

The Challenge of African Finches

by Don Warmbrod
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I would guess that a good percentage of us got our avicultural start with "cheap" finches, mostly African in origin. "They're so pretty but, of course, everyone knows you can't breed them." So we stick about a dozen of them in some sort of cage that's too small and they pick on each other and, of course, they don't breed and we say, "Told you so!" Having acquired some experience though and having caught the bug, we generally invest in some Australian finches, which we know will breed because they are all captive bred, since the Australian ban in 1959, in contrast to those difficult, imported Africans. Or maybe we move on to those "real" birds: the parrots.

Well, folks, the times may be achanging. How long have we been told the supply of these cheap imports is not unlimited and we need to establish some breeding populations of finches that have been taken for granted for so long. From West Africa comes the latest and maybe strongest wind of change affecting some of our most common species like the Orangecheek Waxbill, as well as Lavenders, Goldbreasts, Red Ears, Senegalese Fires, Cutthroats, Cordon Bleus, Melbas, Silverbills and Bronzewing Mannakins. These are all names with which we are familiar and take for granted. There are other names which are not as familiar, such as Yellow Wing Pytilias, Dybowski Twinspots, Schlegal's Twinspots, Crimson Seedcrackers, Bluebill Fires, and Quail Finches that are also from western Africa that many aviculturists have never seen and most may never see if we do not get off our collective rear ends! Now comes the punchline. *These birds can be bred, are being bred, and you can do it.* Forget what you've heard and give it a shot. If I can do it you can do it. Don't try them all at one time but pick out two or three species that appeal to you. If nothing else, let's look at it as reverse snobbery. After all, everybody knows you can breed African Greys, cockatoos, and macaws. But when was the last time



Photo by George D. Dodge/Dale R. Thompson

The Orange-cheeked Waxbill has been a commonly imported finch into the U.S. for many years. With the recent notices about proposed legislation, this finch, along with many other African and Asian finches, will need immediate work by American aviculturists.

you saw domestic bred White Chinned Quail Finches offered for sale?


On the other hand, if the supply does dry up, the African finch breeder might not be so bad off. What do you suppose a pair of plain old Senegal Fires would be worth if no imports were available for a few years? Several years ago I saw an Australian finch club price list with Blue Cap Cordon Bleus listed at \$700 a

pair. I did some quick figuring and came up with about \$6,000 worth of Blue Caps I had at the time. I would have figured out what my entire collection was worth at those prices. Only problem I found after some correspondence with an Australian gentleman was that about 75% of my collection was unavailable there. Guess why?

Now, let's breed birds! What are we going to start with? Well, some

species are definitely, in my experience, easier to breed than others. I have operated at what most people would consider an advantage in that for the most part I have bred in aviaries. However, consider the aforementioned Orange Cheeks that my wife acquired for something like \$4.95 a pair at K-Mart and, while housed in a somewhat cramped budgie cage, proceeded to tear up paper and kept stuffing it in their bath water. My wife thought they were trying to build a nest and since everyone knows only waterfowl would likely build nests in their bath, I purchased a nest to prove her wrong. Now, I never did hear those finches quack, but I did see them build a nest. That event lit a fire under me in resolving to provide the necessary requirements. Therein lies the entire crux of breeding — fulfilling necessary requirements! The trick is in figuring out what those requirements are. In that vein, there is no substitution for observation. I have been asked innumerable times, "How do you breed certain species?" For the most part I still don't know, but I'm convinced if you can watch any pair long enough they can and will tell you.

I once had a zoo curator tell me he wouldn't consider adding a species if he couldn't obtain at least four pairs. There's a lot of value in that policy. I finally came to the decision that I would obtain three pairs of a species if at all feasible. I would put all six birds together and then watch. I usually found the first two to pair off would be the most productive pair. When that first pair bond was established, the remaining four birds would be removed to other quarters. If subsequent experience showed more than one pair of the same species to be compatible per enclosure, I would house them so, but I learned from experience not to make that assumption. In general, I found it was pretty safe to house pairs of different species together, assuming there was enough room. Even that assumption can be dangerous. I found, for example, that Fires, Cordons and Strawberries could all have active nests, which they built literally touching each other in the same bush, and in a perfectly peaceful community. On the other hand, two pairs of Cordons will tolerate each other in the same enclosure but not in close proximity. Two pairs of Senegal Fires hardly take notice of one another. One pair of Bronzewing Mannakins in a com-

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munity aviary, however, can be a disaster. When breeding they will keep all other birds away from their nest. If, by chance, babies fledge from another nest while the Bronzings are breeding, they would be killed in very short order. Other examples: two pair of Schlegal's Twinspots cooperated so closely in nesting activities I never even knew who the real pairs were. In one nest of four eggs at any one time you were as likely to find two birds incubating as one and it could be any combination of two birds, either male A - female A, male B - female B, male A - female B, male B - female A, or both males or both females. I never did figure it out. A breeding pair of Dybowski Twinspots will tolerate another pair of Dybowskis only if they were added to the community at the same time. If they are added later, they will be severely harassed and possibly killed. This treatment extends to other similarly colored species such as Blue Billed Fires. However, I have found them to be completely safe with species of different colorations.

