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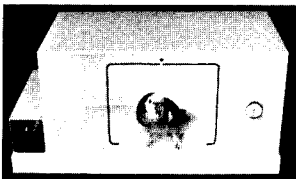


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THE MELBA FINCHES

by Robert G. Black
Bryson City, North Carolina

Melba finches are a species that is seen occasionally in aviculture, but they are not plentiful and only very rarely breed successfully. Virtually all of the melba finches available to American aviculture are imported from their native areas of Africa.

The melba finch is native over a wide area of central and southern Africa, but not in the areas of rain forests. It is a bird of the scrublands and savannas. The acacia thornlands are a favorite habitat, and they will be found in semi-desert areas and desert edges, as long as some thorn cover is available. Though usually found near a water source, the melba finches are also found in the dry Kalahari desert. This indicates that they are well adapted to live for long periods without water.

Fortunately, the melba finch has gone through fewer name changes than many of our other common avicultural species. The name "melba finch" is used most widely and commonly, but this bird may also be called the melba waxbill and occasionally the green-winged pytilia.

Linnaeus coined the original scientific name for this species in 1758, *Fringilla melba*. Later research and study resulted in a change of the scientific name to its current form, *Pytilia melba*. In some older works, you may see the genus name *Pytilia* spelled *Pytelia*. Since melbas are native over such a wide range in Africa, ornithologists have described a number of subspecies that differ slightly in coloring. The songs and calls of the varying subspecies may also differ noticeably.

Melba finches are easy to sex once

they have reached their adult plumage. As shown in the photographs, the most noticeable difference is the bright red face and yellowish breast of the male, which are totally lacking in the hen. The young cannot be sexed reliably until they begin their molt to adult plumage. The first red feather that appears in the face of a molting youngster will be a sure indication that the bird is a male.

Melba finches are waxbills, and like all other waxbills, they eat large amounts of insect food in the wild. This source of protein and other vital nutrients is removed as the bird is trapped and subjected to captivity, shipping, and a lengthy quarantine. Severe stress results, with a high mortality rate once the birds reach their destination. For this reason, melba finches have gained an undeserved reputation for being extremely touchy birds. In their desperate search for the complete protein that their bodies need, newly-imported melbas will often engage in severe feather-plucking. Feathers contain the complete protein that they need, and they seem to know this instinctively.

For ten years I have harped on protein deficiency in finches, and still over 90% of the finches that I see are suffering from severe protein deficiency. These birds must have a rich source of complete protein to remain in good health, and particularly before any breeding attempts will occur. Melba finches are no exception to this rule. The best natural sources for this complete protein are insects and mashed, hard-boiled eggs. Commercially made foods such as monkey pellets, game

bird starter, turkey starter, and dry dog food are also good, if you can get the finches to eat these products. This may take some time, since birds do not recognize these crumbled and pelleted products as food.

Maintaining melba finches in a planted aviary is usually best, since it will afford them more space and the opportunity to catch insects on their own. A large flight cage will be satisfactory, if the birds have a couple of plants or suitable hiding places. They do have a continuing need to feel secure, and a thick place to hide in is important for them.

Since they come from open woodlands and savanna areas, they will prefer a fairly open aviary. They prefer thorny bushes for hiding and nesting, so such plants as firethorn (*Pyracantha*), crown of thorns (*Euphorbia splendens*), and barberry (*Berberis*) will be ideal for them. Also, several types of long, drooping grasses will make them feel at home. Be sure to leave a large, bare area, since mating and the accompanying displays occur on the ground. In addition, melba finches will normally spend a large portion of their time on the ground.

Other small waxbills and non-aggressive nuns and Australian grassfinches will be suitable companions for them, and a pair of diamond doves and button quail are always compatible with the melba finches. Though the male especially may become aggressive during the breeding season, a planted aviary will allow the other birds to escape safely from an over-aggressive male. It is unwise to put more than one pair of melba finches in

an enclosure, however. The males will be likely to squabble incessantly with one dominant male bullying the rest. Melba finches do best when each pair is kept separately.

