

Red-headed Parrot Finch

(*Erythrura psittacea*)

by Jane McCulloch
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Parrot Finches belong to the family Estrildidae and are distributed through a rather small range in the Indo Pacific region. There are 11 species of parrot finch, but most of my experience has been with the Red-headed Parrot Finch, *Erythrura psittacea*, found only in New Caledonia and neighboring islands in the Pacific. New Caledonia has the warm, moist climate of a tropical rain forest and the plant material is rich and varied. The Red-headed Parrot Finch is not a grassland bird, but enjoys a forest habitat where it forages for herbaceous seeds, fruits and insects.

The Red-headed Parrot Finch has a beautiful color scheme with the head and throat being bright red, the body bright green and the rump and upper tail coverts red also. The female's red parts are usually less extensive and less bright when compared with the male's. The throat color of a breeding hen is a softer red than in the male. The females usually have less red on the forehead and it does not extend as high on the crown. However, there is a great deal of individual variation in my pairs. I have proven hens with little or no red above the eye and other proven hens with red extending well above the eye, making sexing difficult. The young are color-banded according to heritage for this reason.

The fledglings are a dull green color, but easier to sex than the adults. The males have a smudge of yellow-orange on the throat while the hens are just a lighter green color on the throat. The age of the birds has a great deal to do with the successful sexing of the parrot finch. I believe the hens color up faster than the males and at three to four months of age, the hens will appear to be brighter in color. The males, by this time, will be singing their lovely, long trills at dusk if there are other parrot finches within hearing distance to impress.

The finches are housed in two-part

aviaries — large flights planted with small trees, shrubs and grasses that are attached to an enclosed, sheltered room. The birds enter the shelter through a bathroom-type sliding-pane window which can be partly closed during the winter. Frosted glass is used so that the birds can see it and avoid injuring themselves by flying into it. The two-part aviary allows the birds to go inside during bad weather and offers a protected place to roost at night, away from feral cats and racoons that sometimes roam into the yard from the park across the street.

It can get freezing cold here in the northern California Sacramento Valley and electricity for heat and lights is available inside the shelter. A Hot Rock used for snake aquariums is placed on the floor and any sick or egg-bound bird will go to the Hot Rock for extra warmth, making it easy to spot birds which need special care immediately. The water dishes are in the outside flight and the birds enjoy bathing even in the coldest weather. Nests are removed from the outside flight in winter but some birds still make their own nests in the bushes.

Red-headed Parrot Finches are peaceful in a mixed collection of exotic finches. Besides ten species of finches, I also keep two species of Neophema (Scarlet-chested Parakeet and Rosy Bourke's) in the flights without any difficulty. These two species of grass-keets are the only hookbills that I trust to be housed with the tiny birds. The Zebra Finches, Society Finches and Lady Gould Finches are housed separately, each species in its own colony aviary.

Parrot finches are really fun to feed because they will eat almost anything and enjoy it. Of all the finches I raise, the parrot finch is the most intelligent and adventuresome in trying different foods. The basic food always available is a good finch mix, a dish of hemp seed, Petamine (Kellogg), and health grit with added flakes of cuttlebone and charcoal bits. Soaked

canary seed and a soft food sprinkled with vitamins is fed daily. In cold weather more oily seeds are fed to keep the birds plump and to help them generate warmth. Additional lipids and fat-soluble vitamins are fed by adding Linatone (Lambert Kay) to the soaked seed once a week during winter months.

This species likes all kinds of fruits and vegetables, and everything that is grown in the garden is fed to the birds. They love corn, berries, zucchini, and especially cucumber. Wild chickweed, oats or seeding grasses are put into the aviary for the birds to pick through and later use as nesting material. Don't throw away your apple cores, melon rinds, spinach stems or carrot peelings; feed them to your birds. An old fig tree provides food most of the summer and pyracantha berries are available all fall. Frozen peas or corn, thoroughly thawed but not cooked, are another favorite food. Dampened wheat bread is eagerly devoured.

For a protein source, I feed small mealworms during the breeding season. I do not feed egg food in the heat of summer because of the danger of spoilage. Insects are available in the open, planted flights and fruit fly cultures are an easy source of protein. I put some fruit, peels, rinds and cores into a bucket with a little straw and sprinkle these items with yeast and a few drops of vinegar, and in a few days the bucket is teeming with fruit flies. It gives me pleasure to see the birds perched on the lip, picking larvae off the sides of the bucket, making a "ping-ping" sound as their bills hit the metal. The birds hover over the bucket, like hummingbirds, hawking the tiny insects in the air.

