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Purple Grenadier

(*Ureaginus ianthinogaster*)

by Maureen Newman
Hesperia, California

This beautiful, slender bird from the dry scrubland of central east Africa measures approximately five and one quarter inches in length including its long tail.

The adult male is a reddish brown with a rich, glossy blue on the chest, belly and base of tail. A similar blue forms a rather wide eye-ring. His beak is a deep coral red. The female is a lighter brown, without the reddish tones. Her chest and belly are a mass of off-white spots which, at times, forms irregular lines. Her eye-ring is most commonly a pale mauve or blue, but can vary from almost white to a blue almost as dark as in the male. (When I first noticed that one of my females had a much darker eye-ring than the others, I assumed it might have something to do with the length of time the bird had been in captivity, and that the darker coloring would fade in time, as has been seen in other species. I also assumed that this deeper color would probably not be passed on to successive generations. However, according to Derek Goodwin in *Estrildid Finches of the World*, the darker coloring could be an indication that the bird is of a different subspecies. Certainly her eye-ring has not faded and many of the offspring have darker than average eye-rings, but none so far exhibit color as deep as hers.) The female's beak is a pale red. As she reaches full maturity and breeding readiness, a dark, almost black band appears down the length of the upper mandible.

Fledglings are entirely brown, except for some purplish blue at the base of the tail. I have observed some

slight differences in the shade of brown among my babies, which, according to Derek Goodwin, indicates gender. I have not tried to confirm or deny this, however, since the sex of the youngster becomes obvious when, at around six weeks of age, a partial molt produces the colored eye-ring. At around four months of age a more complete molt results in the adult coloring, though the male, in particular, displays a richer, more beautiful plumage after the second full molt. This may be purely my imagination but it seems as if both male and female display richer colors with each successive molt.

The newly hatched chicks are almost black in color, naked except for a few tiny tufts of down and have deep blue and white gape tubercles. They start out in life surprisingly small considering the size of the adults, but they grow quickly and usually fledge at around two and a half weeks. I have, on occasion, been surprised to see them out of the nest as early as two weeks. I usually separate chicks from adults at around six weeks of age, making sure before moving them that they are, in fact, independent.

These birds, which were supposed to be so difficult to raise, have turned out to be some of the most prolific breeders with which I have worked. I don't know why I have had such great success — I don't have any special secrets or knowledge. I can't, therefore, furnish a recipe for successful breeding of Purple Grenadiers. The following is nothing more than a guide based on what I do,

* Position open — contact regional vice president if interested
** Indicates 2 year term has been fulfilled. If no new interested party comes forward and indicates a desire to serve, incumbent remains in position.

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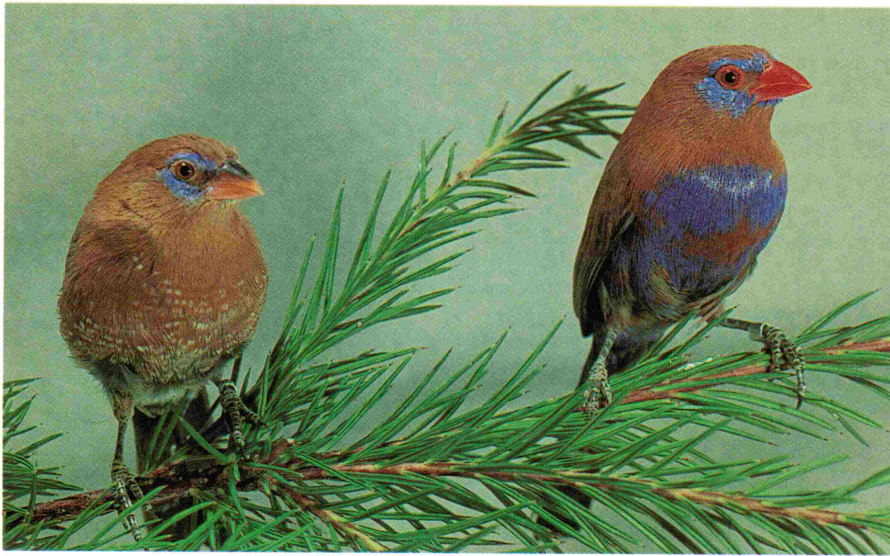
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Photo by Janet Taylor