If you have given your melba finches an adequate diet rich in complete protein and some secluded spots for nest building, sooner or later they will show an interest in nesting. This will occur between the months of November and June, with the strongest possibility in January through April. These are their normal months of breeding in Africa, and breeding is often triggered during a rainy period.

The melbas instinctively realize that this rainy period will cause a proliferation of the insects, especially termites, that they need to feed the young once they hatch. Studies of their feeding habits in the wild have shown that termites make up a very substantial part of their native diet in Africa. Without an adequate supply of these termites, they would be unable to rear young in the wild. Consequently, when they hatch young in captivity and can find no termites to feed them, they will often throw the babies out of the nest and abandon them. For imported melba finches, this is a frequent problem. Only an abundant supply of other insects is likely to prevent this short-circuiting of the breeding cycle in melbas. Fostering the melba eggs out to other more dependable finches is about the only way to get around this problem when breeding your first generation of melba finches.

The male melba, particularly when courting, has an interesting, soft, little song composed of varying trills. This

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A pair of melba finches showing an obvious sexual dimorphism with the male being much more colorful.

can come as a surprise to those familiar with the other waxbills, for the melba finch can truly be classed as a songbird.

Once a pair has decided that it is breeding time, they will choose a spot well secluded and hidden, preferably in a thorny bush. The nest is a round structure that may be placed as low as two feet off the ground, or as high as fifteen feet. In an aviary, they might accept a wicker nest, but they would be unlikely to accept a standard finch nestbox. They prefer long grasses for nest building, and in the wild the grass stems stick out of the nest like bristles. They line their nest with feathers. If you can supply your melbas with small, soft chicken or guinea feathers, they will happily incorporate these into their nest as a soft lining for the eggs. Given a choice, they will choose white feathers to line their nests, so the feathers of white doves would be ideal. Detailed observation of this species indicates that only the male collects

materials and builds the nest.

Once the nest is completed, the hen will lay a clutch of from three to six white eggs. Four or five eggs is the average clutch. The incubation period may stretch from 12 to 14 days, and in captivity, the longer period seems to be common. Since they are native to a hot climate, the cooler temperatures in Europe and North America during their breeding period probably account for the longer incubation period in captivity. Both the cock and hen will share the duties of incubation, and the cock seems to take over the job during the daylight hours.

Once the nestlings hatch, both parents will feed them primarily on insects. The high-protein foods discussed earlier will be suitable substitutes for insects, if you can get the adult birds to feed these items. Again, foster parents that are already acclimated to these items will be much more likely to feed them to the nestling melbas and to

raise your first generation of them successfully.

The nestling period is the most critical in the life of a melba finch. Any bacteria that they have no resistance to may proliferate in their digestive systems and cause their death. A preventative treatment in areas of non-chlorinated water would be to place one drop of chlorine bleach in the parent birds' drinking water one day each week. This will kill any proliferating bacteria before they have a chance to kill the nestling. Beneficial bacteria will be replaced at the next feeding.

A second major cause of death in the nestlings usually occurs at the pin-feather stage, probably with a full crop. This is the result of protein deficiency, and it means that the diet the parent birds are feeding is insufficient in protein for the raising of young ones. The extremely fast growth of nestling melba finches from hatching to fledg-

ing requires a constant and adequate supply of protein. There is no substitute for this complete protein for the growth of the nestlings, and a diet of mixed seeds, fruit, greens, cuttlebone, etc., will not supply an adequate quantity of protein for this rapid growth.

The nestlings can leave the nest as early as two weeks of age, but those fed a diet lower in protein may take three weeks to fledge. The young birds are a fairly uniform olive-gray color with a reddish rump, quite unlike the adults. This is a critical time in their lives, since they are new in the ways of the world and are unable to fly strongly. Also, they are still susceptible to bacterial attack and protein deficiency in their diet until they are eating on their own.

