

Common Red-ears Heading for Rarity Status

by Ian Hinze
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Of all the birds that have been exported from their country of origin for reasons pertaining to scientific research, museum specimens, zoological exhibits or just plain bird-keeping, it is the waxbills that have suffered most.

Imported into western Europe and North America in the tens of thousands over the years, the fact that they have been hitherto so readily available has made captive propagation virtually non-existent. In the past, whenever a species took our fancy, it was a matter of just going out and making a purchase.

Not so today! With legislation to curb birdkeeping being clamoured for by prohibitionists worldwide, those in the hobby who have kept birds merely for a rosette-embellished ego-trip are gradually coming to terms with the fact that they owe a duty to aviculture by way of embarking on serious breeding programs —thereby putting something into the hobby for a change —or getting out altogether; to which end they will not be missed!

Unfortunately, far from taking bird-keeping seriously for altruistic reasons, there is a minority that sees only dollar signs as the end result. This may well prove as fatal to hundreds of presently available species in aviculture as any import ban because in one's pursuit of trying to establish the rarer species, for financial gain or otherwise, those species previously regarded as common will inevitably be neglected.

With this in mind, I decided to concentrate on those species of waxbill which I felt were in danger of being overlooked and, after taking stock of the situation, decided to specialize in the red eye-striped species of the genus *Estrilda*, with particular emphasis on the Black-rump or Red-ear (*E. troglodytes*). This typical, vivacious little waxbill has been kept in British aviaries for decades and is nothing less than a black mark against avi-

culture.

While many consider it immoral to import hummingbirds and other species requiring extreme specialist care, one cannot complain about the hysterical calls for a total ban on bird imports when one considers that the Black-rump, in spite of the ease with which it settles down, is seldom bred in captivity. In my own country, for the whole of 1991, only 28 were registered by the Foreign Bird Federation (a body set up to, among other things, collate breeding data). Hopefully, this article will inspire others to seriously consider its specialization.

Around four inches (10cm) in length, both sexes look alike and the oft-repeated assertion that females are slightly less colorful than their mates is entirely misleading and a most unreliable guide to determining a true pair. That said, once a definite pair has settled down and come into breeding condition the owner may well spot subtle differences in the plumage. This becomes evident, however, through regular study and vigilance and is easy to ascertain once two birds have obviously paired up. In a pet shop, when waxbills tend to be housed in overcrowded cages, plumage differences may be the result of a lack of condition and to choose a true pair from such circumstances is best construed as being pot-luck.

The upperparts are light brownish gray with delicate vermiculations on all of the feathers save those on the forehead and wing quills. The eye-stripe, from whence the bird derives its alternative name and which doesn't cover the ear at all, is of deep scarlet. The underparts are of grayish fawn washed with pink, lighter around the throat. There is a rosy red patch on the ventral area, while the under tail coverts are white with a pink tinge. Under wing coverts are pale buff. The rump, as one would expect, is black as are the upper tail coverts and tail. The beak is bright red to crimson and

the feet are dark brown to brownish black.

Although there are no sub-species there is a great deal of individual variation in color — particularly in the amount of rose red on the underparts and of pink suffusion generally — which again, highlights the uncertainty of obtaining a true pair and calls into question whether other species, regardless of their geographic location, are over sub-specified!

Frequenting grassy savannas, scrub and other grassy areas, as well as swamps in its native Africa gives an indication as to its captive feeding requirements. My own birds are supplied regularly with panicum, white and Japanese millet, canary seed, British finch tonic mix, lettuce seed, oystershell and limestone grit and, prior to and during the breeding season, Ce-De egg-food and the seeds of ripe and unripe annual meadow grass (*Poa annua*), rough meadow grass (*Poa trivialis*), narrow-leaved meadow grass (*Poa angustifolia*), tussock or tufted hair grass (*Deschampsia caespitosa*), perennial rye-grass (*Lolium perenne*), cocksfoot (*Dactylis glomerata*), meadow or common fox-tail (*Alopecurus pratensis*) and chickweed (*Stellaria media*). Along with an abundance of livefood, it is these wild seeds that are the catalyst for a successful breeding.

From April onwards I collect bundles of wild seeds on the stalk and just throw them on the floor of the bird-room. As soon as I close the door behind me the birds immediately alight upon them and dexterously work their way along and through the stems to partake of the tonic-giving properties enveloped within the fresh seed-heads. A good idea is to pick them early in the morning when there is dew on the ground. That way they last longer in the birdroom because the extra moisture means a longer evaporation process which prevents the seeds drying out quickly.

