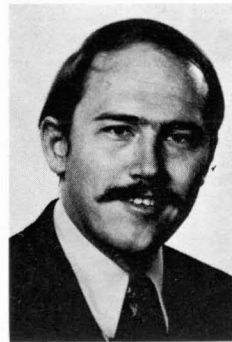
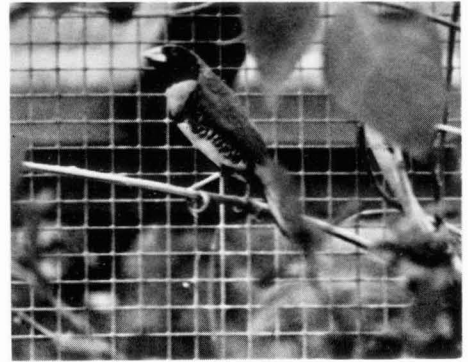


# Breeding Finches In Captivity

by Jerry Jennings

Male Chestnut-breasted Mannikin



Jerry Jennings

## THE CHESTNUT-BREASTED FINCH



 RANGE OF CHESTNUT-BREASTED FINCH

The Chestnut-breasted Finch (*Lonchura castaneothorax*) is one of three Australian Mannikins, the only one still in American aviculture to the best of my knowledge, and perhaps the most striking of all the *Lonchura*. The other two Australian Mannikins, the Yellow-rumped Finch (*Lonchura flavipyrma*) and Pictorella Finch (*Heteromunia pectoralis*), were kept by U.S. breeders in the forties and fifties, but seem to have disappeared sometime shortly after the Australian embargo on wildlife exports in 1959.

Although I have never seen the Pictorella, I was fortunate to obtain two female and one male Yellow-rumped Finches in the Spring of 1973. These birds laid several clutches of eggs, however, many were infertile and the parents did not incubate them as well as they might. By the end of the year all three birds had expired for unknown reasons. One egg in a clutch of five, placed under Societies, did hatch and the chick lived to about 18 days.

During the past three years small numbers of Chestnut-breasted Finches have been imported and are enjoying increasing popularity with more advanced breeders. Their handsome appearance and willingness to breed under the proper conditions have contributed to this new interest.

The Chestnut-breasted's crown and nape are dark grayish-brown streaked with a still darker color. Back and wing feathers are dark cinnamon, rump and tail feathers are straw yellow. Lores, cheeks, and throat are black. Breast is a light

chestnut brown bordered by a black band, which sets off the white abdomen. Under tail coverts are black. Bill is gray-black, iris reddish brown, legs and feet black.

The female is identical in color to the male making them extremely difficult to sex. Some observers have stated that females have a lighter shade of color, especially on the crown. This, however, is an individual variation and not related to sexual characteristics. The only accurate method for differentiating the sexes is through careful observation. The male has an elaborate courtship which includes a noticeable and elaborate song.

During courtship the male extends his neck and holds his beak open and pointing down. At the same time the feathers of the head, breast, and belly are fluffed out. In this posture the male sings his courtship song, while bending and stretching his legs. The Chestnut's courtship behavior is similar to the Society's in this regard. The song can easily be heard from a distance of thirty feet or more and the birds will not stop their display behavior when approached. Sexing, therefore, requires just a little patience.

Young Chestnut-breasted Finches are quite different in appearance from their parents. They are nearly uniformly dull olive brown, lighter on the underside than on the back. The black areas of the face and throat are the last to color up during the juvenile moult.

The Chestnut-breast ranges from Derby in tropical northwestern Australia to eastern New South Wales as far south as Sydney. It is not known how far inland the species extends, however, it covers a fairly broad climatic range. Four distinct sub-species of the Chestnut-breast inhabit New Guinea (*L.c. uropygialis*; *L.c. boschnai*; *L.c. sharpei*; and *L.c. nigriceps*). The Australian race (*L.c. castaneothorax*) is slightly different in appearance from the others.

The Chestnut-breasted Finch inhabits grasses and reeds bordering watercourses and swamps. It also prefers cane fields and other areas of dense cover. It avoids

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human structures, being shy than many of the other Australian Finches. Although the Chestnut-breast is fairly common in Australia it has met fierce competition from the introduced Spice Finch (*Lonchura punctulata*) and in some areas the Spice has completely replaced the Chestnut.

In the wild the diet of the Chestnut-breast consists of half-ripe grass seed as

quently change their appearance in the first years of their lives."<sup>1</sup>

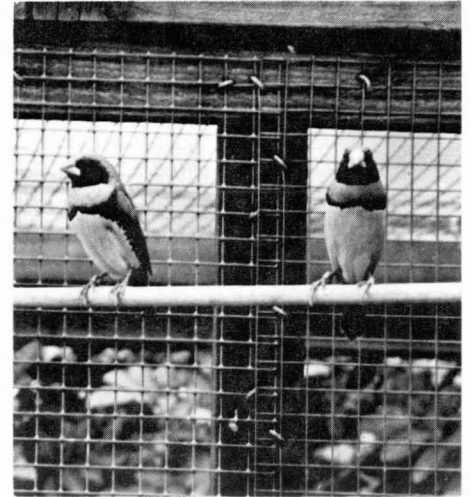
The Chestnut-breasted Finch is ideally suited for aviculture. After years of domestication, the species retains most, if not all, of its characteristic behavior patterns. In addition, it has become an excellent breeder in captivity, though it is quite rare in the U.S. In European aviaries it is well established and is less expensive



Young — two weeks  
out of nest.



Young — four weeks  
out of nest.