After leaving the nest, the young melbas will be fed by the parent birds for at least two weeks. At the end of this two-week period, they will be taking some food on their own, and a few may be completely independent. Usually, an additional week is necessary for the fledglings to become fully independent. At the time they are sampling food items, a high-protein food placed before them constantly will assure that they try it and begin to consume it regularly. This will be the most important single factor in developing a successful breeding strain of melba finches. Those breeders who are forced to feed quantities of insects constantly are likely to abandon finches in favor of the less touchy psittacine species. This is the primary reason why so few aviculturists now breed exotic finches successfully.

Once your strain of melba finches is successful, you can try a really difficult species—the paradise whydah, *Vidua paradisaeia*. Both this species and the broad-tailed paradise whydah, *Vidua orientalis*, parasitize the melba finch in its native areas. The hen whydahs lay their eggs in the melba finch's nest, and the melbas raise the young whydahs, often losing their own young in the process. This parasitic means of reproduction is rather unusual in the avian kingdom, but it is also found in our North American cowbirds that lay their eggs in the nests of other birds.

In summary, the melba finch is a beautiful addition to any collection, but it will be as difficult to breed as are the other waxbills. This is not a species that I would recommend to the beginning aviculturist. For the experienced breeder, however, the melba finch will present a welcome challenge, since successful breeding of this species is a noteworthy accomplishment. ●

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SELL OR TRADE GOULDANS: white breasted \$225 pr., splits \$120 pr., normals \$90 pr. Taking orders for '85 hatch. Color photos \$1 each. White breasted lutino Gouldians \$1,500 pr., splits \$750 pr. Blue backed Gouldians \$750 pr., splits \$325 pr. Exotic birds and animals available. Send SASE: Royal Crown Aviaries, 2393 N. Blythe, Fresno, CA 93711. Call (209) 275-2128 after 6 p.m. CA. time.

HANDFED DOMESTIC RAISED greater Alexanders, lutino ringnecks, African greys, yellow crowned Amazons, eclectus (grand), sun conures. Call Kathleen, (305) 252-0082.

BUTTON QUAIL: silver and normal chicks \$3.00 each. Adults: normals \$10 a pair, silvers \$15 a pair. Doves and finches. Debbie Mills, Rt. 4, Box 1108, Los Lunas, NM 87031. Call (505) 865-0331.

BLUE RINGNECKS '84/'85 hatch, lutino ringnecks '84/'85 hatch. Crimson wing, rock pebbles, Alexandrine. Breeding stock and young for sale. Critters Corner, San Jose, CA. Call (408) 578-4414, ask for Jim.

SUPER TAME, HANDFED BABIES: Blue & gold, and Military macaws. Congo grey, Blue headed Pionus and Meyer's parrots. Moustache, Derbyan and Ringneck (blue, split-blue, lutino & normal) parakeets. Half-moon conures, white-masked and varieties of Peach faced lovebirds (some handfed). Al or Char, (602) 973-2852, Phoenix, AZ.

DOMESTIC HANDFED CLOSED BANDED BABIES. Cockatoos, Amazons, macaws, Pionus, African greys, caiques, cockatiels (all mutations), and 30 species of conures both Pyrrhuras and Aratingas. Call or write for information: TUWANA AVIARIES, Tom Ireland or Bill Maynard, 4724 Collier Road, Lake Worth, FL 33463. Call (305) 967-0346 (always looking for mature South American parrots for breeding!)

NORMAL, PIED, ALBINO, CINNAMON, PEARLY PIED cockatiels. Pied, jade, cherryhead, albino, lutino, blue, peachface, Fischer's, blue masked, black masked lovebirds. Yellow, green red rump parakeets, American, English budgies, Shafttail grass finches and other cage birds. Pheasants, quail, peafowl, partridges, geese, ducks. SASE for prices. No shipping. Pierce's Game Farm, Dept. W, Rt. 5, Princeton, IL 61356. Call (815) 699-2638.