Back to the pair bonding. I find the second pair to establish to be much less consistent. Usually there is some production but very rarely as good as in the first pair. Again, pull the remaining two birds. These two are not likely to make your hit parade. I have found that seldom do they pair up and accomplish anything. You're probably just as well off holding them over and trying to pair them up with your F1 young to diversity your blood lines but don't bank on anything. If you are determined to utilize these birds, what you might do is put the single hen, for example, with two or three young males and hope for a quick bond. If it doesn't happen rather quickly, I would not waste the young birds' time with her because most of your young hens will be more than willing to pair with the young males.

Time is a precious commodity with finches. By and large they are not long lived. Most references give an average life span in the five to eight year range. That may be, but mine seem to either live two or ten years. The pioneer Orange Cheek male outlived three wives and was with us for 12 years and, of course, he was an import. The first Gold Breasted Waxbill I owned outlived all his grandchildren that were in my possession. They can be around for a while but

their productive lives can be very short. I consider myself extremely fortunate if I get three seasons from a pair. Interestingly, even though the long livers have been males, their reproductive lives seem to average less than the females. I have had several instances where previously productive pairs lost fertility and the male had to be replaced. If they have bonded, the female has always come back into production.

There is no right way to house, feed and breed African finches. A few years ago I conducted the finch workshop at the AFA convention in New Orleans at which time I went into some detail on my management techniques. Many of the participants shook their heads in disbelief at various times and then related their practices, some at which I could only shake my head. Observation, I do believe, is the most important item. Housing may or may not be critical. In general, I believe, the more room the better. I think virtually any finch can be bred in a 3' x 6' flight and most in considerably smaller areas right down to breeder cages as many aviculturists have demonstrated. And, I think as the generations go and Africans become more domesticated like the Australians, this will become more the rule. Safest, however, is to provide as much room as you can reasonably give. With experience you will know what species you can confine more closely. I do believe that Africans are more naturally active than Aussies.

Specieswise, some are certainly easier in both maintenance and breeding. For instance, Senegal Fires are considered fairly delicate, yet are among the very best breeders. Red Ears and Orange Cheeks are extremely hardy but you also have a bear of a time trying to breed them. Some, like Cutthroats and Bronzings, I would not be particularly concerned with trying to breed with no live food at all, while the Fires and Lavenders I wouldn't consider trying to raise without live food, especially with imports.

Again observe the parents. That can be a sticky situation. Some will tell you to never disturb a nest, however, I personally had to know what was going on. There was a time when I routinely inspected every nest every day. Rarely was there any problem. There are exceptions. I found Crimson Seedcrackers to abandon if the hen even so much as saw you looking

at her on the nest, yet I once had a female Violet Ear Waxbill who had to be raised off the nest with a spoon to see if her eggs had hatched.

As mentioned, live food is absolutely essential in most cases. All you have to do is see Fires or Lavenders searching every nook and cranny of the aviary to know that young have hatched. It is a dramatic change in behavior. One day they are sitting around with no worries; the next day they are tearing up the place. Twinspots will do the same thing except they scratch in whatever litter you have on the floor. Obviously, different methods of food gathering, and how you address those needs determines success. For species who like to search on the ground, I have been very successful in using a cake pan on the floor with about 1/2 to 3/4 inch of shavings in it in which I put mealworms and let them go to work. Of course, you need to let them eat out of the bare pan for a few days to let them learn where to look. The pan trick also helps considerably with those species who are addicted to what I call the head shot. That is, picking up one worm by the head, giving a quick snap which sends the rest of the body flying, then going for the next one. You can't count how many some can go through. The fact of the matter is that I haven't found an all around readily available live food that suits everyone's tastes. Small mealworms have come the closest. Baby crickets for those species that are absolutely opposed to scratching are excellent, but they are terribly difficult to keep confined and they're expensive. I once bought 500 baby crickets for \$15 only to have the community aviary go through them in two days.

