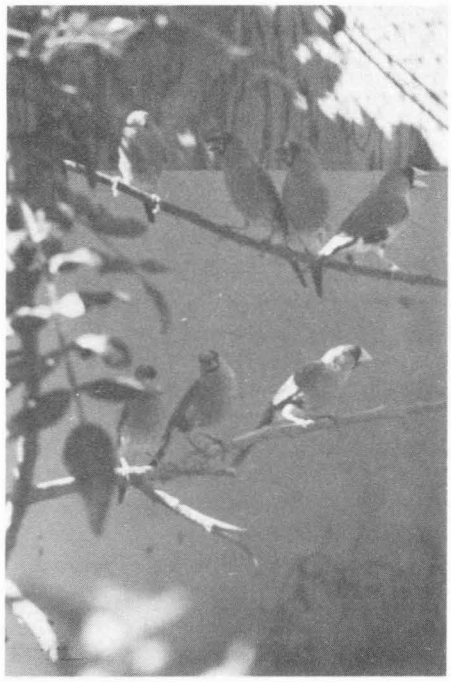
The most noticeable feature of the Masked Finch is the large, bright lemon yellow beak set off by the black feathers of the forehead, lores, and upper throat creating the "mask" that gives the species its name. The eyes are brown.

The Masked Finch is monomorphic as are the Shafttail and Parson.

Although Shaftails and Parson Finches can be sexed with great difficulty, I have never been able to distinguish the sexes of the Masked despite intense scrutiny. It has been said that the face mask of the male is slightly larger than in the female. The only method of sexing these birds is through prolonged observation of their behavior during courtship. During their display, the male will sing in a very excited manner while hopping to and fro along the perch towards the hen. Just before copulation the male will rapidly vibrate its tail vertically. If the female excepts, she will respond with the tail vibration. Copulation follows.

Since mature males demonstrate courtship behavior fairly regularly in captivity, they are generally easy to spot. However, in a group of aviary birds young males or non-dominate males will display much less frequently, thus allowing them to possibly be confused with hens. Removal of extra birds from the flight will solve the problem. These birds may then be placed in another flight for sexing.

Family of Masked Grassfinches (adult pair with five young)



There appears to be only one subspecies of the Masked Finch known as the White-eared Grassfinch *(poephila personata leucotis).* This variety is found on the eastern side of the Gulf of Carpentaria on the Cape York Peninsula. Leucotis differs from the dominate race in having the sides of the head white. Leucotis is not known in American aviculture to the best of my knowledge.

The Masked Finch is a dry climate bird inhabiting lightly forested country with a heavy ground cover of small bushes and grasses as well as open grassy plains. Immelmann indicates they spend much of their time on the ground, where they also frequently nest. This preference for the ground, however, does not seem to carry over into captivity.

In the wild the Masked Finch's diet is composed primarily of ripe and half-ripe grass seeds. During the breeding season they consume large quantities of flying insects which they catch in mid-air. The main staple is flying termites, although they pick up a few bugs from the ground. Immelmann indicates these birds become almost entirely insectivorous at the beginning of the breeding season. However, in captivity they will continue to consume a high percentage of seeds while the young are in the nest, possibly because not enough insects are offered and there are relatively few naturally occuring ones because of the size limitations of the aviary.

The Masked Grassfinch probably best demonstrates the pigeon-like drinking behavior characteristic of most grassfinches. Rather than taking a mouthful of water, then tilting the head up to swallow, the Masked Finch dips its bill into the water and sucks continuously without pause until its thirst is satisfied. Immelmann states that sucking bouts of more than twenty seconds duration have been observed in some species. In fact, the Poephila species are so versatile as to be able to hang upside down and drink, thus allowing them access to water inaccessible to other birds. It is this great versatility that Immelmann attributes to the relative increase in the numbers of the Masked, Shaftail, and Parson Finches during the years following the settlement of northern Australia.