GORGEOUS RED RUMPS, Bourke's parakeets, cockatiels and red-factor canaries bred in my aviaries in Napa, CA. Phone early a.m. (707) 257-2125, 'Margot'.

BIRD QUARANTINE STATION for lease. Joint venture possible. Call Grant Miller, Florida. (305) 667-7481 or (305) 389-9059.

HAND RAISED BABIES — blue & gold macaws, sun conures, rosellas, slaty heads, lutino ringnecks, and others. Quality Bird Ranch, Rt. 10, Box 147, Gainesville, FL 32605. Phone (904) 372-0299.

TRUE GREATER SULPHUR crested cockatoos (C. galerita, galerita). Fat, affectionate handfed babies from breeders we brought back from Western Australia in 1975. \$2,500. Hornbeam Farm, northern Ohio, (419) 588-2279.

BABY AFRICAN GREYS — beautiful, intelligent pets. Exceptionally tame and loveable. The finest in domestic raised greys. Hatched in my aviary and lovingly spoon-fed by me from day 1. Will ship. Ann Nothaft, 110 Jamaica Ave., Medford, NY 11763. Call (516) 289-1413.

SUN CONURE BABIES — handfed and super tame, loveable. Phone Gladys, (313) 682-2205, Michigan.

BABY COCKATOOS AND PARROTS — exceptionally tame, intelligent and loving pets. The finest in domestic raised babies. Hatched in my aviary and lovingly spoon-fed by me from day 1. Greater sulphurs (C. galerita, galerita), umbrellas, citrons, Goffin's, rosies, African greys, eclectus, double yellow headed Amazons, macaws, others. Will ship. Ann Nothafft, 110 Jamaica Ave., Medford, NY 11763. Call (516) 289-1413.

HAND RAISED BABIES: We are now taking reservations for our 1985 domestic babies. We specialize in macaws and parrots: Hyacinth, Blue and gold, Catalina, Green-winged, Red fronted, African grey, Yellow naped, Tucuman, Alexandrine ringneck parakeet. Send SASE for our price list. SANDY CREEK FARM, Rt. 2, Box 350-H, Sarasota, FL 34240. Call (813) 322-2006.

DOMESTIC HANDFED, Senegals, Timneh African greys, grey cheeks, umbrella cockatoos, and Moluccan cockatoos. Call Jill, (619) 244-1705, California.

MOVING SALE: s/s pairs dusky conures, s/s pair Senegals, s/s pair Congo greys, s/s male Congo grey, s/s male double yellow headed, red headed Amazons, Meyer's, sun and jenday conures, halfmoon conures, s/s pair half moon conures. Call Jill, (619) 244-1705, California.

MEDIUM SULPHUR CRESTED COCKATOOS. Mature pair together four years. Good feather, ready for breeding. Will ship. \$2,400. Greg & Sharon Schauer, (414) 629-9292.

FOR SALE: Princess, Barabands, Rock pebbles \$300 per pair. Lutino Indian ringnecked hen \$350. Indian ringnecked male, normal \$80. Two moustache parakeet males \$85 each. Alexandrine pair \$400. Medium sulphur crested cockatoo pair \$1,700. Faye Ensminger, California, (805) 489-4506.

PROVEN PAIRS: Barabands, rock pebbles, princess of Wales, also '84 and '85 hatch. Barnard's male, pair Amboina kings. WANTED: blue and lutino split blue ringnecks. John, (503) 825-3230, Oregon.

BABIES — yellow collared, and blue & gold macaws, and Congo African greys. All handfed and raised with extra care to assure you a superior pet. Hilltop Aviary, (503) 825-3230, Oregon.

BREEDERS: lilac crowned \$150, half moon conures \$75, double yellow headed mature hen \$350, thick-bills pair \$2,500 delivered. Call for others, (915) 584-5377, El Paso, Texas.