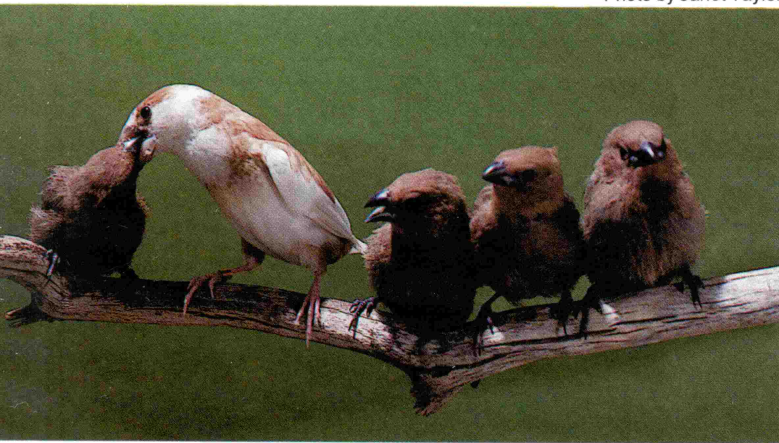
This is my most prolific Grenadier pair.

Photo by Janet Taylor



Grenadier babies. Note blue & white gape tubercles.

Photo by Janet Taylor



Society feeding Grenadier fledglings.

Photo by Maureen M. Newman



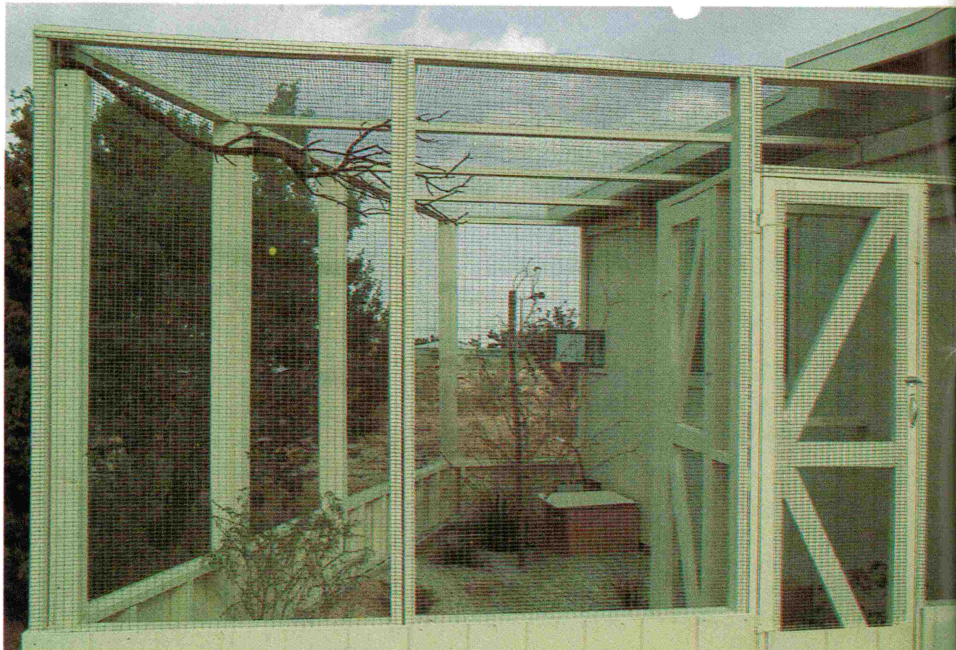
Indoor flight houses a variety of finches. Small doors on right inside allow access to outside flight, but can be closed up during cold weather.