I tried colony breeding the Red-headed Parrot Finch. With two breeding pairs and their young in a large aviary, I added the young from other parents until there were 17 birds together. All other species were removed from this aviary. It was a beautiful sight to see the flock of red and green birds foraging on the ground and filling the bushes. Directly behind this flight is a row of Bottle Brush shrubs which flower in the spring. With their rich red, brush-like flowers and green foliage, their color scheme matches the plumage of the parrot finches. When the birds are viewed against this background they blend with it, producing a "find the hidden birds" picture such as one might find in a child's activity maga-

zine. The colony of parrot finches got along just fine without any fighting or territorial disputes, and they seemed to enjoy themselves as do flocks of society finches. Nest boxes were placed high and low, in bushes and scattered around the aviary. However, very few young were fledged that season or the next. Late in the fall when record cold hit our area, I lost several birds, including two hens which received too much attention from the male birds. I decided to abandon the colony project and distribute the remaining birds with mixed collections, one pair per aviary, as I had done the first few years.

It is very important to keep the ratio of males to females even if more than one pair of parrot finches are housed together. The males drive the hens very hard during breeding season. I observed a male reach down from atop the nest box and pull his mate, an incubating hen, out of the box by the feathers on her head. Infertility is never a problem. I have observed more than one male copulate with the same hen within a short period of time. For this reason, extra male birds should not be housed with pairs. Bird keepers who put several birds of this species together, hoping to raise young or to give the birds a choice of mate, may be disappointed. If the group contains extra males, the hens are weakened and may die from exhaustion. The surviving birds will all be males.

Red-headed Parrot Finches mature very early, and young hatched in late summer will breed the following spring. The birds are most productive during the first two breeding seasons. This species can be kept in breeding condition all through the year with temperature and light control, but in the natural-type environments with seasonal changes, the birds do not breed in the cold winter months. In February, mealworms are added to the diet to encourage breeding to begin.

The male parrot finch in breeding condition spends a great deal of time singing. The males in different flights seem to compete in declaring their territory by singing louder than neighboring males. The singing is beautiful and makes the garden a magical place. Last spring, three separate pairs hatched young simultaneously and I wonder if it was the weather or the singing that stimulated the nesting to begin at the same

time.

Once the pair bond is formed, incubation takes two weeks and both parents rear the chicks. Clutch size varies from two to five chicks and the parents may have three nests per season.

Parrot finches prefer to weave their nest inside standard finch boxes. Nest inspection is difficult and should be avoided because it involves digging a peek-hole into the dark cavity inside the tightly woven nest. The disturbance may cause the parents to abandon their young. It is better to discover a hatch by watching, waiting and listening. When the chicks hatch, the parents appear to become very tame, and will hang on the aviary wire waiting for me to bring them mealworms and soft foods. Parent birds have even called to me, in case I missed their jumping-on-the-wire-door message, and have followed me around as I tend to the bird chores. This behavior is a sure indication of a new hatch. The soft, begging noise of baby parrot finches can easily be missed in an aviary full of other bird sounds. Young finch begging sounds can be recognized by different characteristics. The Zebra Finch babies' chorus of greed is easy to recognize, Strawberry Finch babies sound like a frog croaking far away, and mannikin babies chug like a train; the parrot finch begging noise is a gentle, high pitched "zit zit" in an even rhythm.

The babies depend on their parents for food for about three weeks in the nest and two weeks after fledging. The young have prominent, yellow gapes and the inside of the mouth is brightly colored. The begging noise, gape and mouth markings stimulate the adult bird to feed, and help guide the parents' bills inside the dark nest cavity.

Fledging time is critical as young birds can be lost because the parents' attention is divided between babies remaining in the nest and the fledglings on the ground. If the weather is cold, it is a good idea to put the fledglings back into the nest at night, if possible. Be prepared to stand for a long time with the hand over the nest hole or the chicks will pop out again. A light placed at ground level may help to keep the newly fledged chicks warm at night.

I am a hobbyist interested in the science of bird breeding and in other people with like interests. Finch breeding is not a profit motive busi-

ness, although some birds are sold to help pay expenses and to acquire new stock. My first Red-headed Parrot Finches were purchased in 1982 and I now have fourth generation birds that are all parent-raised. Years ago I set out to get one pair of as many finches as I could find, but soon learned the folly of this plan. With single pairs of a species, one risks losing a bird and it is very difficult to find a replacement mate. The hens are more delicate and fewer are hatched, and to locate and purchase an exotic finch hen is almost impossible. It is best to buy at least three pairs of the same species so that unrelated pairs can be formed from the offspring. It is also wise to purchase parent-raised birds if available. Fostered birds are slower to bond with their own species and seem to be poorer parents, in my opinion.

Finch breeding is an absorbing and rewarding hobby. Every day brings new knowledge, new revelations about bird behavior and new pleasures. There is joy and excitement in a new hatch of a "difficult" species and in the successful fledging of the young of one of my treasured species. ●

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