INDIAN RINGNECKS — 1985 hatch, green split to blue \$500 each, lutino \$300 each. Dennis Robertson, Rt. 3, Box 477-A, Cottonwood, CA 96022.

THICK-BILLED PARROTS: two pair and four babies, one available, all domestically raised. Adults have been in country four years. Pairs \$1,600. Babies \$800 each or will trade? Los Angeles area, (818) 888-5172.

COCKATOOS — my baby medium sulphur, greaters, and tritons are hand raised from incubated eggs. Completely people-oriented. Oldest of ten will wean by end of June. Impeccable references available. Happy to ship anywhere. Patricia Urquhart, California. Call (714) 832-6567.

COMPETITIVELY PRICED, baby Triton, Umbrella, Bare-eyed cockatoos. Red sided and Grand eclectus parrots, also adult male Triton. Derek Cowie, California. (805) 257-0566 week days.

HAND FED BABY ECLECTUS FOR SALE. All babies pulled from nest at 3 weeks. One male red sided eclectus born 2-15-85, at \$1000. We have new babies year round. Reserve yours now. Will consider trades for cockatoos. Call Nelson Blackmore, (305) 259-8351 or (305) 676-4848.

FOR SALE OR TRADE. Surgically sexed toucans, eight varieties. African pigmy geese, African grey and other African birds. Antonio Alentado, 9564 SW. 58th St., Miami, FL 33173. Call (305) 232-2082.

HAND-FED BABIES: Amazons, African Greys, Cockatoos, Conures, Eclectus, Lories, Macaws, Pionus, others. Health guaranteed. Call for species and availability. Gail J. Worth, Aves International, 2808 Oregon Court, Unit L8, Torrance, CA 90503, (213) 541-1180.

HAND-FED BABIES — hatched & hand-fed at our home. Blue & gold, Catalina, Scarlet, & Hyacinth macaws, Citron, Goffin, Moluccan & Umbrella cockatoos, Congo African greys & many others. Sea Island Aviarie, 4124 Blue Cross Lane, Johns Island, S.C. 29455. Call (803) 559-9072.

ECLECTUS, grand, red-sided, Solomon Island, hand-fed babies, fabulous size and color. I buy and sell adult eclectus on occasion. Bernie Conner, (707) 526-7111.

RAINBOW GOULDIAN FINCHES: 6 pair for \$500. Red, black, orange headed, 1985 birds in full color. Order now: white chested and splits for delivery early 1986. Will ship anywhere it's safe, or deliver within 100 mile radius of Washington, D.C. Call (703) 356-4605 eve's and weekends.

ATTENTION BREEDERS: one pair of Fig parrots (Edward's) and one male. One pair Blue Quakers, one pair s/s double yellow Amazons. Roger, Park Bird Farm, FL. Call (813) 546-1455.

WANTED — MATURE HYACINTH s/s pairs and singles. Grand and Red-sided eclectus pairs and adults. Paying top dollar. Bompert Farm, Montana. Call (406) 933-5704 days.

LUTINO INDIAN RINGNECK females \$350 each. Cockatiels: lutino, lutino pearl, lutino pied, cinnamon, cinnamon pied, green cinnamon, pearl, pied, pearl pied, \$35 to \$150 each. Minimum shipping \$350. Helen Forsythe, 1325 Loma Vista Drive, Napa Valley, CA 94558. Call (707) 226-8671.

PET SHOP AND BREEDER OF BIRDS. Cockatiels, lovebirds, parakeets, finches, conures, macaws, diamond doves, and other birds available. Jobbers welcome. Stans Birds, 2108 South 'M' Street, Bakersfield, California 93304. Phone (805) 831-1414.