Adult pair Chestnut-breasted Mannikins

well as half-ripe seeds of Barley. In some areas it is known as the Barley Finch. During the breeding season they eat large quantities of insects, usually flying termites, which are taken on the wing.

The Chestnut-breast builds its nest in the grasses and reeds usually one to three feet from the ground. Sugarcane fields are specially popular areas for nesting. Bamboo and dead cornstalks also are frequent sites for nests. Long pieces of grass are used to construct the nest, which is then lined with finer material. The Chestnut does not build a roosting nest, as do many Australian Finches.

In tropical northern Australia the breeding season corresponds to the rainy season, when half-ripe seeds are most plentiful. However, in irrigated portions of their range, the breeding season is extended.

In the non-breeding season Chestnut-breasts gather in large flocks. Many of these flocks are mixed flocks of Chestnut-breasts and Yellow-rumped Finches. It has been observed that Chestnut-breasted Finches regularly interbreed with Yellow-rumped Finches. In fact, many Yellow-rumps show Chestnut-breasted markings. A number of respected ornithologists wrote earlier in the century that the Chestnut-breasted markings often appeared in the Yellow-rumped Finch only after several annual moults — not an unknown phenomenon of hybrids, which "... fre-

there than the Lady Gouldian or Shaftail.

Because of their sociable nature, I would recommend housing Chestnut-breasts one pair to a flight. This prevents too much visiting and facilitates the identification of sexes. It also appears that some males tend to dominate others, who then will not display making it impossible to correctly sex them.

Chestnut-breasted Finches will accept a wide variety of nest sites from tumbleweeds to wooden boxes and wicker baskets. Due to individual pair preferences, however, a combination of sites should be provided and the birds allowed to make their own choice. Varying lengths of Bermuda or Devil Grass can be offered for nesting material along with pieces of string, white feathers, or animal fur for the inner lining.

Captive birds vary in their ambitiousness when building nests. Some are very elaborate, while others hardly build any structure at all. Occasionally, no material is used at all. The eggs are simply laid in the empty basket or box.

Chestnuts lay from three to seven eggs, four being the average clutch size. The average number of young fledged at Walnut Acres this year was three per nest, based on eight nests from four pair. (This figure represents only successful nests,

1. Immelmann, Klaus, *Australian Finches*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1965, p. 179.

i.e. one or more young surviving to fledge, for reasons explained later). Eggs are incubated from twelve to fourteen days depending on ambient air temperatures. Young fledge in 20-23 days.

Successful rearing of Chestnut-breasted Finches appears to be more dependent upon diet than is the case with nearly all the other Australian Finches. In addition to a standard finch mix they should be offered an unlimited supply of Large Proso Millet and lots of small mealworms. Without these two ingredients, you are not likely to raise many young.

For nearly two years at Walnut Acres I had nest after nest of young Chestnuts die at 3 to 5 days of age. The dead babies were examined at our state veterinary laboratory for suspected disease problems to no avail. A close check of nests was finally made several times a day. It was noted that crops of the nestlings were always empty in the morning and nearly empty (20% full) in the late afternoon. Were the Chestnuts simply not good feeders?

Closer examination of the young birds revealed they were being fed almost an exclusive diet of Large Proso Millet and Mealworms, the millet constituting approximately 85% of total food intake (crop content can easily be seen through the transparent skin). At the same time, the finch mix then being offered contained very little Large Proso Millet, perhaps no more than 5%. The young were literally starving to death. Immediately a dish of straight Large Proso Millet was offered to each pair of Chestnuts with young in the nest. Examination of the nestlings several hours thereafter brought the pleasant surprise of full crops in all young. These nests went on to fledge 100% of the young hatched.

The only other major component of their diet, as mentioned earlier, appeared to be mealworms, which the adults take in large quantities. When the birds are not breeding, they do not maintain their interest in the worms, and consume only a small percentage of their brood feeding quantity.

Large Proso Millet can be purchased by itself from most feed stores. It also constitutes 50% or more of all Parrakeet Mixes. The best solution, though more costly, is to have your own mix prepared to your specifications. The recipe at Walnut Acres, which is now being used exclusively, is made up in batches of 2,000 lbs. It contains 20% Large Proso, 20% Large Red Millet, 20% Canary, 10% Small White Millet, 10% Millet 610, 10% Siberian (small red), 5% Watergrass, and 5% Steel Cut (rolled) Oats. Rape, Flax, and Niger are excluded since most finches

will not touch the first two, and only a few will eat Niger. Furthermore, Niger can turn rancid when stored for prolonged periods and all three are in the top rank pricewise, making it absurd to waste it.

In addition to the above diet ingredients, spray millet, greens, grit, cuttlebone, and sterilized ground eggshell are provided. Headstart Poultry Vitamins are offered in the drinking water (1 tsp./gal.) which is changed daily.

At this time I know of no mutations of the Chestnut-breasted Finch. There have been a number of hybrids, such as the Chestnut/Yellow-rump cross in the wild, and several others in captivity. Some examples are with the Shaftail, Masked, Zebra, Silverbill, White Hooded Nun, and the Society.

Crosses with the Society are fertile. Backcrosses with the Chestnut parent will produce birds nearly identical to the original bird after the F3 generation. Hybridizing can be used in this manner, when one is down to his "last bird" and has no hope of finding another. If that is what it takes to preserve a particular species in aviculture, it can be done, but extreme care is the axiom.

In the next issue, I will discuss the Cherry or Plumhead Finch.

## BIRD NETS

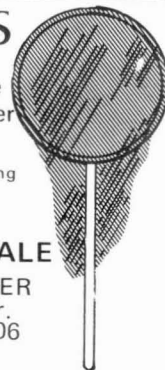
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