In the wild Masked Finches seem to often prefer nesting on the ground. Consequently, they generally do not attempt to breed until the rains have ceased. Their late start, compared to other Australian Finches, usually results in only one brood of young per year, as opposed to three or more broods per year in other species. The Lady Gouldian Finch, for example,

may have up to five broods with as many as eight young per brood (in captivity Mr. Sol Spritzer of Los Angeles had one brood of ten Goulds in 1973). Immelmann has noted that the Masked Finch is perhaps the commonest of the northern Australian finches, indicating a very low mortality rate.

Nest building in the Masked Grassfinch is a time consuming process in the wild, often requiring several weeks to complete a nest. Both sexes share in collecting materials and working them into the structure. An interesting curiosity of the Masked Finch's nest is the large amount of charcoal they contain. Immelmann says both species carry charcoal to the nest. There is so much of it used that the eggs usually turn black during the incubation period. The charcoal may serve to remove moisture from the eggs caused by the damp ground or the bird's feces.

Other ingredients of the Masked Finch nest include plant wood, animal fur and feathers.

Masked Finches lay four to six eggs with incubation lasting approximately twenty-two days. Young, which hatch covered with natal down, are very like adults upon fledging except for a duller appearance and a black beak characteristic of all grassfinches at that age. At about six weeks of age the beak begins to turn yellow. The color change is complete at about three months of age.

In the aviary, Masked Finches can be very prolific. The only drawback is the identification of males and females. Once that has been accomplished good breeding pairs can be established. It is necessary, however, to have a number of birds with which to work, since not every male and female will be compatible. If the breeder cannot afford several birds, and they are expensive, then it would be prudent to locate other breeders with whom he can trade.

Masked Grassfinches should be housed one breeding pair to a flight. Colony breeding should be avoided, if for no other reason than to make it easy for the breeder to know which pairs are not breeding. These non-breeding pairs can then be separated and re-mated with other birds, until the proper combination is found.

Masked Grassfinches at Walnut Acres receive a diet of a specially prepared Finch Mix that contains 20% Canary, 20% large White Proso, 15% large Red Millet, 10% Water Grass, 10% small Finch Millet, 10% small red millet, 10% Millet 610, and 5% Steel Cut Oats. There is no niger, rape, or flax found in standard commercial mixes – all of which are ex-

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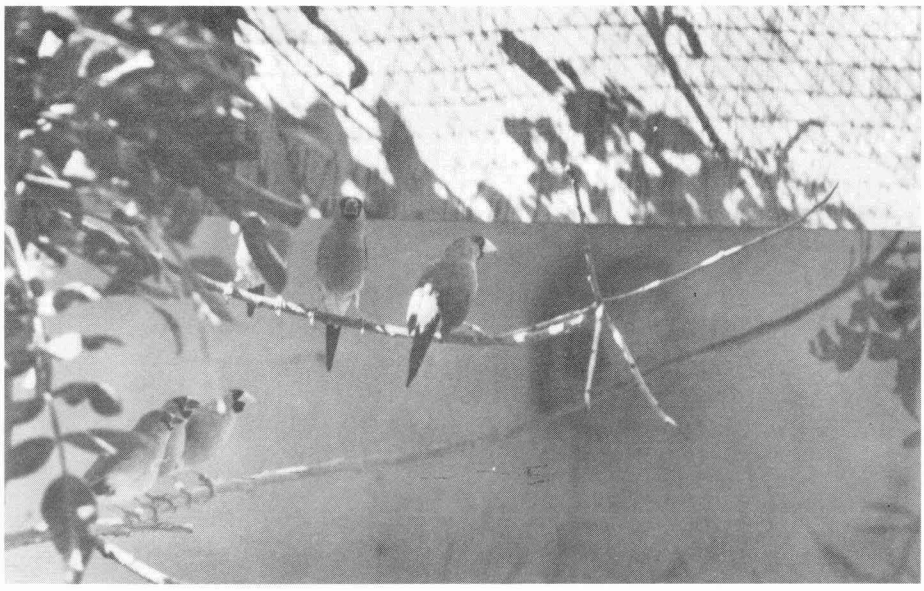
pensive and not appreciated by most finches.