WHOLESALE BIRDS & CAGES - parrots, cockatoos, macaws, conures, lories, toucans, and wrought iron cages. All birds are hand-picked for the highest possible quality. We ship nationwide, live delivery guaranteed. Surgically sexed birds and hand-fed babies available. Stop in and see one of the largest selections of birds in the United States in our new Palm Beach County location. For bird price list and cage brochure send S.A.S.E. to: Michael's Bird Paradise, Inc., P.O. Box 9046, Riviera Beach, FL 33404. Phone (305) 842-1050 from 12 noon to 6 p.m. (closed Tuesdays).

PAINTED FINCHES (Emblema picta) — rare, beautiful, excellent breeders. Herschel Frey, 1170 Firwood Dr., Pittsburgh, PA 15243. Call (412) 561-7194.

DOMESTIC HANDFED PARROTS: Congos, Amazons, Macaws, Asians, Australians, Conures. Breeder pairs or singles available also. Many birds in stock. Waterfowl, Vulturines, Guineas, Ratites, and more. S.A.S.E.-Exotic Avian Specialties, Rt 6, Box 387, Corvallis, Oregon 97330. Call (503) 745-5248.

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COCKATIELS — beautiful large healthy show quality birds. Selective breeding only. Lutino pearls, cinnamon pearl peds, pearl peds, cinnamon pearls, lutinos, cinnamon peds, golden pearls, heavy peds, fallows, silvers, splits. Also handfed babies. Pat (818) 339-7866 or Kathy (714) 756-0355. (Los Angeles area, CA)

HATCHED AND HANDFED on our farm - blue & golds \$800, militarys \$600, napes \$650, yellow headed \$600, suns, jendays \$250, Alexandrines \$300, African greys \$700, yellow collared macaws \$300. References. George Lackey, Texas (512) 787-1479.

YOU ASKED FOR IT! — A Calcium-Mineral-Grit block as SOFT as a cuttlebone. For finches and canaries. 1 large block is equal to 4 cuttlebones and costs only 40¢ (min. 12). The small block is 30¢ (min. 20). They are terrific! Ask for them at your pet shop or send check to: EXOTIC BIRD PRODUCTS, INC., P.O. Box 128, Newberg, Oregon 97132. We ship POSTPAID continental U.S.A. Call (503) 864-2827.

WE SPECIALIZE IN BIRDS. Have other pets and supplies, carry Leach seed. Special price on 300 pounds or more. We buy birds and small animals, also take birds on consignment. Open 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. No shipping. S & A Pets, 15880 East Amar Rd., City of Industry, (818) 369-3943.

'85 HATCHED, HANDFED closed banded moustache parakeets, sun conures, Alexandrines, maroon bellied conures, chattering, and dusky lories. Yellow crown, blue fronted, and double yellow headed Amazons, African greys, mini macaws, cockatoos, blue & gold, and scarlet macaws, crimson winged parakeets. DMC Farms, Ft. Myers, FL. Call (813) 936-1627.

HANDFED BABIES ONLY: tame and most talking, Amazons, macaws, cockatoos, A.o. magna double yellow \$400. Yellow naped Amazon \$525. Blue and gold \$1,000. Scarlet \$1,300, Catalina \$1,400. Hyacinth \$4,500. Cockatoos: Moluccan, Bare-eyed, umbrella, Goffin's. All birds domestically raised. Some pairs available. Los Angeles area, (818) 888-5172.

AFRICAN GREY BABIES, hatched and handfed in Atlanta, GA. Will ship when babies are ready. The Grey Parrot Aviary, phone (404) 636-4540, or (404) 939-6715.

ECLECTUS PARROTS — red-sided, Solomon Islands, and Vosmaeri. Domestic handfed and tame. Three months old males \$800, females \$1,500. Pairs \$2000. Unrelated pairs available. San Francisco area, (415) 826-2977.

DOMESTICALLY BRED IN OUR AVIARIES, hand raised and imprinted in our home, super tame baby African grey parrots. Voren's Aviarie, Florida. Call (305) 793-5528.

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