

Breeding the Black-cheeked Waxbill

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Recently I have had some success breeding a fairly difficult species, the Black-cheeked Waxbill, *Estrilda chamosyna*. The Black-cheeked Waxbill is from the East African countries of Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya (Goodwin, 1982). They are found in areas of hot, dry thornscrub.

Cocks are a warm smoky gray on back with fine barring, black masked and tailed, underneath a reddish-gray chest with a black belly. Hens are a little duller all over with a red to pinkish belly. They don't have much of a song but more than make up for it in personality.

Black-cheeks are extremely active and acrobatic little birds that love to hang upside down to pick at the millet. If a moth or spider appears the birds hunt it down with an intensity that is surprising. They watch me move about in the birdroom and are quick to snatch up newly molted mealworms when they are offered.

I acquired three pairs of Black-cheeks in the fall of 1994 from Siggie's Imports. After a suitable period of quarantine two pair were set up into separate breeding cages 30 inches long by 18 inches high by 18 inches deep. A large sized wicker nest basket was placed in one corner at the back of the cage. Phragmites plumes were placed through the cage bars from the inside so the birds would have some cover and thus feel safer in their new quarters. Phragmites is an invasive European exotic that is growing all over the midwest. It sends out 3 - 6 foot tall blades of grass then shoots out a plume that looks like Pampas grass. It's bad for the environment but our foreign finches love the plume for nesting material.

After a couple weeks it looked like I was going to have early success as two pairs went to nest. I soon rediscovered the old axiom "if it was that easy, everyone would be doing it!" They refused to sit for more than three days. Hmmmmm, maybe I'll try fostering for a couple clutches—that's always worked before.

Whenever I try fostering with a species new to me I always use virgin Society Finches for foster parents. That way when chicks hatch underneath them the Societies think, "Babies—I'll feed them." If they have raised any other chicks they might go, "Babies, why are you not like the other babies I've raised? You must be defective so I'll let you starve."

After setting up two pairs of virgin Societies and supplying them with Black-cheek eggs I waited for them to hatch... and waited..and waited.... you guessed it—infertile eggs. I soon found that about the only time I could get them to lay fertile eggs was during the summer months and then generally only from pairs that were in outdoor cages.

From about the summer of 1995 to July of 1997 I pulled 10 to 15 fertile clutches of Black-cheek eggs that hatched under Societies. Time and again the same thing happened—babies hatched, fosters feed for one to five days, then chicks died. Baby Black-cheeks are born totally black with the edge of the beak outlined in white. I had never actually heard them beg. It seemed to me that their crops were empty most of the time. I let the same three pairs of Societies attempt to foster every time figuring that they would eventually get it right—they never did. I shuffled the Black-cheeks into the Owl Finch foster program in which, I am happy to report, they are all doing well.

During the summer of 1997 I set up one pair of Black-cheeks in a 40 inch long by 36 inch high by 36 inch deep cage outside on my deck. This cage had a black soil floor that I covered with bird seed a week or so before the birds were introduced so as to give them places to "hunt" in. I also placed two variegated Schifflera on opposite ends of the flight for cover. Up against the sides all along the upper corners of the cage I tied small bundles of Switchgrass, *Panicum vergatum*. I firmly believe that if I have any "secret" to breeding exotic finches, Switchgrass is it. Switchgrass is a native American

perennial. It's a grassy clump that grows to about two to three feet tall then sends out an "umbrella" of fine tiny seeds. I cut off the top 12 inches of seed heads and dry the clump out for about three days before tying them into a bundle. Most of my finches shun nest baskets and boxes and weave their own nests within the Switchgrass thicket. They use it for cover, for display material, as nesting grass and for the value of the seed as a conditioning food.

The second pair was set up again in the cage first described in this article but with only one variegated Schifflera and plenty of Switchgrass. The third pair was released in a 30 foot long by 8 foot high by 15 foot deep outdoor planted flight. There were about 12 other finch pairs of mixed species in this flight. The first two pairs of Black-cheeks stuffed great quantities of Switchgrass into large wicker nest baskets. They have a peculiar habit of weaving the grasses so as to form a four to six inch entrance tube leading into the nest. The first pair (outside on my deck) also built a cock nest on top on the nest basket. The third pair (in the large outdoor aviary) was unsuccessful for the third year in a row. This was probably due to too much competition for nest sites, food, etc. I really feel that this species needs to feel secluded and hidden to feel comfortable enough to reproduce.

