

Breeding the Melba

a success story

(the second time around)

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MELBA FINCH

Photo taken by John Krell, photo contest winner, 1978. (photo in color on front cover)

San Antonio Zoo's Hixon Tropical Bird House is an arena of glass-fronted exhibits which enclose a landscaped center free-flight area. During the last year we have been renovating these exhibits one-by-one to dioramas with a geographic theme. One of the first of these was an African water-hole exhibit. The details of this interesting micro-habitat were researched to enhance its educational and avicultural value. A spreading thorn acacia shadows a shallow, muddy waterhole which is surrounded by tall, dry Sudan and Kikuyu grass. Antelope and buffalo footprints (in concrete) add realism to this pool as do the pygmy goose and jacana that haunt its edges. In addition to the green-winged race of the Melba finch (*Pytelia melba*), this display includes superb starlings, Jackson's whydah, violet-eared waxbills, scaly-crowned weavers, African ring-necked doves and triangular-spotted pigeons. Within hours of completing their quarantine at our medical facility, the pair of Melbas were seen searching among some tall, dry lambs-quarter plants for a suitable nesting site. In the wild state, Melbas are found nesting in thorn acacia and other low-growing thorny species indigenous to the scrub forests and riverine valleys of Kenya, Nigeria, Natal and Mozambique.

Twenty-four hours after release into their display cage the Melbas were seen courting. The male circles the female with a seeding grass stem in his bill and his tail held toward the female. The plumage of his head and neck is compressed, and the plumage of the flanks and belly erected. During this display the male sings a quiet, but varied series of descending trills. As is typical in most estrilids, the female ignores the males circling dance until ready for mating. During her receptive phase, she rapidly vibrates her tail and invites copulation. For two days before and all during the completion of laying the clutch of five eggs, the Melbas copulate several

times each day.

Nest construction moves swiftly with the pair selecting a dense, twiggy site three to eight feet off the ground. The male delivers a seemingly superfluous amount of both green and dry grass blades and stems to the female who constructs a ball-like nest the size of a large grapefruit with an opening on the side. Our pair of Melba finches lined their first nest with feathers plucked from the flanks of protesting ring doves. We then took the hint and gave them sterilized Muscovy feathers to use — much to the relief of the ring doves.

The male Melba defended the first nest of five eggs vigorously, and, after a thirteen-day period of incubation by the female (shared occasionally by the male), all five hatched. On the third day after hatching, disaster struck in the form of a pair of superb starlings, and the whole brood of Melbas was recycled.

The dauntless pair of Melbas began anew to construct a nest that same day. At that point, we netted them out of this display and placed them in a steep riverbank habitat where our pygmy kingfishers and a pair of Nile plovers reside. This situation suited the Melbas perfectly, and nest construction began the same day in a ¼-inch wire mesh tube 4' × 4' × 8' hidden in a clump of living woodrose vine. This nest

site is only 15 inches from the front glass of the display. A tightly-packed ball of grass seed heads, woodrose leaves and duck feathers housed five fertile eggs only ten days after the pair was introduced to the cage.

Two weeks later, vigorous squeeking was heard each time the parents entered the nest. The young Melbas remained in the nest 23 days after hatching. When fledged, the five young are greyish-green monotone little creatures with great tufts of natal down still adhering to the feathers of the crown and lower back. The internal gape is studded with violet and white pearls that soon fade and disappear as the young become self-feeding.

During the whole rearing period the Melbas were voracious feeders, concentrating on live young crickets (housefly-sized), vitamin-fed mealworms, hard-boiled egg and sprouted finch mix. Dry finch mix, health grit for budgies and fruit flies were also available. The young all flew rather well on the day of fledging, soon returning to the front of the display where they were assiduously fed by both parents. The presence of thousands of visitors only inches away had no effect on their appetites.

Most of us would be pleased to have zebras or societies with the instincts of this pair of wild-caught Melbas. The first brood have now moulted out to be four males and a female. The prolific parents are again incubating a clutch of five potential pytilias. I can strongly recommend the extra time and trouble necessary to house and breed these colorful African finches. As legal restrictions on aviculturists proliferate with each passing month, the importance of establishing good genetically diverse captive stocks of all species becomes essential.

How about clearing out a flight of zebras or diamond doves and giving Melbas a chance? ●