



Photo by John and Kristin Rounds, New Jersey.

Bar-breasted fire finches, pair #1 and their babies August 1984. Adults and babies both have brown nape and pink feet.

Breeding Success with the Bar-breasted Firefinch

by John & Kristin Rounds
New Jersey

We here report our recent success with the bar-breasted firefinch, *Lagonosticta rufopicta*. The bar-breasted differs most notably from the familiar red-billed firefinch, *L. senegala*, in these respects: the white spots are larger and more like broad horizontal bars; the female is colored like the male; the crown, nape, mantle and wings are brown rather than red; and they are larger and "plumper in shape." I have weighed six bar-breasteds — the original four and the two oldest

offspring (weighed when four and one half months old). The weights ranged from 8.8 grams (for the handicapped male, see below) to 13.4 grams and average 11.6 grams. The weights of nine red-billed in our collection range from 7.5 grams to 9.2 grams and average 8.6 grams. The bar-breasted differs from the "very similar" brown firefinch, *L. nitidula*, chiefly in their red upper tail coverts and tail, which are greyish brown in the latter, and their dull flesh to pink legs — brownish to grey in the

latter.*

The two pairs involved were acquired out of quarantine in 1983 and came into our possession on breeding loan that December. At that time the birds were in good condition except that one of the males had a dislocated or broken wing. The wing did not heal, but the bird did well nonetheless.

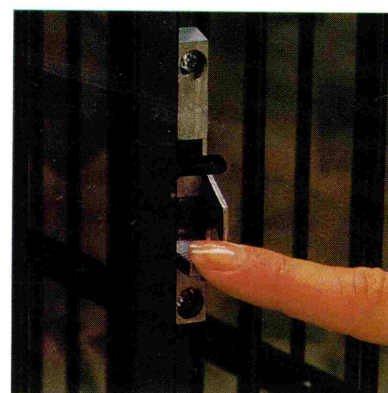
The four were housed together in a basement flight measuring thirty inches wide by six feet deep by seven feet high. Ten to fifteen finches of various species



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were housed with them. On June 20, 1984 they were released in two flights in our new aviary (described below). One pair (#1) went into a three by six foot unplanted flight with a pair of owl finches. The other pair, which included the handicapped male, went into a four by eight foot planted flight with a pair of melba finches. The two flights face each other across a corridor, and from the start the birds, principally though not exclusively the males, engaged in argumentation, landing on the front wire, flying from floor to ceiling just inside the flight front, while the opposite number did similarly. This seemed quite burdensome to the handicapped male, but he managed.

Pair #1 appeared to be incubating within two weeks of release. They chose a fence-wire framework (a column about four inches in diameter and eight inches high) stuffed with dried grass, suspended near the ceiling in a far corner. They created an ordinary waxbill nest inside. Feeding activity was noted on July 22. Crickets and ants' eggs were provided and taken eagerly. On July 25 strong baby voices were heard, and on August 3 two plain grey babies fledged. Both did well and were removed to another flight on September 5. At this time the nest was cleaned and one clear egg was found. The owls were removed and replaced with a pair of yellow-winged pytilia at this time as well.

Meanwhile the pair with the handicapped male had finished off a nest in a wire frame like the one described above, mounted about four feet up on one wall. By August 10 they were incubating. On August 26 baby voices were heard, and the parents began taking live food — crickets, mealworms, beetle larvae — with that special eagerness we have come to associate with parenthood. On September 3 at least three voices could be distinguished. On September 9 one baby fledged, and by the eleventh there were three out. A fourth fledged the next day, but one died shortly thereafter. Like the previous two, these were a uniform medium grey, with black beak and feet, and with prominent white gape marks at the base of the beak. By September 29 the three seemed to be independent. On October 6 two were removed to another flight, but one wing of the third was sprained in the course of handling and it was left with the parents. It was flying again within a week.

During this time the first pair went to work again. They had started to do so

while the first clutch was still with them, but that effort did not produce eggs. However, within a week of the removal of the first two babies the parents were incubating another clutch, this time in a cardboard finch nesting box which had been stuffed with dried grass and suspended about four feet up one wall. On October 3 two babies and one clear egg were visible in the nest, and on October 11 two babies fledged. On November 18 they were removed to another flight. By December 1 this pair had started a third nest in the finch box used for the second nest.