Photo by Maureen M. Newman



Closet aviary. Sparsely furnished. Original pair of Grenadiers nesting in wicker nest on wire. Other nests are available.

Photo by Maureen M. Newman



Outside flight. Small door in rear connects to indoor flight.

what I have observed, and a whole lot of guesswork!

By the time I bought my first pair of Grenadiers, I had been working with birds, predominantly finches, for a number of years. I suppose I had become brainwashed because I was inclined to believe the experts when they said "you can't do that" in reference to breeding exotic finches. True to form, I was told Purple Grenadiers wouldn't breed for me and they certainly wouldn't breed in cages. I wasn't concerned about breeding them at that time, I just thought they would be nice to have.

Doubting that I could keep them alive in an outside aviary, I put the pair in a converted closet measuring 2' X 6' X 8'. (I later realized that Grenadiers, like many other finches, are not as fragile as we sometimes think. In winter, the temperature in our enclosed aviary normally does not drop below 50°F, but even though it has, on rare occasions, dipped as low as 40°F, these are not consistent "lows". Clearly they can endure much lower temperatures than are normally recommended, though they are obviously more comfortable when kept in warmer temperatures.) Their new home was sparsely furnished, containing nothing but a variety of nests and a few pieces of tumble weed, a wire contraption full of straw and a manzanita branch standing on end to form a tree. Since there was very little natural light, the fluorescent light fixtures were fitted with full spectrum bulbs. All the feeders were on the floor, as was the bowl of water (I do not use tube drinkers for any of my finches. Bathing is an important part of a finch's daily routine, so I feel a water bowl is the more suitable method of providing water, even though the task of keeping the water clean can become a real chore). They shared this set-up with pairs of Red Headed Parrot Finches, Stars, Quail Finches, and a few other single finches.

I had planned on making the set-up a little more comfortable, but a couple of months passed when I noticed the female on eggs and began asking around to see if Grenadiers might sit on other birds' eggs. This, of course, was rather a silly notion, but since I knew Grenadiers wouldn't breed for me, I didn't dare let myself think they might be Grenadier eggs. When it became apparent that the eggs were, in fact, their own,

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I contacted the only person I could find who had raised Grenadiers and between us we decided that they probably couldn't be trusted to raise their own babies. I fostered the eggs under Societies. The four eggs were fertile, but they all died in the shell. A second clutch fostered under a different pair of Societies met with the same end.

Having lost two clutches, I decided I had nothing to lose by giving the Grenadiers a chance, so I left the third clutch under the parents. I don't know how many eggs were laid or how many hatched, but one baby was reared. At the time I was very nervous about disturbing them, so I didn't check them very often. I have since realized that they are not particularly jittery and do not get off their nest for every little disturbance.

On successive clutches, I kept finding newly hatched babies on the floor so, if they were still alive, I put them under Societies. This worked well — the Societies raised nearly all of them. Most of those lost, died within 24 hours of placing them under the foster parents. They had probably been cold for too long. I finally got wise — the Grenadiers would incubate just fine but could not be trusted to raise the babies — Societies would not, or could not incubate the eggs reliably but would raise the babies, so obviously the time to transfer Grenadier to Societies was at hatching. I have continued to use this procedure with great success. There have been times, however when I have had to put eggs under Societies or lose them. This has not been a total failure, as in the first attempt, but it certainly does not produce the high survival rate that transferring at hatching does. Possibly there is a difference in the way that Grenadiers and Societies incubate which could account for the varying survival rates.

I have found that my Societies will raise Grenadier babies along with their own, though when mixing clutches, I feel a little more comfortable if I arrange it so that the exotic babies are a day or two older than the Societies. This gives them a slight edge should the Society parents shown preference to their own babies. Some species with which I work are less readily accepted by the Societies and in my experience cannot be fostered in mixed clutches — this is particularly true of Bluefaced Parrot Finches. If exotic babies are

rejected by the Societies (sometimes even they object to strange kids or if the clutches are extra large), I resort to hand feeding. Since the Societies will usually keep the babies warm, I leave the babies in the nest and take them out only at feeding times. In the case of large clutches, I merely supplement the parents' feeding as necessary.