In addition to the above mix, the birds are fed spray millet, mealworms, cuttlebone, and oyster shell grit. Headstart Poultry Vitamins are given in the water fresh daily at the ratio of one teaspoon per gallon. Other dietary supplements should include fresh apple, orange, and greens – spinach, romain lettuce, comfrey, etc.

Several pairs of Masked Grassfinches have nested at Walnut Acres over the past couple of years. In every case, the birds have chosen a tumbleweed for a nest site. The nest is ball shaped 6-8 inches in diameter and so inaccessible generally as to preclude examination even from a distance with a flashlight. Mr. Don Rice, a member of the Avicultural Society of America and the only other successful Masked Finch breeder known to me, recently advised me that some of his birds nested in wooden boxes. Indeed, there are so very few Masked breeders around that it is difficult to compare notes.

Masked Grassfinch, breeding pair with five young.



Nesting material provided the Masked Finches, as well as to the other finches includes green devil or bermuda grass, string, white dog hair from a Cockapoo, occasional feathers, and charcoal.

Masked Finches seem to be sensitive to interference. The checking of nests should, therefore, be strictly avoided. The average number of young fledged is four, though five is not uncommon. A good pair will produce three to five broods a year totaling more than twenty young.

The Masked Grassfinch is such an attractive and desirable bird, that it deserves the attention of aviculturists looking for a specialty and a project benefitting aviculture. It would do well to have this species firmly established in American aviaries.

In the next issue I will discuss the Australian Mannikins of the genus Lonchura ▪

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.....in Congress Assembled

CONTRA COSTA COUNTY BREEDERS WIN

After a lengthy struggle with county bureaucracy the Contra Costa County Planning Department finally has come to terms with the need of local aviculturists to have aviaries.

After several hearings at the Planning Commission level, and despite numerous directives to do so, the Planning Department had failed to budge on their de facto decision to now allow aviaries. As our readers may recall from previous coverage of this continuing saga, local breeders were prohibited by law from having aviaries in their back yards, even if their lots were as big as 2½ acres! Times have changed.

A.F.A. and several of the local A.F.A. members decided it was time to move in a new direction. Instead of trying to prevent new restrictions from being implemented, A.F.A. was now trying to undo some previous damage enacted several years ago. It has been said by many, and not without good reason, that once a law is passed it is impossible to go back. We have proved this ain't necessarily so!

As late as September the Planning Department had not responded to our letters or proposal. Finally, A.F.A. advised all members of the Planning Commission in writing of the Department's lack of response to us or local breeders. A copy of the proposal was included along with copies of ordinances from several other demographically similar California counties, which covered the keeping of aviaries and birds.

Behold a miracle was born as the Planning Department begrudgingly responded to some apparent no nonsense request from Planning Commission memmembers. On November 16th, the latest Planning Commission hearing, a new proposal was presented, accepted by local breeders, and passed by the Commission.

Under the proposed changes, aviaries will henceforth be permitted on residential lots in the county. Anyone living on a residential zoned lot anywhere from 6,000 square feet up to 100,000 square feet will be allowed to erect an aviary. Aviaries, however, are restricted in size at a ratio of one square foot of aviary for every fifty square feet of lot area. For example, a 6,000 sq. ft. lot would be allowed an aviary 120 sq. ft.

Although there are some limitations, the newly proposed ordinance does not limit the number of birds that can be kept. It also allows for the application for a special land use permit that would allow more aviary space on any given lot size. Further, and perhaps the open door to unlimited aviaries is the stipulation that anyone possessing a Federal Fish and Wildlife Service Permit or a State Fish and Game permit is exempt from any restrictions on size of aviaries. Contra Costa could become fertile grounds for game bird breeders who routinely possess permits for migratory waterfowl and other native North American species.

This adventure in reversing a bad situation is encouraging. It shows what can be accomplished when breeders get behind A.F.A. ▪