



Quail Finch . . . An African Curiosity

by Jerry Jennings
Woodland Hills, California

Male on nest.

When thinking of finches, most aviculturists think of fast flying little birds that dart from tree to tree, roost high off the ground and build nests in boxes, baskets, and bushes. Not so the quail finch.

Quail finches are distributed throughout central and southern Africa from Senegal on the west coast to Ethiopia on the east and as far south as Cape Town, South Africa. Quail finches inhabit open grasslands especially near water around which grow certain grasses the seeds of which they are fond. These finches usually occur in small groups and will rise steeply at one's feet with whirring wings and a plaintive call when disturbed.

There are two species, the South African (*Ortygospiza fuscocrissa*) and the West African (*O. atricollis*), and several sub-species. The South African quail finch has been the subject of several importations into the U.S. over the past few years and has been bred on a number of occasions.

Fuscocrissa is distributed from Damaraland and northern Kalahari in the west of South Africa to southern Cape Province in the east and as far north as Uganda and Ethiopia. The male has a black mask with a large white ring around the eye (not to be confused with eye-ring) and a white bib under the bill. Crown, back, wings, rump, and tail are slate gray. The sides and breast are horizontally striped black and white. The abdomen is a rich chestnut or teak color. Legs and vent are light brown. The female is similar to the male except she lacks the black face mask and the bib is significantly smaller. Young are indistinguishable from females. The West African species differs in that the male lacks the white ring around the eye and the white bib on the throat, and probably has not been imported into the U.S.



This tall tuft of grass proved to be a suitable nest site for a pair of quail finches.



Female at nest; note her softer grey and white coloring, compared to the male's black and white.

Photos by John Mitchell, senior bird keeper, San Diego Zoo



*Male quail finch
with two of his
youngsters.*



*The male gets
involved in the
feeding chores.*

Quail finch, as their name would imply, are the only waxbills that live and nest on the ground both in the wild and in captivity. They almost never perch in the wild, even on grass-stalks. They seem to prefer bare patches of ground between clumps of grass. They nest in the wild from December to April, however, in captivity they readily adapt to the spring and summer seasons of the northern hemisphere and will occasionally continue breeding into the fall. They use grass to construct a round domed nest lined with feathers. It is built on the ground usually beside or underneath a tuft of grass or low hanging bough of a tree or shrub. Eggs number four to six and are pure white.

Incubation lasts about two weeks and the nestlings remain in the nest for about 20 days. Babies are fed by the parents by regurgitation and do not get up and walk about like normal quail to which they are not even remotely related. Young obtain their mature coloration in two to three months.

Quail finches are fairly gregarious birds and should be housed two or more pairs per flight depending on space available and potential ground

nesting sites. Since they neither mingle with other finches, nor compete with them, the number of other finches in the flight will not normally affect quail finches and vice versa.

Diet consists of a variety of seeds such as the millets, canary seed, etc., that are found in a good finch mix plus a number of spiders and other insects they will find on their own in the outdoor aviary. Mealworms may be supplemented, too. Since they are very fond of water, plenty should be available at all times to which a good vitamin should be added. If they are not on a soil floor (best for their feet), grit should be provided along with cuttlebone or some other calcium source.

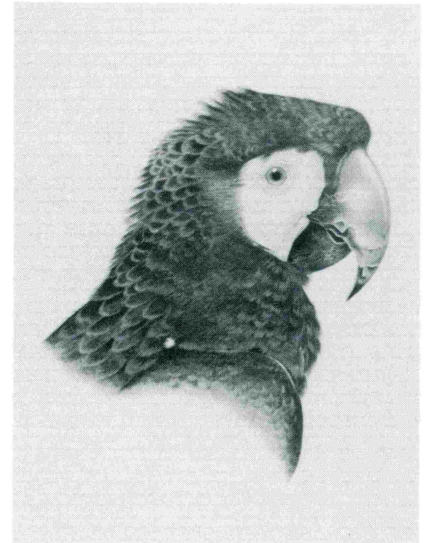
Quail finch are very hardy birds that will tolerate most climates and a very wide temperature range from the mid-twenties to over a hundred degrees (provided shade is available). They are excellent breeders and will nest several times in a year. Though somewhat expensive, they will certainly reward the venturesome aviculturist with hours of enjoyment and a sense of achievement, since few people work with these unique birds. ●

Full color

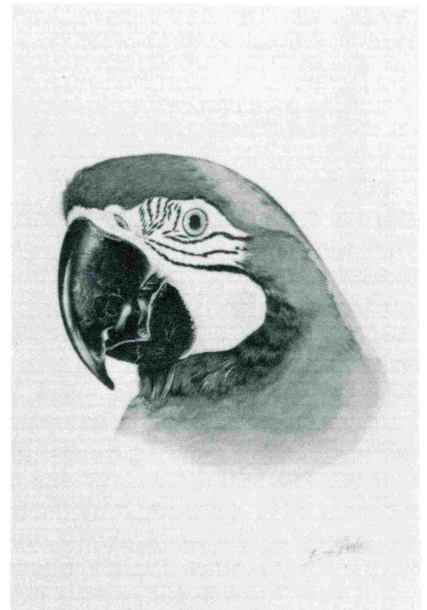
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