After two years, we purchased our second and third pairs of Grenadiers right out of quarantine. I assumed our first pair was also wild-caught, but I have no idea how long they had been in captivity when we purchased them. I put all four of the new birds together in a cage overnight. The next morning two of them, a pair, were cuddled up together. With the idea in mind that greater success is achieved by birds being allowed to choose their own mates, I separated them from the other two and put them in a 30" x 24" x 18" cage (still in our quarantine area). Within two weeks they produced their first clutch of eggs. They incubated for 16 days at which time I checked and found the eggs to be infertile. (Normally I would have candled the eggs much earlier, but since this pair was so new to me I hadn't wanted to disturb them). They immediately went back to nest. This time the four eggs were fertile, but the pair only incubated for 10 days. I fostered the eggs to Societies and three chicks were raised. Since then, this pair has consistently incubated for only eight to ten days at which time I move the eggs to Societies. This, I have found, is still better than allowing the Societies to incubate from day one. Of course, the Societies must be already sitting tight.

Pair #3 produced their first fertile eggs about three months after purchase. They will not incubate reliably, so I have little choice but to foster the eggs.

All three pairs continue to produce clutches consisting usually of four, sometimes five, eggs. They breed year round, breaking for a month or two occasionally. Also occasionally they produce clutches of infertile eggs, this usually coinciding with their molt. It is not always immediately apparent when Grenadiers are going through a molt because, unlike some other species, they do not turn into a mass of pin feathers. I used to be concerned about resting my finches but found that finches tend to have minds of their own and will

rest when they are ready, not when I tell them to!

I have read or heard from various sources that regardless of nutritional content, if a bird's diet is not presented in an acceptable form, the parents will not feed the babies. I assume it is for this reason that my Grenadiers are reluctant to feed their young. Obviously the nutritional content of the diet which I feed is adequate since my Societies raise the Grenadiers with no problem — I don't even feed mealworms to the Society foster parents. Grenadiers, which I have sold to people who are able to provide outside flights, have raised their own young. These flights give the birds the opportunity to catch insects and bugs which we cannot, or more likely, will not provide indoors.

I feed a good quality seed, offering both finch and canary mixes. Every day, each pair is also given a dish containing a selection of small pieces of fresh fruit and vegetables such as apple, orange, broccoli, spinach, carrot, etc. I cook a mixture of rice, pigeon mix, oats and other small grains which they seem to enjoy and I offer hard boiled egg mashed with whole wheat bread crumbs and ground monkey chow. There is also a daily supply of mealworms. I use Avia vitamins and D-Ca-Fos to provide dietary supplements, and, of course, there is always a supply of grit, oyster shell, cuttlebone and egg shell. Baby chick scratch appears to be eagerly taken, especially by fledglings. The Society foster parents are fed exactly the same diet with the exception of mealworms. In an attempt to provide more live food, I tried feeding fly larvae, which the birds loved, however, our house and aviary was soon filled with flies as a result of escapee larvae, so I gave that up in a hurry.

It appears to be the general opinion that Grenadiers are normally peaceful in a community setting except with related birds such as Cordon Bleus and Violet-eared Waxbills. However, I have seen enough instances of aggression on the part of Grenadiers toward other non-related birds to advise caution when placing them in any community setting. On more than one occasion I have seen Grenadiers take a sudden and violent dislike to another member of the community after having lived peacefully within that community for several months. In each case the

violence involved a non-related species. I still have my original pair in a community flight, however, I had to remove the parrot finches and, of the remaining pairs, only the Grenadiers are breeding. All things considered, I feel the Grenadiers are best kept on their own.

