

The Cherry Finch

by Jerry Jennings



Hen Cherry Finch (top right) feeding three young fledglings.

An engaging bird, the Cherry or Plum-head Finch (*Aidemosne modesta*) is not common in American aviculture. It is not a colorful bird, though it is extremely hardy and a prolific breeder under proper conditions.

Like the Owl Finch the color pattern of the Cherry Finch is limited to a variation of browns, blacks, whites, and grays, however, the Cherry has an additional splash of color on the crown. As in the Owl Finch, it is the arrangement of colors in the Cherry Finch that make it attractive.

The Cherry Finch is one of the few dimorphic Estrildids native to Australia, thus simplifying the task of setting up true pairs. The sexes are identical in all aspects except for the male's distinguishing crown and throat patch, both of which are a maroon purple in color. The female lacks the throat patch and has only a minute portion of the crown next to the base of the upper mandible swatched in purple.

The back and wings of the Cherry Finch are brown speckled with white, the color that also tips the wings and upper tail coverts. Tail feathers are nearly black, lores black and cheeks white. White also covers the breast and abdomen extending to the vent. The breast itself is barred with brown in fine lines that come together above but not below such that the white forms an inverse V as it extends downward. Legs are brown/black, bill is slate gray and the eyes are brown.

Juveniles are similar to females except they are very dark all over, having a smudged appearance. As they mature their coloration lightens, however, sexual characteristics only begin to appear at about two months of age.

The Cherry Finch's distribution is one of the most restricted of all the Australian Finches. It ranges from Port Denison



Female Cherry Finch.

in Queensland south to southern New South Wales and west to the Nogoa River and west central New South Wales. The present range of the Cherry Finch is smaller than it was during the first half of the Twentieth Century. Where it was once seen in northern Queensland it has now completely disappeared. It is believed that the introduced Spice Finch (*Lonchura punctulata*) has partially displaced the Cherry, though it is difficult to accurately determine the status of the Cherry Finch population, since the birds are very nomadic moving with the changing location of available surface water.

In the wild, Cherry Finches frequent grasses and reeds bordering watercourses, as well as open areas spotted with Eucalyptus trees and a variety of shrubs. The birds congregate in large flocks outside of the breeding season, whereas during the breeding season they associate in pairs and small groups. Pairbond is strong among Cherry Finches, though body contact is minimal compared to the Poephila species, which routinely preen each other and spend their nights outside breeding seasons in specially built "roosting nests".

Cherry Finches feed on or near the ground and are adept at climbing grass stems to reach their seedheads. Their drinking habits are the typical pigeon-like sucking method employed by the Poephila. They have been observed hanging from a grass stem over the water from which they drink.

Male Cherry Finches have a very well-defined courtship display. This display begins with a song, proceeds into a series of bowing movements while holding a grass stem in the beak. Next, the stem is dropped as the male extends the legs, stretches up with a bowed head, fluffed feathers, and sings. This is quickly followed by copulation. Immelmann indicates there is a strong individual variation of this behavior, wherein one or more of the above described actions may be eliminated.

Cherry Finches prefer to nest low to the ground in the wild. They select bushes, tussocks of grass, thorny vines, and other plants in which to construct their relatively small nest. Somewhat calm in nature, Cherry Finches often nest close to human habitations, whose gardens they visit in search of food. Nests are composed primarily of green grasses and occasionally living grass next to the nest may be woven directly into the nest itself. This tends to provide additional camouflage.

At Walnut Acres, Cherry Finches are housed one pair to a flight. While this procedure is applied to most of the species at Walnut Acres to preserve family identity, it is applied to the Cherry Finch in order to preserve life and limb. Through some unfortunate experiences, it has been demonstrated that males will occasionally fight causing injuries. This behavior usually occurs when one or more males become interested in breeding and the aviary does not allow for

establishment of appropriately sized territories. It appears that Cherry Finches require larger territories in captivity than do many other species. On the other hand, I have not observed fighting among sibling males.

Although Cherry Finches have been at Walnut Acres for several years, it was not until January 1976 that significant breeding began. This long awaited turn of events is attributable in part to the limited number of individuals available for breeding, the undetermined age and ancestry of the birds, and relative excessive disturbance.

Despite the ease in sexing Cherry Finches, the establishment of compatible working pairs is no mean feat. Accomplishment of such a task requires the keeping of a number of birds, unless the breeder is abnormally blessed. Several pairs at Walnut Acres for several years displayed no interest in the boudoir. Finally, these pairs were split and rematched. If variety is the spice of life, it worked magic as heretofore unproductive birds took up housekeeping.

In every instance where Cherry Finches have built nests at Walnut Acres, they have exclusively selected tumbleweeds as nesting sites. They are one of just a few species of Australian Finches which has not demonstrated some individual variation in site preference.

Cherry Finches lay small white, elliptically shaped eggs — numbering from four to six per clutch. However, fertility is not as high as the *Poephila* species. Four young in a nest is great, the average is about 2.5 per nest. Incubation lasts 12-14 days and young fledge approximately three weeks after hatching. Juvenile moult varies from two to three months after hatching, but is complete after the third month of life.

A fundamental element in the breeding program is to **LEAVE THEM ALONE!**

If they even think you have fooled with their nest — the nest is most likely to be abandoned. Occasionally, just a close approach to the nest is sufficient

to cause a breeding failure. When parents are nesting, they usually become very excited when the aviculturist enters the aviary. This behavior is more pronounced after the eggs have hatched.

Once young have fledged, they tend to return to the nest at night to roost. After a few days they will roost out in the open. During the first few weeks after fledging young Cherry Finches are very flighty, tending to panic at any disturbance. Caution upon entering the aviary will help avoid unnecessary dashing about and subsequent injury.

The diet of the Cherry Finch at Walnut Acres is nearly the same as for the other finches. It consists of a wide variety of millets including Spray Millet, Canary seed, mealworms, fruit flies, greens growing in the flights, cuttlebone, grit, ground eggshell, and occasionally fruit. Water containing Headstart Poultry Vitamins at the ratio of one teaspoon per gallon is, of course, provided fresh daily.

The Cherry Finch is neither colorful, nor common, but it does have a distinguished appearance and a pleasing personality. This species is compatible with all the other Estrildine finches with which I am familiar and is easily housed in any collection. It would be most gratifying to see this bird well entrenched in American aviculture.

In the next issue, I will discuss the Diamond Sparrow.



Cherry Finch, male, left center bottom, female — right center bottom, two young on top.



Cherry Finch family, male-left, female- center, two young on right.

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