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Notes from the Aviary...
**Breeding the
Finsch's Amazon**

(*Amazona finschi*)

by James J. Murphy
White Mt. Bird Farm, Graham, Washington

The scientific community of the western world was introduced to a new parrot species in 1864 using the language of the scholars of the day:

"... CHRYSOTIS FINSCI, sp. nov. Similis C. viridigenali, sed paulo major; plumis corporis inferioris nigro distinctius marginatis: fronte angusta, purpurascens rubra: pilei plumis elongatiusculis, viridibus, caeruleo marginatis: Rostro albo. Hab. in Mexico. Mus. Brit.

The British Museum contains a single example of this fine species of Chrysotis, purchased from a dealer, and stated to be from Mexico. It was marked by Mr. Finsch, during his recent visit to this country, as being distinct from C. viridigenalis (to which it is nearly allied), and such is evidently the case. I therefore propose to call it by Mr. Finsch's name . . ."

Thus did Dr. Sclater, writing in the British Proceeding of the Zoological Society (PZS) in 1864 establish the formal Latin name for the Finsch's Amazon. Since that time, its rightful formal name has often been replaced by the more descriptive name: lilac-crowned Amazon.

The genus name of Chrysotis has long since been replaced with the modern genus nomenclature of Amazona, but the delightful bird remains the same. The modern western world first viewed this beautiful Amazon in the form of an artist's rendering a full ten years later when the renowned avian artist, J. Smit, produced the accurate half-sized lithograph for the same journal in 1874.

When Dr. Sclater penned his first words about this Amazon over 120 years ago, the world was an uncrowded and largely wild place. Time has reversed the natural order established over the history of our planet and now species once too numerous to count are in drastic need of help.

It is the frightful reality, and a strong testimony of the human condition that we have demonstrated in irreversible trend to replace other members of this planet with more members of our

own, reducing forever the richness of our earth and our lives.

"Living species today, let us remember, are the products of twenty million centuries of evolution; absolutely nothing can be done when the species has finally gone, when the last pair has died out." — Sir Peter Scott, speaking before the 1972 Conference on Breeding Endangered Species.

The Finsch's Amazon is not in immediate danger but its historical range is rapidly declining. If we are to make even a small dent in the inevitably long list of avian extinctions, we must act now. The eleventh hour crisis conservation mentality simply will not be enough to save many of the world's bird species.

Mexico no longer exports its avifauna. As a conservation technique, this is a double-edged sword. It may help reduce the rate of population depletion by denying the legal pet trade. However, without habitat protection and the smuggling laws severely enforced, this has questionable value. It also reduces the genetic availability needed by the parrot breeders in this and other countries to absolutely insure their long term survival in captive breeding programs, shielding them forever from extinction.

It is my hope that the information provided will help stir even a greater interest in breeding these beautiful Amazons.

Habitat and Range

Northwest Mexico. The native habitat of the Finsch's Amazon (*Amazona finschi*) is restricted to the southern pacific slopes of Mexico from southern Sonora and southwestern Chihuahua, south to Oaxaca (Forshaw). This small Amazon is a bird of the higher elevations, occurring mostly from 3,000 feet to 7,200 feet, occupying the wooded uplands and mountains of western Mexico, and preferring the high canyons with lush vegetation along the streams that drain their mountainous home range.

This small Amazon has often been

recorded at sea level but usually as a non-breeding seasonal visitant and, occasionally in the past, seen in large flocks numbering in the hundreds. Finsch's Amazons have also been reported to have communal and habitual night roosts where the members of the same flock will return evening after evening to the same tree or clump of trees to spend the night in familiar surroundings and with familiar flock members. (The tendency to form large flocks and the use of communal night roosts has captive management implications that will be discussed later.)

Two forms are recognized: *Amazona finschi finschi* (Sclater) 1864, the nominate form with a more southern distribution and; *Amazona finschi woodi* (Moore), a larger bird with more narrow maroon forehead. There is apparent overlap in their ranges, however, *A. f. woodi* ranges farther north and further inland (Bosch and Wedde). The captive husbandry techniques are considered the same for both forms.

