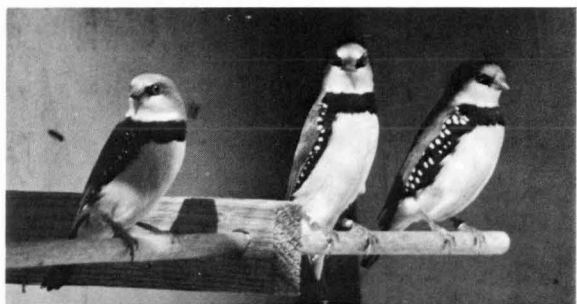


BREEDING FINCHES IN CAPTIVITY

Diamond Sparrows

by Jerry Jennings
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Diamond
nest in
tumbleweed.



Diamond Sparrows, male center, hens on left and right.



Whether breeding finches in cages or aviaries, it is a difficult and challenging task with most species. The Diamond Sparrow certainly is no exception.

Known as the Diamond Firetail Finch (*Zonaeginthus guttatus*) in its native Australia, this bird is one of the four Firetail species and the only one common in captivity. Among the other three species, only the Painted Finch (*Emblema picta*) is known in American and European aviculture, where it is extremely rare. The remaining two species, the Beautiful Firetail (*Z. bellus*) and the Red-eared Firetail (*Z. oculatus*) have never been imported into the U.S.

The Diamond Sparrow is an extremely attractive, but somewhat aggressive bird. The crown and nape are silver gray; back and wings dusky brown; rump and upper tail coverts red, tail black. The throat, abdomen, and under tail coverts are white. A broad black band covers the foreneck and upper breast. The sides of the foreneck and the flanks are black with each feather having a subterminal white spot. The bill, iris, and eye ring are red; the feet and legs are dark gray. Sexes are alike except males have darker bills tending toward maroon, whereas females often have very light red bills. Behavior is the key to sex determination. Immatures are similar to adults except the bill is black and the black feather areas are gray.

The range of the Diamond Sparrow extends from the Dawson River in eastern Queensland to the Eyre Peninsula and Kangaroo Island of South Australia, where they inhabit open forest and grass-

lands. The birds are also known to frequent gardens and parks, though they are not particularly fond of man. Habitat destruction has brought about a distinct decline in their numbers, and they have been extending their range inland away from advancing civilization.

The natural diet of the Diamond Sparrow consists of half ripe and ripe grass seeds, which are taken from the ground. Birds may also be observed jumping up from the ground to obtain seeds direct from seedheads. During the breeding season Diamond Sparrows consume large quantities of small insects and insect larvae.

In captivity their natural diet can and should be duplicated. A variety of dry seeds including Canary, Proso, large and small red millet, and the smaller finch millets should be offered as the main



Hen using nest box.

course with emphasis on the first two. A practical solution would be to offer a commercial finch mix and a parrakeet mix, since finch mixes are generally light on Canary and Proso. Spray millet is a perennial favorite, rounding out the dry seed offerings.

During breeding season the aviculturist should endeavor to grow some spray millet or finch millet. This is fairly easy to do and the seed heads produced should be served while still green (half ripe) and in the milk stage.

It is difficult to raise Diamond Sparrows without some live food. Mealworms are the most convenient, though not the only option. Fly larvae may be cultivated in the back yard. This includes houseflies, which may be produced from decaying meat (be sure the larvae have been cleansed by placing them in bran for twenty-four hours before serving), and fruit flies — a culture of which may be cultivated right inside the aviary.

Other insect options include wasp moth larvae and small crickets, which are commercially available (Classified ads in *Field & Stream Magazine* provide information on suppliers). Finally, mosquito larvae can be grown in standing water, as small as a bucketfull in most parts of the country, and removed with a small fish net.

Establishing breeding pairs of Diamond Sparrows is a painstaking task. As with most finches a male and female do not necessarily a pair make. Several birds should be color code banded and placed in an enclosure where they may select their own mates. Once pairing has occurred, pairs may be removed to sepa-



Diamond Sparrows.

rate flights — ideally one pair per flight as males may behave aggressively towards other males.

Diamond Sparrows will select a variety of nest sites. Some birds will choose boxes, while others will choose baskets. Some will build only in tumbleweeds or live plants, having nothgint to do with artificial sites. Whatever site they select, they must be left **ALONE!** The greatest cause of failure is the nosey breeder. Diamond Sparrows are so finicky that I automatically remove young from a nest accidentally inspected, and place them under Societies or Zebras. In every case where this has not been done, the young have disappeared. The critical period is froj the day of hatching to about two weeks of age, however, the chance is not worth taking.

Nest building materials primarily consist of long pieces of grass and feathers (preferably white). In the absence of these they will utilize nearly anything at hand, including leaves, spray millet stems, and paper. It is important to provide them with proper materials and to do so year around. In the non-breeding season Diamond Sparrows naturally construct roosting nests. If not permitted to do so, they may be stressed and, if outdoors, unnecessarily exposed to the elements.

Diamond Sparrows should be given plenty of opportunity for exercise since they are voracious eaters and prone to becoming overweight. Some individuals become so fat they can barely fly, if at all. Consequently, Diamonds are not particularly suitable for cage breeding.

To my knowledge, there are no mutations of the Diamond Sparrow. There have been a number of hybrids with Zebras, Shaftails, and Societies. With the latter birds, which I have personally seen, it is likely the Diamonds were reared by Societies and became imprinted. When they matured they mated with Societies.

Diamond Sparrows deserve more attention in American aviculture. The challenge is there for anyone choosing to specialize in this exquisite bird. ■

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