



Black headed Lady Gould pair (Poephila gouldiae gouldiae). This Australian native ranges from Queensland through the Northwest Territory. Both the black and red bearded forms of this finch are found in the wild although the black is sighted more often. Both forms are found traveling together.

Breeding Cycle of the Gouldian Finch

by Anthony J. Mobbs
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Of all the Australian finches, the Gouldian appears to have the most pronounced breeding pattern and, if the species is not allowed to carry out the full cycle, it is more than likely a breeding attempt will fail.

To someone who is not conversant with the breeding behavior of the species, certain aspects can prove somewhat worrying. It is, therefore, beneficial for a breeder to fully understand the cycle as not only will this eliminate need for concern, it should also enable a breeder to produce more chicks each year.

Housing

In the United Kingdom the majority of Gouldian finch enthusiasts house their breeding pairs in individual cages. This is due partly to the somewhat inclement weather we experience. In certain areas of the States, many breeders no doubt house their Gouldians in communal aviaries or outside flights. However, as most Gouldian finch breeders are interested in mutations, it is preferable to cage breed, even where weather conditions are ideal for outdoor breeding. More control can be maintained over caged birds, which is essential if a breeder wishes to line breed.

Pairing Up

The birds must be in breeding condition before any attempt is made to place pairs together. Cock birds, when in breeding condition, have an almost white beak with only the tips coloured. Those eager to nest will regularly hang on the wire fronts of their cages, calling to the hens; the latter usually answering them.

It is usual for hens in breeding condition to have beaks which are almost black in colour. However, this is not

always so and many hens may successfully go to nest and rear young without any pronounced colour change in their beaks. More obvious signs are when a hen can be seen to become "heavy," with a pronounced rise to the rump and with the tail held in a downward position.

Nest Boxes

Gouldian finches will attempt to nest in almost any type of nest box. I have found a 13 cm (approx. 5-3/8") cube to be ideal. The opening should be no more than 4 cm (approx. 1-3/4") wide. This means that the front panel needs to be 8 cm (approx. 3-1/2") in height. Such a height ensures that, after the nest has been completed, an incubating bird is completely hidden from view, but should it wish to look out of the nest box, it has only to stand up to do so. A hinged lid should be fitted, thus allowing easy access to contents of the nest box. This is essential if one intends to close-band youngsters.

Nesting Material

Some Gouldian pairs show little inclination to build a nest, especially when housed in a cage. However, I have found most pairs will add to the material already in the nest box and some will construct a superb globe-shaped nest. It is preferable to at least start a nest off before placing the nest box in position. I always cover the bottom of the box with a layer of clean, white sawdust before adding the hay. One's balled fist should be pushed into the hay, thus making a globe-like hollow. A small amount of hay can be placed in a corner of the cage, directly under the nest box being ideal. Most pairs will use this

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hay to add to that already placed in the nest box.

The type of hay is most important, fresh pieces approximately 23 cm (approx. 9-1/4") in length being ideal. If short, brittle pieces are used, the continual movement of the incubating birds may cause the eggs to become covered and the birds will then desert them.

In the United Kingdom many breeders use coconut fibre as nesting material for their Australian finches. I have found this of no use at all for Gouldians, although I do occasionally use it for other species, but even then I usually mix equal parts soft hay with the fibre. To use it on its own can cause chicks to sweat, especially during warm, humid conditions.

Incubation

Incubation does not commence until the final egg of the clutch is laid. Both birds may sit in the nest box during the daytime (either individually or together), but until the clutch is completed, they will always leave the box to sleep on a perch.

As soon as the hen (and in some cases the cock also) remains on the nest overnight, one can assume that incubation has begun. Incubation takes from 14 to 16 days, according to how "tight" the birds sit. The hen does most of the incubating and it is invariably she who sits at night, the cock taking over at first light and again for short periods throughout the day.

One can usually tell when the chicks have hatched by the behaviour of the parent birds, as they will change over duties more frequently. However, it is always the hen which covers the chicks for the night period.

Growth of Chicks

When the chicks are ten days old, the parents cease to brood. Occasionally one comes across a pair which will cover the chicks until they fledge, but this is certainly the exception to the rule. If the intention is to close-band the chicks, then this is the time to do so as well-fed Gouldian chicks are ready at ten days of age.

The chicks will leave the nest at approximately 25 days old and are weaned within five to six weeks. If they are seen to feed themselves, they can be removed.

The Second Nest

When Gouldian chicks are approxi-

mately one month old, I always remove the nest box, otherwise the parent birds may go to nest before the chicks are weaned. It is possible for a breeding pair to go down successfully when the young of the previous clutch are still with them, but more often than not, the eggs prove infertile, or become chipped or broken due to the young roosting in the nest box.

The moment the young Gouldians are removed from their parents, the cage should be thoroughly cleaned. The nest box (which should have been washed and cleaned immediately when it was removed from the cage) should be filled with fresh hay and then placed in position. The breeding pair will then go to nest within a matter of days. It is essential that the nest box be placed in position immediately when the young are removed because if they are left without a nest box for too long a period, the breeding pair may go into a moult.

Moulting in Chicks

There is much variation in the length of time it can take a young Gouldian to moult from immature to adult plumage. Many young birds complete their first moult within a period of four months, whereas others can take almost a year. In extreme cases, a period of 18 months has been recorded.

If a bird of 12 months or more has not moulted into full adult plumage, complications may arise. Such birds, due solely to their age, may be in breeding condition and, if not used in the breeding pen, they will often refuse to moult, maybe for many months. When used for breeding, they will, when breeding is over, commence to moult immediately and then attain full adult plumage. However, I am totally against the practice of using birds in immature plumage for breeding. Admittedly such birds often go to nest and successfully rear young, but the progeny from such birds are usually slow to moult into adult plumage. Also, if one mates a bird in full adult plumage to one which is not, many of the young (usually of the same sex as the slow moulting bird) also fail to moult out in a reasonable time. Because of this, I would suggest that slow moulting birds, rather than being used for breeding, be passed on to someone who wants them solely as an attraction in a mixed flight or aviary. ●