Captive Management

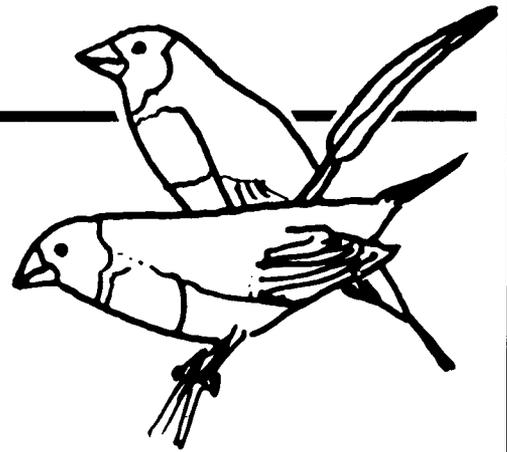
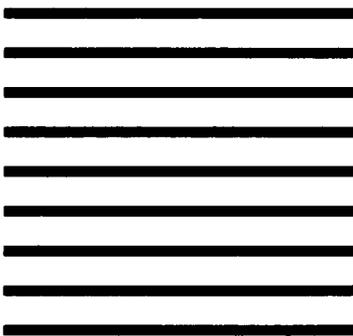
In the early spring (mid-February) all the Finsch's Amazons are removed from their winter quarters and moved outside to their breeding cages, one pair per cage. The breeding cages measure 3 feet x 3 feet x 6 feet long and elevated 3 feet off the ground and placed under the overhanging branches of douglas fir trees. A 2" x 4" perch is placed at each end of the cage. One perch is oriented with the 2" up making a wide perch to chew on; the rear perch is oriented with the 4" side up making a small platform.

Each cage that is placed under the boughs of Douglas fir trees has bamboo planted in the back half of the breeding cage to afford greater privacy. The front of the cage is in the sunlight while the back portion is in constant shade. Each pair of Finsch's Amazons is separated by 20 to 30 feet with other birds of different genus or species placed between them. All the lilac heads are within hearing distance but out of visual range of each other during this critical breeding period.

A typical Amazon nest box is provided on the outside of the breeding cage measuring 10" x 10" x 24". The interior of each nest box is stained dark. There is more than enough ornithological evidence to show that a darkened interior helps to increase gonadal (sex organs) growth. Although nest level rear inspection doors are time consuming to build, they are indispensable.

Continued on page 32

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Owner Terry Dunham is author of *The T.F.H. Book of Finches* and has written numerous articles for avicultural publications in the U.S., England and Australia.

* Permit required



An original stone lithograph, hand colored, done by J. Smit in about 1874 and first published in the 1874 issue of the British Proceeding of the Zoological Society. The author of the article was fortunate enough to find this excellent print in an antique shop in Olympia, Washington.



The birds thrive on a varied diet designed for their health and specific needs.

The nest box is located in the perpetual shade end of the breeding cage. The only time anyone approaches the side or rear of the cage near the nest box is for the necessary inspection or removal of chicks. The rest of the time the side and rear area around the cage is off limits. The illusion is maintained that the nesting chamber is a safe place to raise young.

All the parrots are watered with hanging water bottles typically used for rabbits; all food items are placed in heavy duty plastic bowls that are indestructible and easy to clean.

The evidence is scant but increasing

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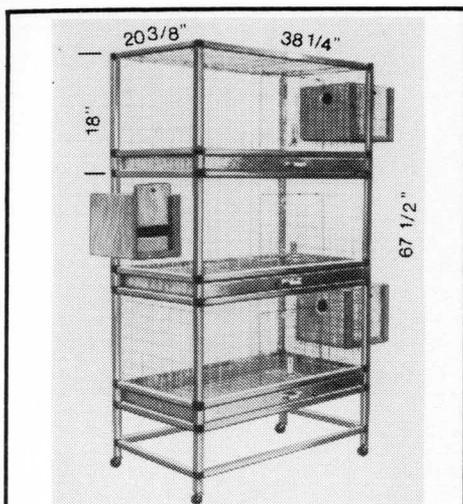
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field information suggests that Amazons, like most other birds coming into breeding condition, seek out higher levels of protein for their diet in preparation for the exhausting task of raising a family.

Before recently switching over to a pelletized parrot chow, the Finsch's Amazons were fed commercial products such as Hi-Pro dog kibble and breeding formula pigeon pellets. Small amounts of mixed seed stayed in the diet to aid as a feeding stimulant as well as entertainment for these intelligent animals. The crude protein level during the pre-breeding season of late winter is elevated to at least 20 percent. Wheat germ meal accounts for three percent of the diet and certified Brewer's yeast accounts for one percent. Seasonally available vegetables and fruit are added daily. Sea kelp is also sprinkled on their soft food two or three times per week.

After the postnuptial molt ends in the late summer, the birds' diet is gradually changed by reducing the crude protein intake to about 15 percent. The wheat germ meal is eliminated and levels of calcium are reduced. Too rich a diet year around may well bring about gout or near gout conditions in Amazons.

the lilacs laid their eggs. The parrots are bred under natural light conditions. Pairs are identified by their band numbers. All the parrots have the quarantine bands removed and replaced with my personal bands. All domestically reared parrots are close-banded between day 18 and 21. Accurate record keeping is very important.

