



ESTRILDID FINCHES IN AVICULTURE...

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the Painted Finch

This is one of those truly beautiful estrildid finches which originates in Australia. As wild-caught imports have been prohibited since the early 1960s, all new blood is generally imported from continental Europe, most notable Holland. Admittedly, this is one species in which Americans can take consolation in the fact that it is truly difficult to breed, especially in the "generational" situation. We know no breeder in this country who is successful generation after generation in the case of the Painted Finch. Without a doubt, the crux of the problem is that Europeans send us their "junk," inbred and often infertile. It is understandable, as who would want to part with their valuable breeding stock anyway?

We have spoken with Mike Fidler, of England, about this bird, and the British also find it difficult, especially in regard to getting it to rear its own young. On one of his research trips to Australia, he asked the Australian aviculturists why we in America and Europe find this species so challenging. Shocked and surprised at this, the response was that the Painted Finch is primarily a termite-eater while raising chicks, feeding them to its young. This is really not surprising, as the Painted Finch is a bird of dry scrublands, nesting in Spinifex, a coarse, spiny grass not unlike our western tumbleweed. So, although they are primarily seed-eaters, they feed heavily on termites



Photo by Stash and Carol Anne Buckley

Female painted Finch emerging from the nest. This species is dimorphic in that the cock has a larger red face mask and fewer but larger white dots on the breast. The males also vocalize with a metallic clicking sound while robotically moving their heads side to side.

when feeding their young. This could very well be one of the keys to establishing this estrildid finch in America. Of course, termites are not practical in the home. Safer substitutes are ant pupae, newly molted mealworms, and white worms.

Another difficulty in breeding the Painted Finch lies in the fact that the young are difficult to foster. Due to their diminutive size, our large American Society Finches find these chicks quite challenging. However, for those of you who are up to the challenge, this is what we found successful in the breeding of our birds.


Keep your Painted Finches one sexed pair per flight (not mixed with other species) in the most generously-sized flight you can provide. We keep our pairs in flights 3 feet long x 2 feet wide x 4 feet high. In the corners and in the back, tie dry grass tussocks onto the hardware cloth. Within these,

mount small wicker baskets of the type usually reserved for Zebra Finches, *Poephila guttata*. They may or may not use these, at times preferring to utilize the tops of these nests as platforms for their own nests. The nesting material of choice seems to be strands of burlap. In our opinion, the provision of charcoal bits for use in lining the nest does not appear to be necessary. Surprisingly, we have had more breeding success in our tropical bird room with high humidity than in the drier environment recommended by most authorities.

We have found that domestic strains will raise their own young on homemade eggfood. Clutch size, in our experience, averages three eggs and newly-hatched babies superficially resemble Society chicks. This is one species in which you should exercise restraint — avoid nest inspection which would probably lead to nest desertion.

Chicks are very quiet in the nest. This is probably an adaptive behavior to avoid predators in their sparse spinifex environment where nests are easily detected and raided due to their proximity to the ground. We urge you not to make the classic mistake with these finches, that is to sell the offspring quickly to recoup your investment in the purchase price of the original breeding stock. These juveniles have adapted to your particular husbandry techniques and will be much more likely to breed when mature.

There are three known color mutations of the Painted Finch: fawn, pied, and yellow — none of which are found in this country.

The future outlook for this small, colorful finch in aviculture is extremely dismal. This is due to the difficulty in acquiring acceptable stock (the price is now between \$500 and \$600 a pair), its lack of fertility, and the challenge involved in rearing the chicks. It is sad to state that when importation stops, the Painted Finch's demise in aviculture is inevitable. This is a sad commentary, worldwide) on the lack of true concern for a tiny, yet interesting bird which has all too often been bred only for a quick profit and not with an appreciation of its beauty and desirability as an avicultural subject. 



In Buckleys' article on Java Rice Birds in the last issue of *Watchbird*, the bird's scientific name *Padda oryzivora* was omitted.