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photo by Daniel L. Martin

Purple Grenadier fledgling at 22 days old. See color photos on front and back covers.

Purple Grenadiers

by Terry Dunham
 St. Petersburg, FL

"Purple Grenadiers?" muses a well-connected California bird dealer: "I haven't heard of anyone breeding them in years."

Few people anywhere would have heard of breeding success with Grenadiers, a colorful close cousin to the better-known Violet-eared Waxbill. First imported into Europe in 1928, it was not until 1957 that the first breeding was recorded, at the Keston Bird Farm, in England. There is no compilation of American breedings, but last year two American breeders raised more than 50 of the rare finches from four pair of imported, presumably wild-caught, stock. By December, 1978, some of those young which had hatched the previous March had already laid fertile eggs themselves.

Both breeders first tried to allow the Grenadiers to raise their own young, and saw those experiments fail, before resorting to fostering under Society finches. Inexplicably, one of those breeders' fostering efforts met with only marginal success—though she may have produced the first U.S.-bred Purple Grenadier in years—while the other effort was remarkably and consistently productive.

"Without question the Grenadiers have been the hardest and trickiest bird I've raised," says Mrs. Frida Hoffman, of Los Altos, California, who has raised Violet-ears, Blue-capped Waxbills, and many of the Australian grassfinches.

Her first pair laid numerous clutches in the summer of 1977, but babies died "on the first day, the fifth day, even the 17th day; they never raised them all the way,"

she says. "They seemed too anxious to go back to nesting elsewhere before finishing with the clutch at hand." She finally began fostering under Societies, but was able to raise only one youngster to independence.

The following year—the summer of 1978—she set up three pair of imported birds. They were housed in outdoor flights twelve feet long and two to four feet wide, some in mixed collections and others by themselves. All three pair laid throughout the summer, with excellent fertility, but would not raise their young. Again, she fostered, and raised three babies. She considers the results "disappointing," considering the many fertile eggs laid. She does not know why the Societies did not successfully rear the young.

Carol Martin, of Seminole, Florida, was more successful with fostering. She bought one pair of imported Grenadiers in March, 1977, and added them to about 15 other pairs of finches in an indoor flight 2½-feet wide and 16-feet long. During the first 12 months they laid three clutches, two eggs each, all infertile. In March, 1978, they hatched at least one youngster—and let it die.

"They went back to laying immediately," she says, "and from that point on I started fostering. I had raised various kinds of Australian finches, and some Cordon Blues, under Societies, and I figured they'd raise these birds, too."

They did.

Between March 9 and October 2 the single pair laid 85 eggs. Two immature birds were lost in a birdroom accident; the Societies raised 55 others to indepen-

dence. Five eggs transferred to Societies on June 6 all hatched and all five birds survived. More typical clutches consisted of four eggs, with an average of three hatching and/surviving. The Grenadiers would resume laying four days after each clutch of eggs was removed. Typically, they moved to a new nest site for each clutch, sometimes choosing a wicker nest, other times building in vines growing in the flight.

The fostering Societies were fed finch and parakeet mix, greens and occasional spray millet, and an egg food mix prepared as follows:

To each hardboiled egg add 2 tsp. Vionate, one heaping tsp. high protein baby cereal, heaping tsp. Petamine or other nestling food, and 1 tsp. RGB high protein-vitamin "Supplement for the Birds" (available from J. & D. Finnicum, P.O. Box 176, Gaffney, S.C. 29340). Soy protein powder from a health food store would be an acceptable though incomplete substitute for this latter additive.

She feeds this mix once each morning, giving only as much as the Societies will consume in about three hours. The young left the nest between the 15th and 17th day; five days later she began feeding small mealworms, which the baby Grenadiers devoured. Three weeks after leaving the nest, the young were removed from their foster parents. Only one baby died after being removed. The young quickly commenced a heavy moult and could be sexed when 2½ months old.

I bought two pair of the Martins' birds. One pair laid scattered infertile eggs during their seventh month. The other pair laid their first full clutch during their eighth month, after being moved from a mixed flight to a separate aviary. One pair of young kept by the Martins laid their first fertile eggs during their ninth month. As this is written, those eggs are incubating under Society Finches.

"I'd like to get to the point where I didn't have to foster anything," Mrs. Hoffman says, "but when you can foster and have success, I favor it."

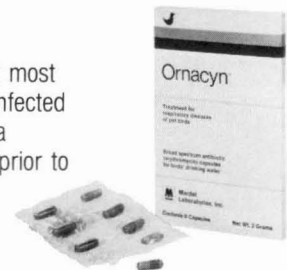
"I'd foster them again any time," Carol Martin says. "The babies are friendly, they're sturdy, and they're strong. The last baby was as husky as the first."

Her birds are kept indoors at room temperature. I have birds she raised in my outdoor flights, where temperatures had dropped to 42 degrees F. at this writing. Mrs. Hoffman's adults are in outside flights where recent 24 degree F. weather froze water in their drinking cups. "The cold didn't bother them," she says. "But I can't wait 'til spring, to try them again."



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