Band No. by Pair	Date egg laid or first observed	Date of hatch or estimated date
030 x 031 (domestic male x wild-caught hen)	1. April 12	clear
	2. April 14	failed to hatch
	3. April 14	May 15
	4. April 21	May 17
047 x 046 (wild x wild)	1. April 19	May 17 (?)
	2. April 23 obs.	May 23 (?)
	3. April 29 obs.	May 21 (?)
021 x 022 (wild x wild)	1. April 20 (?)	May 18 (?)
	2. April 22 (?)	May 20 (?)
	3. April 24 (?)	May 22 (?)
036 x 037 (domestic hen x wild)	1. April 30	May 30
	2. May 4 obs.	May 31
	3. May 6 obs.	June 1
009 x 010 (wild x wild)	too young to breed	

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The 1986 Breeding Season

Five pairs of Finsch's Amazons were placed in their breeding cages in mid-February. Two domestically bred birds, a male and female from a 1981 hatch, were provided with wild-caught mates. (The two domestic birds were nest-mates). The remaining three pair were all wild-caught birds. The domestically bred brother and sister were removed from their nest at about two weeks of age and associated with their human parents for the next year. The duo was placed with other Finsch's Amazons in their second year to familiarize them with their future flock members.

All pairs were monitored for pair-bond compatibility and their adjustment to the captive environment. There is seldom ever a problem with adjustment with domestically bred Amazons, but the problem is frequent with wild-caught individuals.

Pair bonds are monitored to see how close the two birds sit together at night, any level of fighting or scraping, and if, during the critical pre-breeding season, the pair "sing" a duet. (Male and female alternate very rapidly in their breeding territorial calls).

The following chart gives the dates

Results

Five pair produced 13 eggs. One young pair abstained. The 13 eggs from the producing four pair accounted for one clear egg, one that failed to hatch, and one died after 17 days: a poorly formed chick. All failures came from the same pair. (If this pattern continues in the next breeding season, this pair will be separated and not allowed to breed with each other. In birds, as with people, there are lethal combinations of parental genes.)

The chicks were pulled from the nest for hand-feeding, except those chicks from the domestic hen (036). She was allowed to raise her own chicks as well as fostering another Amazon chick. I needed to compare the fledge weights of the hand-fed chicks to those raised by the parents (as a check on the hand-feeding formula). There was no statistical difference between the parent-raised and the hand-raised chicks.

Select chicks from pairs 036 x 037 and 047 x 048 will be held back to produce third generation chicks. It was interesting to note that the parent-raised chicks became very tame without a great deal of handling. Two of the three were sold as house pets to very satisfied owners. The youngsters that

demonstrate the greatest amount of natural tameness are selected for breeding.

Over Wintering

As noted earlier, the Finsch's Amazon has a strong tendency to socialize in large flocks. With this trait in mind, I re-flock all the breeding lilacs along with all the retained youngsters held back for breeding. Usually, they are flocked together in a large flight cage measuring 18' x 10' x 10'. However, I have placed them all in one 3' x 3' x 6' breeding cage with very satisfactory results. This smaller size cage is used for very short periods. Even then, there is little initial bickering and no fighting among these highly social flocking birds.

The reflocking takes place anytime after October. The birds do better when flocked after their postnuptial molt is complete in the fall. In the late winter/early spring when the birds are returned to their breeding cages, all birds are caught and given a brief physical exam. Their bands are read and the birds are placed in the appropriate breeding pens that have their numbers stenciled on the outside.

Flocking up of the Amazons has several advantages. First, it allows the Finsch's Amazons to do what is very natural: flock up after the breeding season and do whatever they do in flocks. Second, it simplifies the chores. Third, it allows the natural socialization process to develop in the young ones held back for breeding. I have never found any disadvantages. If you are worried about the transmission of disease, do not forget to have your bird's stool checked annually.

In the seven years of annually flocking the gregarious Finsch's Amazons, I have never had a single bird desert its mate in favor of another. As has been suspected, they are monogamous. Even with extra non-mated male and female lilacs available, there were no takers.

It is extremely important to note that re-flocking Finsch's Amazons *does not* infer that other species of Amazons or other parrots can be re-flocked as well. This would not only be erroneous but dangerous. Each species has its own husbandry uniqueness (which is often difficult to decipher). The lilac heads do well under these conditions. Others will not. A thorough examination of all

the literature on a particular species is necessary before making any deviation from usually accepted avicultural practices.

Pet Quality in the Domestically Bred Finsch's Amazon

As expected, the domestic babies are substantially superior to wild-caught birds as pets. (Yes, I am aware of exceptions.) Hand-fed domestically bred Finsch's Amazons are puppy-friendly; even young ones raised by very tame domestically bred parents show little signs of shyness. Of the many lilac youngsters bred here, I have never produced one that did *not* talk. This year, I placed four surgically sexed youngsters in a cage next to yearling Panama Amazons. After about six weeks all the lilac heads were talking with impressive vocabularies learned from their Panama tutors, and with a clarity that would please and delight even the most discriminating people, as my feedback from new owners attests.

If you would like to learn more about the husbandry of Amazon parrots, write to: The Amazona Society, P.O. Box 73547, Puyallup, Washington, U.S.A. ●

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