

The Painted Finch

by Herschel Frey
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I was tempted to entitle this article "The Return of the Painted Finch." I wanted what I would write to reflect my practically boundless enthusiasm for this finch (*Emblema picta*), in the hope that it will never again disappear from American aviculture. But, then, I realized that prior to the Australian animal export ban in the late 1950s, even among finch cognoscenti, the painted was relatively unknown, and mostly absent from the collections of breeders who kept the other Australian finches. Given the traits of this truly ideal aviary specimen (including good breeding habits), the lacuna remains a puzzlement for me.

If the painted finch is to make the permanent comeback that I predict, we have the enterprising Dutch and some other European fanciers to thank, since our recent source of this bird is these countries. Now that we have a limited number of these finches to work with, we will have to take care to pair unrelated birds, for we cannot count on the future availability of wild-caught stock.

In many ways the painted finch, which belongs to the firetail family, shares characteristics of many of its nineteen Australian cousins, known around the world as the most ideal finch group for those who would keep and breed these birds. It seems to me, though, after some five years of working with the painted, that it is, for many reasons, at the very top of this list in its desirability, for it is a composite of all things likable, and with few, if any, drawbacks.

The painted is pleasantly dimorphic,



Male painted finch.



Fledglings at the nest.

A pair of painted finches. The male has more red on his breast while the hen has more and larger spots on her breast.



with the generally duller hen still retaining the main colors displayed in the male. Hers is not the brilliant scarlet found on the face and breast patch of her partner—these areas being smaller in the female. In fact, some hens have no red on the belly at all. And her lighter breast, not jet black as in the

male, contains larger white dots. Both sexes have a crimson rump and brown back and head. Juveniles that have not yet gone through their first molt look like a toned-down version of the adult female.

Husbandry

One reason the painted finch is so ideal as a cage or aviary bird is the relative ease with which one can maintain it in good health. While it is not quite as "picky" an eater as, say, the Gould, it thrives on a relatively simple, readily available assortment of foods. These birds need a good finch mix, with sufficient canary seed. But since they relish the small panicum millet, I offer this also, separately. Like most finches (the society finch being the rare exception), they like millet sprays, which I keep before them when they are breeding, and feed periodically when they are not. Some will take egg-food, which you don't want to overdo when the hen is sitting on eggs or not nesting. And most will eat small or medium-sized mealworms, wax-worms, and the like. A greater amount of these disappear when there are young in the nest. I provide something green every day, mostly romaine lettuce. And I am careful to keep before them ample calcium sources: different grits, cuttlebone, chicken eggshell, along with charcoal. On the advice of several Australian breeders, I include a sandy area in one corner of the aviary, which they visit frequently.

Since painteds love to bathe, but aren't too fond of a rather sticky vitamin-laden water, at one point I made the mistake of discontinuing vitamins (one of the commercial liquid varieties). At this time all but one of the nesting hens—apparently in excellent breeding condition—began to have difficulty producing eggs with shells. There was no outright eggbinding; the female would simply pass a shell-less egg. I even added liquid calcium to the water, but to no avail. I soon realized that calcium deficiency was not the problem, that instead the hen simply needed vitamins to enable her to metabolize the calcium needed to produce eggshells. This problem immediately and completely disappeared when I restored the vitamins to the drinking water. Since that time, I have provided fresh water, without the vitamins, first thing in the morning for bathing, and later change the water, adding vitamins.

Housing

While the painted finch can be suc-

cessfully kept and bred in a good-size cage, it tends to do somewhat better in a larger enclosure. This is because they are a bit shy, and not as likely to readily settle down as, say, a Gould or zebra in a small cage. I have bred them in my 28" Gouldian cages, but their full personality comes out if they are given a larger area.

I went to the totally unappreciated trouble of outfitting a large room with some of my prized tropical greenery (not easily kept alive in Pittsburgh...), forgetfully not anticipating that since the painted comes from an arid area he would, therefore, ignore this lush setting. Instead, he prefers dead branches or logs, or, on the floor (ground), rocks or sandy earth. For the most part, the finch seems to want to be in the open, with a view of what is around him.

An admirable characteristic of the painted is that he is not at all quarrelsome and will mix well with his own kind or with other birds. He does not even seem to be very territorial when nesting. Thus the fancier should only be concerned lest a larger, more aggressive bird harm the peaceable painted. And when the aviary seemingly becomes crowded, with many fledged young, these are not bothered by the adults, nor vice versa.

Here in the East, few of us bother with outdoor facilities, even in the summer months. But the painted will predictably thrive outdoors, since by all accounts it is less vulnerable to low temperatures than any of the Australian finches. And it deserves a sunbath as much as we might enjoy seeing its scarlet patches gleam, reflecting the light. If kept indoors, I recommend a bright room, with at least 12-14 hours of light during the months when the finches are breeding. I suggest about 80° temperature during the breeding period; thereafter it can fall gradually. And painteds seem to do best in a relatively low humidity environment.

Breeding

The painted finch has the loudest and, to my ear, the most pleasant song of all the Australian finches. Klaus Immelmann (*Australian Finches in Bush and Aviary*, 1965) reports on how great a distance the bird's song and various calls tend to carry. The male's song is either a solitary melody, which he performs with regularity, or is a part of the courtship routine. When initiating the latter, the male stands erect, with legs spread wide apart, and, with head pointing upward, almost vertical, rapidly pivots his head from

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side to side. When cooperating, the female assumes a similar stance, minus song and pivoting head. (To my knowledge, this posture and movement behavior is unique to *Emblema picta*.) If interested, the female will signal her desire with the typical tail-quivering, at which point copulation takes place. The painted lacks the full hopping dance, for example, of the Gouldian, but both sexes perform preliminary beak-wiping, along with slow, rotating body movements.

