

Breeding the European Serin

by Vladimir Kulhavy
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

The European serin (*Serinus serinus*) is one of the most attractive members of the serin genus, though it is not commonly encountered in North American collections. It is the smallest of the European finches, though it is not the smallest serin. In the wild it is found both in the countryside and in towns. It ranges over most of Europe from as far north as Britain, Scandinavia, Poland and the U.S.S.R. and is a year round resident of southern Europe and north Africa. The serin is the closest relative of the wild canary (*Serinus canarius*) and hybrids of the two species are fertile. At one time they were even considered to be subspecies of the same species.

The European serin measures approximately 11 centimeters or 4-1/2 inches in length. It is brownish and green in color with heavy striations on the breast of the hen, and to a lesser extent on the male. The birds are obviously dimorphic. The male is bright yellow on the breast, head and rump and the intensity of the yellow increases just before the onset of the breeding season. The male is a persistent songster and I find his song very pleasing to my ear. It is definitely a wild bird's song, somewhat resembling a grey singing finch yet not as clear, reminding me of the song of the European skylark, though not as glorious. L. W. Restall, in his book "Finches and Other Seed Eating Birds," calls the serin "a delightful bird;" however, he warns that the serin requires a careful acclimatization after which it "becomes hardy and ultimately long lived."

I obtained my pair of serins in the fall of 1983 and, as they were already

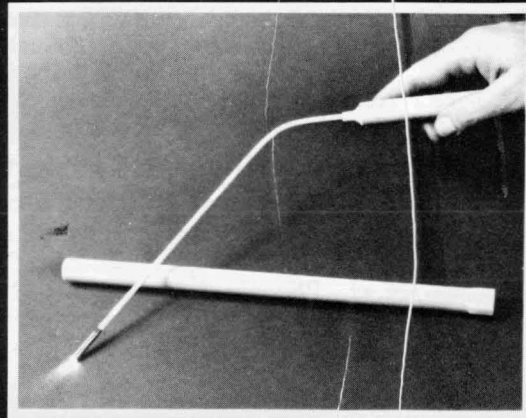
acclimated, I cannot comment on their sensitivity during that period. I found them easy to keep on a typical canary seed mix with some greens and, occasionally, soaked seed and egg food. I placed them in an indoor flight measuring eight feet by three feet, eight feet high, which they shared with some other finches. They were peaceful towards the other inhabitants until February 1984 when the male began singing his courtship song and displaying an aggressive attitude, typical of serins. The serins were removed to a smaller cage measuring 80 x 40 x 30 centimeters (32 in. x 16 in. x 12 in.). A felt-lined plastic canary nest was provided and partially shielded from view by a small evergreen twig (I found such an addition is very helpful in encouraging wild birds to breed in a cage.) Strings of sisal approximately two inches long were provided for nesting material. The hen built the nest without any apparent assistance from the male, although subsequent nests of other pairs were constructed by both males and females. The nest took approximately two days to complete and on the following morning the birds were observed copulating. This

observation was the only time I ever saw them, as the male would stop his courtship song whenever I entered the room. This time he continued singing and he mounted her — all in my presence!

The first egg was laid three days after the nest was constructed. The second egg was laid on the floor from the perch, and the third egg in the nest. The fourth and last egg wound up on the floor as well. Incubation began thereafter and the hen sat as tight as a good canary hen. She would not leave the nest when I changed the food and water, or even if I touched her which, I have to admit, was a stupid experiment indeed!

Fourteen days after the onset of incubation two babies hatched. Egg food and soaked seeds were provided and everything seemed to be going well, when on the fourth day one baby was found thrown out of the nest. It was still alive but cold, even though well fed. I warmed it up and placed it back in the nest, but as I had to leave for work, I could only hope for the best. When I returned in the late afternoon, a horrible scene like one from a Greek tragedy was awaiting me. Both

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A pair of European serins, the closest relative of the wild canary. The hen can be easily identified by her heavily streaked breast.

babies were lying dead on the floor with apparent beak wounds.

There had been a radical change in the behavior of the male. Normally when I entered the room he would hide behind some cover, but that time he remained in open view. When he did this again the following day, I removed him from the cage and placed him in a heated hospital cage with vitamins and minerals added to his water. Since he looked as fit as ever, after two days I returned him to his own cage. The next morning he was dead. Unfortunately, I failed to have an autopsy done, so my only conclusion is that, upon falling sick for whatever reason, he destroyed his nestlings following his natural instincts telling him he could not take care of them and himself at the same time.

Since it was impossible to find another male serin at that time, I considered replacing him with a male grey singing finch, which was duly introduced to the hen. He was immediately interested in her, singing lustily and courting. The serin hen, however, did not share his enthusiasm. Every time he came close to her, she moved away. Even in an outside aviary she kept refusing his advances, and it was not until late summer when she began to tolerate his presence. That was, of course, too late to expect any breeding results from them. As I was fortunate enough to obtain a serin male in the fall, the grey singer's budding romance was ended.

While I was only partially successful with the original serin pair, the new pair should do better. They are housed in my 8 ft. x 3 ft. flight with a pair of canaries.

As Restall says, serins are thoroughly delightful birds to keep and offer the breeder the challenge of creating new color strains of serins and may be used to develop new canary strains. Let's not forget the domestic canary has undergone considerable genetic changes over the past four hundred years of its culture. Even though it has been said that only male offspring of serin/canary crosses are fertile, they could be bred back to a serin hen. A whole new type of canary could be created in the same fashion the Spanish singing canary, known as the "timbrado," was obtained by crossing original wild canaries with German rollers.

I certainly hope some serious breeders in North America will take an interest in breeding these attractive little finches, so they become available to a wider section of bird enthusiasts. ●

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Name: Ocellated turkey
Agriocharis ocellata

Range: Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico, Belize and northern Guatemala

Status: Threatened. A small captive population exists.

Conservation Action: AFA has recently awarded Maria Jose Gonzalez Fuster, a graduate student at the Universidad Nacional (Costa Rica), a small grant to determine the preferred habitat characteristics of the species in Tikal National Park, Guatemala. Data collected will be unitized in the development of a comprehensive management strategy for the species. See *Watchbird* October/November '83, page 26.

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