On to plan B. My birds have been totally unimpressed with fruit flies. I have heard others rave how their birds went crazy. I have had fruit fly cultures of world class proportions, all to the absolute disdain of my charges.

On to plan C. I did come across a termite nest once and presented my group with a feast that ranked with, if not ahead of, the crickets. However, I've never seen commercially available termites.

The simple way to deal with any natural parent feeding problem is to resort to fostering with Societies. I specify Societies because, in spite of what has been written as to the fostering abilities of Zebras, I have been

notably unsuccessful with them. Societies, on the other hand, have done a quite admirable job raising everything given them with the exception of Lavenders and Peter's Twinspots. Peter's make very admirable parents so that's no great loss. Though fostering is held in low regard in some circles, it has a very definite place. Consider the individual with limited resources either in birds or time, who wishes to raise Africans, yet has definite opinions on 1) what the babies should be fed, and 2) the constant availability of that diet. It sure simplifies things to be able to turn those eggs over to a reliable pair of Societies on a good, high protein diet and let them provide us with some captive raised young that are more attuned to our way of thinking, at least in the manner of acceptable diet. It has become my practice, when starting with a species with which I have no experience, to do exactly as I have related with fostering. In that way, at least, there are some birds to work with in the event the parents should meet with an untimely demise or prove to be unreliable.

Nesting facilities have been another source of education for me. In my earliest days I came across a reference giving very precise requirements for nesting boxes. This work insisted that the proper nest receptacle should be so many cubits by so many cubits, some with half open fronts and others with holes of "X" diameter. I duely constructed such boxes only to wait in vain for them to be used. When the construction schedule fell behind, I decided to utilize some horizontally hung, dry lemonade cans for my Africans. Imagine my surprise when they were immediately and wholeheartedly accepted, whereas through the years succeeding generations continued to reject my wooden wonders.

I have found that the *large* wicker nests work very well, too. Then there are the odd species and individual pairs who insist in nesting at ground level. For these, just a big pile of nesting material works best. Of course, in a community situation some precautions to keep the other inhabitants from making off with the roof is in order. Speaking of nesting material, natural grasses are preferred, such as Bermuda of at least 10 to 12 inches in length.

Many pairs will construct their own nests from scratch, given proper

sites. The use of live Eastern Red Cedar bushes planted in containers works well. They stay alive for a couple of years in outdoor flights, but don't do well indoors. In that case, discarded shrub or hedge plants that have been pruned very thick work fine.

I'm amused by some hookbill breeders' apparent "look down the nose" attitude toward finch breeders who raise "only" finches. They may lament the fact that they've had a pair of birds five years and they haven't bred. Of course, these are usually species well established in aviculture and their requirements are well known, so it's likely they will eventually breed. I certainly understand the frustration, but if you want to talk about pressure for results, consider the finch breeder who sprang for some rare finches that he might never have heard of before, let alone seen. He has no idea if the birds are six months or six years old, what kind of diet they prefer, housing or breeding requirements, or anything else. Then, figure if you're going to get babies, you'd better do it in two years, tops. Now, sports fans, let's see who can breed birds and who is a chicken rancher.

The attitude that if you raise Australians you raise finches and if you raise Africans, you don't, is tragic! How many different mutations of Gouldians can there be before they become like budgies or chickens and what's accomplished from an avicultural point of view in breeding these different mutations? The point is somebody had to establish these birds in captivity before all this other stuff was possible. The pet trade has been through who knows how many millions of African finches and where are the self-sustaining, captive populations and who is establishing them? My friends, I don't see either. Did we learn anything from the Australian ban? I'm reminded of a line, a toast actually, from the movie "Gardens of Stone." It went, "Here's to us and those like us;" and then the reply, "damn few left." That is the feeling I have with the Africans, that there very well soon will be damn few left. This is the American Federation of Aviculture and it's my feeling that most of us are doing not enough aviculturing, especially in the field of African finches, which have been taken for granted for so long and yet their foothold in American aviculture is oh so precarious. ●



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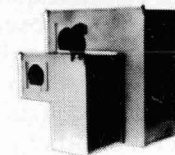
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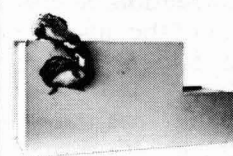


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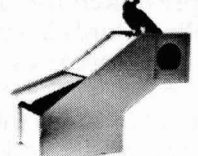
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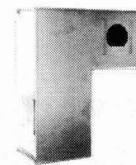
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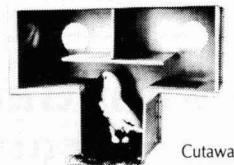
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