The painted's biggest attraction for finch lovers who have a primary interest in breeding these birds is the fact that they readily go to nest and will almost always successfully bring off the young. While the nesting inclination is quite strong in most of the Australian finches, some will not incubate, and others will not feed or will toss out the young. I have never had a pair of painteds desert the nest—and they have tolerated my considerable nest monitoring. Nor, save for one pair, have they failed to feed and wean the young. Indeed, they are devoted, protective parents.

Painteds go through their first molt quite early and would gladly nest at six months or so. But I have always waited for them to go through a second molt, at which time (10-12 mos.) they are larger and more fit to breed. The breeder will want to use unrelated pairs, so utilizing the "natural selection" process for pairing will at times, almost perversely, it seems, find brother hankering after sister. An easy method to avoid this is to separate the two birds you want to use; they will invariably bond and will stay together even if mixed with a number of other painteds. Immelmann errs, I am sure, when he states that the pair bond is not strong in this species. On the contrary, while you can easily separate birds to form new pairs, if given the opportunity two of these finches, once paired, remain faithfully devoted and will generally sit together (though without preening) when resting between breeding seasons. My painteds have proved to be much less promiscuous and more truly bonded than other Australian finches. It is one of their traits which I find most attractive.

Since these finches inhabit the arid areas of Central Australia and are thus dependent on the sporadic availability of ripening seeds for breeding, they do not have an annual breeding season per se. This contrasts sharply with Goulds, which migrate and breed during one

predictable season. The painted finch is, therefore, able to go to nest at any time, and will normally do so. A kind of problem that presents itself because of this lack of seasonality is that many pairs seem not to know when to stop and will continue with a fourth and fifth clutch. The breeder may want to remove the eggs of the fourth clutch, for example, and foster under societies. In general, however, I find it so nice not to have to employ fostering and, in fact, have had much better luck allowing the birds to rear their own. Another plus to the painted's lack of a set breeding season is the greater amount of flexibility afforded the breeder: after one set of birds have bred for six months in a given aviary, they can be removed (at any time of the year) and a replacement set can begin to breed.

I have experimented considerably—always the fun part—with nests and nesting material. Certain definite preferences have emerged, and I have found it worthwhile to cater to these likes. When breeding in a room or large aviary, painteds consistently will choose a nest site near the floor—two to three feet on average. I have never had them take to a nest near or at ceiling height. As for the nest itself, these finches prefer anything *but* a nestbox. Again, not a single pair has selected a nestbox if given a choice, not even one with the top front cut away. On several occasions I have induced them, without apparent problems, to use a box in a medium-size breeding cage, when I have insisted on an accessible exterior box with a lid. But in a flight, they want something that looks "grassy." This matches their habit of nesting in the wild in a dense clump of spinifex grass. For one of their favorites, I nail a wicker canary nest onto the bottom of a 5" x 5" board, then fashion sticks (dead fir branches are ideal) around and above to form a dome. But actually, anything with a grasslike or clump-of-sticks look, and a small cavity, will attract them and serve the purpose quite well. One could use a tumbleweed, dead shrub, or any dense bundle of twigs and/or grass, such as in a chicken wire enclosure. I converted a dead box-wood bush into an oft-used nest for them.

It is necessary to provide them with more than twice the number of nests than pairs, not because they are so choosy, but simply because most pairs will select and begin on a new nest site even before the young have fledged.

The hen will often begin to lay in her new nest at about the same time the young leave the nest.

Painteds are excellent nest builders. While sometimes the nest will not be completed prior to the appearance of the first or second egg, the male, nonetheless, will continue to add to and line the nest, resulting in a solid domed nest, complete with a small entry hole. They do not like to use fine, thin grasses, so I provide short pieces of thick-bladed grass. One of their preferred materials is burlap strings: I cut washed, bleached burlap into 3" squares and remove the strings and mix feathers into this. Many like to line the nest with something soft.

When they first start to nest build, the male (only he carries material) will sometimes drag larger items—sticks, stones, clumps—into the nest, and it's not a bad idea to remove these if you can predict a problem for the necessary final nest cup. But generally this is not a problem, and I have never had a pair imitate the zebra in covering the eggs with extra material, even when the male continues to work on the nest once incubation begins. The use of larger objects for the nest doubtless is a reflection of earlier habits when in the wild these birds typically built a platform-base nest.

Painteds lay four to five eggs and do not begin the incubation period (13 days) until the next-to-last egg has been laid—though they stick close to the nest once the first egg appears. All of the young fledge on the same day at around the 27th day. They remain on the floor in a huddle for at least a week, where their devoted parents feed them. They do not return to the nest, and as they gain strength and flying ability, they take to higher ground. They are quite easy to catch when they first fledge, to be banded, so as to maintain necessary bloodline records. (One might be in trouble if two clutches fledge on the same day.)

The young soon begin to pick at spray millet and hulled millet, lettuce and sprouted seed. I make sure to provide these easier-to-eat items for the fledglings.

Obviously, it is not difficult to extoll the many admirable traits of *Emblema picta*. It is beautiful, hardy, interesting, a good singer, a free breeder, and easy to maintain in captivity. I am confident that this exquisite little Australian finch will never again disappear from the scene, and that for years to come finch enthusiasts will be able to enjoy this bird in their collections. ●

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