While on the subject of housing, I feel I should mention a couple of concerns I have, which I haven't thoroughly investigated, but should be given some consideration. During the several years that I have worked

with and watched Grenadiers, I have been given the distinct impression that they are very territorial. Evidence of this is exhibited in aggression when more than one pair is housed in the same flight. However, I have for some time noticed aggression if another pair is within sight. This aggression, on the part of the male, is directed toward his own female, as if he is trying to keep her away from the intruding mate. His intentions may be honorable but the results can be deadly. I have seen a

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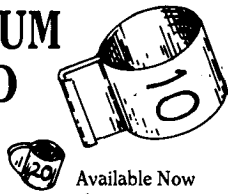


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similar type of thing happen with hookbills when they fear an intruder in their nest, resulting in dead or badly injured chicks!

My breeding pairs are totally out of sight of each other, though I think two of the pairs can hear each other and I see no problems between the members of each pair. The problems begin when another pair is set up within sight of any pair. I have housed young Grenadiers in holding cages within sight of my pairs with no ill effect. Could it be that just the sight of another pair, as opposed to single birds, is upsetting? Or is there some kind of communication between the pairs that I am missing? I don't know the answers, but I do know that something involving that "other pair" is disruptive.

My other area of concern involves setting up young pairs. Based on past experience, most finches may be paired up when they are fully colored out. When setting up young Grenadiers, however, I have observed considerable aggression on the part of the male toward the female. This is not the case with every new pair that I set up, nor does the aggression necessarily start immediately upon introduction. Sometimes, just when I think I have found a good pair, they start fighting. I began to think that perhaps the male matures earlier than the female and when she does not respond favorably to his advances he resorts to violence. To complicate matters, I tried, on two occasions, to introduce an older female to a young male; this resulted in the female harassing the male. After much trial and error, it seems that by waiting for the female's upper mandible to turn dark and pairing her with a male of approximately the same age, I have a much better chance of a peaceful match. I have also found it helpful to follow the same procedure as when setting up large psittacines, i.e. house them side by side at first, then introduce the male to a female's cage. She will have established territory and be less inclined to be intimidated by the male.

I stress again that these concerns are based solely on my observations, - I have no scientific evidence or expert opinion to back up these thoughts. However, it can't hurt to be aware of possible problems.

Although Grenadiers do not seem to be overly concerned about the size of cage or flight in which they are

housed, since they are fairly large, active finches, obviously they need room to move around. My smallest cage for Grenadiers measures 22" x 22" x 36". They seem to be content with this size. I give each pair a choice of nests. All but one pair have opted for the small wicker nest to be in a dark corner. I provide tumbleweeds and branches of *graviilea* as hiding places and, as I stated previously, where there is insufficient natural lighting, I use full spectrum bulbs. I offer a variety of materials for nesting and they seem to particularly like pampas grass plumes, dry and green grasses, feathers and shredded burlap. The latter is washed prior to shredding and, for safety reasons, cut into lengths no more than two to three inches. Both male and female work on building the nest, both sing beautifully, and both dance holding a piece of grass or a feather. Male and female take turns at incubating the eggs during the day - the female usually incubates at night while the male roosts on a branch nearby. Close to hatching time, the male seems to show more interest and when I see both adults spending more time together in the nest, I know the eggs are either hatching or are very close to it.

I feel I have learned a tremendous amount since I brought my first pair of Grenadiers home but I still have a lot to learn. Just when it seems as if I am beginning to understand them, they do something to prove I don't know a thing. Of course, that's what keeps them interesting. They are certainly not for beginners but neither are they something to be afraid of. After having worked with these birds, never again will I unquestioningly accept statements such as "Those birds will not breed..." or "You can't do that." I can, and so can anyone else who is willing to make the effort. We need to make the effort, not just for Grenadiers, but for any birds which we wish to continue to enjoy because they may not always be so easy to come by. My goal is to get these and other exotics to readily raise their own young in captivity. Perhaps successive generations will be more inclined to do so.

NOTE: During the time I have been working with the Purple Grenadiers, I have had little opportunity to compare notes with other breeders. It would be interesting to know if other breeders have experienced similar behaviors and breeding results. ●



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