I took two clutches of eggs from pair two and placed them under Societies that had only fostered Purple Grenadiers, *Uraeginthus ianthinogaster*. Purple Grenadier chicks are born very dark and they don't beg very loudly so I figured if anyone would raise Black-cheeks these fosters would.

When hatching day came close I started giving the foster parents my eggfood mixture with about 25 large mealworms cut up on top of it. This way, when the chicks hatch, the fosters feed the food item with the heaviest concentration of protein first. In the wild, most waxbills feed nothing but fresh insects for the first week or so. Chopping up mealworms on top of the mixture prevents the mealworms from crawling away as well as making it more appealing to the fosters as a nestling food item.

Soon I had four chicks hatch from the first clutch of four eggs. The Societies kept them fed and they came out of the nest at about 21 days. I soon found out one reason that this species seldom is fed by Societies—they beg very weakly and do not pursue the fosters with nearly as much vigor as a Society, Owl or Gouldian would. Nonetheless, these Societies fed them well and all four were successfully fledged.

Two eggs out of four hatched from the second clutch under a pair of Societies that were virgins. These were also raised successfully. In the meantime this same pair of Black-cheeks sat tightly on another clutch of eggs and four nestlings emerged on day 21. Unfortunately one chick died within a week. This was the last chick to emerge and probably didn't get fed enough.

The first pair of Black-cheeks which were set up outside on my deck laid two clutches of infertile eggs before laying a fertile clutch. This last fertile clutch of three eggs were placed under Societies that had previously raised Owls and Blue-caps. All three were successfully fostered.

All of these young Black-cheeks, both parent raised and fostered, were closed-banded with NFSS "B" sized bands on or about the tenth day.

My friends have asked me "What are you doing that is making them want to breed?" I don't believe in a single factor, rather I believe it is a combination of things that make them feel comfortable enough to want to raise a family. I've already explained cage size and the use of cover in those cages. I believe diet plays a big part also. Birds in the wild eat any and everything. They are just like kids in that respect. If it looks interesting they'll put it in their mouth. So finches in the wild eat various plant life, bugs, and seeds in varying stages of development.

In captivity we probably feed them a good quality Vitaseed mix which is a good start. They really appreciate a good plate of finely chopped veggies every day. Dry seed is high in fat and not the best for them. The more veggies they eat the better off they are. If you have access to fresh or dried bugs this really improves their diet. Bevo

Products makes an excellent bug mix for softbills that is fine enough for finches. CeDe also makes several products both egg and cereal based which include dried bugs in them. Mealworms are an excellent source of protein. If your birds won't eat them whole, either chop them up on top of your eggfood or throw some into the eggfood in the blender! In the summer months grasshoppers are a good "free" live food that all my birds love chopped up. Marigold and Dandelion seed heads are another "summer treat." Just pick the whole flower top and watch the birds rip into them. I make my eggfood mixture every other day, refrigerating the unused portion. I use a mini-chopper/blender to finely chop the vegetables and also to blend the eggs and vitamins together. All teaspoons listed in recipe are heaping teaspoons unless otherwise noted.

Eggfood Recipe

- 3 large carrots
- 2 cups broccoli florets
- 3 cooked eggs
- 10 teaspoons of CeDe yellow eggfood
- 6 teaspoons CeDe Mix
- 3 teaspoons CeDe pure dried bugs
- 3 teaspoons Bevo Universal Insect mix from Connie Cuthbert (215 536-1599)
- 6 teaspoons Purina Chick Starter (medicated).

- 1 can well drained corn
- 1 cup soaked seed well rinsed
- 2 teaspoons Bee Pollen
- 1/2 teaspoon Fertility Enhancer - from The Avian Medicine Chest (712 647-2079)
- 1 even teaspoon Lacto-plus - from Lakes Minnesota Macaws (612 290-0606)
- 1 even teaspoon Montmorillonite (trace mineral clay - very important) - from Connie Cuthbert
- 1 even teaspoon Osteo-Form from Vetamix
- 1 even teaspoon wheatgrass
- 1 rounded teaspoon pulverized eggshells
- dash of Necton - S from Necton Products

All of my birds with chicks get this twice a day. Those without chicks get it either every day or every other day. In addition to this mixture, I chop both mealworms and grasshoppers on top for the Black-cheeks to feed their young.

I would not consider Black-cheeks a good species for a beginner. Though not difficult to maintain, breeding them can be quite frustrating. However, their attractive plumage, charming personality, and intelligence are a welcome addition to any aviculturist's aviary. ➤

Reference

Goodwin, Derek 1982 *Estrildid Finches of the World* Cornell University Press p.178-200

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