On November 18 the third baby was removed from the flight occupied by pair #2. Despite the passage of six weeks since removal of the other two from this first clutch, this pair had not gotten back to work. However, within days of the removal of the last baby, they started up again. Unhappily, on November 23, the male, the one with the bad wing, was found dead, hanging from a branch by a tangled piece of nesting material.

HOUSING

Our new aviary is an insulated addition to our house. It measures 18 by 32 feet. The ridge of the roof runs east to west, and the lower third of the south-facing roof is covered with three layers of fiberglass. The floor is poured concrete except for a four foot wide strip of soil along the south wall (under the fiberglass), which is planted with ficus benjamina, schefflera, ficus repens, and other greenhouse plants. Five large windows, controlled from the outside, provide ventilation in the warm weather, and 20 feet of electric baseboard heat maintain a minimum temperature of 55 °F in the winter.

A corridor separates two rows of flights. On the south they measure four feet by eight, on the north three by six. The 2 x 2 and 2 x 3 wooden framework is lined with half-inch hardware cloth. Sunlight is supplemented by pairs of four-foot fluorescent "Vita-Lite" bulbs (manufactured by Duro-Test Corp.) controlled by timers. Each flight is provided with a shelter attached to the ceiling which traps the heat rising from a 25 watt night light.

DIET AND SERVICE

We enter the aviary twice a day, morning and evening, but we confine our movements to the corridor, and we stay as briefly as possible. We do not examine nests; bitter experience has taught us that to approach an active finch nest is an easy way to cause it to fail.

We provide the standard small finch seed mix which the local bird store offers, to which we add more red and large white millets, plus a cup of broken sunflower seed per fifty pounds. The result is a mixture that is roughly two parts of each of these two millets, one part each canary seed, German millet, and a mixture of linseed, thistle, oats and the sunflower. The seed is served in 8"-diameter plastic plant saucers, and it is freshened every other day. The saucers are washed once a month in detergent and Clorox.

The other main element in the diet is a soft food made fresh every day from one part moistened Purina Chick Growena, one part crumbled "bird bread," and one part germinated red and large white millets. Our bird bread is made from a standard corn bread recipe, to which raw wheat germ, a Wheatena-like cereal (from the local health food store), brewer's yeast, and ground dairy mineral mix have been added. The millet is soaked for a full day, then rinsed, drained, and placed in a covered container for another day. By the time it is added to the soft food

mixture most of the seeds have broken open and started to grow. Each flight receives about two tablespoons of this mixture each day, topped with ¼ teaspoon of mashed, hard-boiled egg.

Water with "No-stress" (vitamins, including D3, and electrolytes) is provided in 10"-diameter plastic plant saucers. Each saucer is scoured, rinsed, and refilled with fresh water at least every other morning. Each dish is washed in detergent and Clorox once a week.

Strips of fresh lettuce are provided daily, and a slice of fresh orange is set out every other day. Millet sprays, health grit and crushed egg shell are always available. Mealworms, crickets and other live food are provided to flights with babies, but only in moderation. Fruit fly cultures are in most flights. These are simply large plastic margarine tubs with many holes punched in the lid and upper edge with a paper punch; 1" sections of banana are added every other day. Various finches hawk for the flies or pick them off the walls, plants, and dishes, and some have been observed stamping about on the lid and

picking up flies as they emerge through the holes.

CONCLUSION

Our experience with strawberry finches, *Amandava amandava*, provides three interesting contrasts. None of these bar-breasted babies returned to the nest after fledging, while strawberry babies often do for the night in their first week or so out. The bar-breasted babies seem dependent on the parents for a longer time period, although this is only our impression. Finally, the babies clearly seem to prevent the parents from starting another nest, whereas strawberries often start another nest regardless of the presence of babies.

Our experience with these two pairs and their offspring indicate that the bar-breasted firefinch is quite similar to the red-billed from an aviculturist's point of view. They seem hardy and peaceful. They do well with a modest diet and have proved so far to be willing breeders and good parents. They are handsome birds and would grace any collection.

*Quotations and description of brown firefinch taken from Derek Goodwin, *Estrildid Finches of the World*, Cornell U.P., Ithaca, 1982, pp. 124-125.



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