Breeding activity normally commences around June or July but can be precipitated earlier by a warm spring. The courtship is a typical waxbill affair in which the cock bobs up and down alongside the female on a branch and adroitly holds a piece of nesting material in his bill while singing. This does not necessarily precede copulation, however, which is presumed to take place in the nest.

Indeed, in spite of my intense study, I have yet to witness it!

The nest tends to start off with a kind of platform base with the sides being sloped to the centre and extra grass or coconut fibre being added to thicken it. Although not weaved, the finished article with its ground-level tubular entrance and top-storey "cock nest", or false nest, is a most impressive ball to pear-shaped structure. The interior floor of the nest is usually lined with feathers (preferably pale colored), soft plant material and bits of earth or charcoal—in fact, anything that the birds take a particular fancy to. Often, the cock nest is also lined.

Though I supply an assortment of wicker nesting baskets and finch-type nest boxes, none have ever been utilized. Preferring to build their own nest, Black-rumps are a revelation to watch as they industriously go about producing an architectural wonder out of coconut fibre and dried grasses, i.e. the stalks of the wild grasses mentioned above. I should add that an excellent plant to offer one's birds for nest construction is Yorkshire fog (*Holcus lanatus*). A native perennial, in spite of its name it is found throughout Britain on pastures, roadsides, waste-ground and open woodland on all types of soil. It is covered with soft, velvety hairs which the birds love to incorporate into the nest, especially as a lining. The only problem is to make sure one provides enough to go round as one's birds are sure to all want a bit—even if it means raiding a neighbor!

Being a gregarious species, I believe one's chances of breeding success are enhanced tremendously if one keeps the Black-rump on the colony system. They are enhanced even further if a colony is housed alone—which I have found only through sorry experience. Extremely peaceable birds, they will nest right alongside one another without any serious bickering whatsoever. Minor disputes can occur around a nest from time to time but these tend to be only when another con-specific strays within a ridiculously small radius.

Other species, however, may not be frightened off by the defendants' somewhat feeble attacks. To illustrate, after constructing a dome-shaped masterpiece over about three days that would have brought in thousands of dollars had it been labelled a

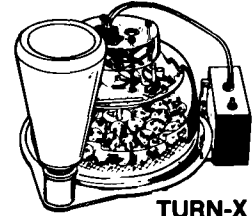
"Picasso", the occupants were usurped by a pair of Orange-cheeks (*E. melpoda*). Being easily dislodged wasn't lost on other Orange-cheeks, either, as another pair took possession of a similar construction—this time with dire consequences. Four beautiful, blind and helpless little nestlings were unceremoniously extricated from within the previously, "safe" confines of the nesting chamber. Conversely, should a Black-rump come across some other species' unfortunate young, the tiny corpse would elicit immense excitement. While flicking its tail from side to side the Black-rump would carry the lifeless form to its nest and immediately proceed to wipe it all over the outside before impregnating it into the outer-nest wall or the cock nest.

The cock nest, a nest-like protuberance that sits on top of the real nest, has caused much conjecture as to its purpose but, coupled with the event just described, there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that its function serves as defense against potential predators. As my Black-rumps always build their nest on the birdroom floor—their wild counterparts likewise build on the ground—it is feasible to conclude that in the wild they are at extreme risk from ground-dwelling predators such as snakes, lizards and/or spiders, etc. Now, besides the construction of this unusual "appendage", the birds invariably make a narrow tunnel entrance on, or slightly above, the ground leading to the chamber of the real nest, but which can only be entered by their adopting a crouched position. This tunnel, though flat-looking, is extremely pliant and enables the birds to enter and leave before returning to its flat position as before. Such an orifice would be difficult for a potential predator to negotiate—and a smelly trail (such as that left by a tiny corpse!) leading to a false nest which offers an assumed easier avenue to a meal provides the incubating bird with just enough time to make a quick escape.

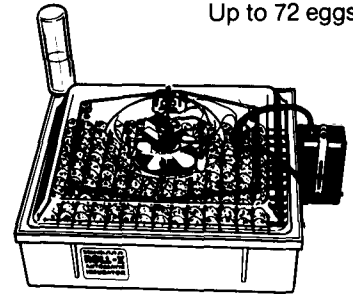
During the day only one bird is ever to be found sitting on the nest, unless its partner has just returned with food or to take its turn to incubate the eggs or brood the young (both birds share responsibility). On getting back to the nest, after having collected food for its offspring, for example, the returning bird stops a short distance from it and

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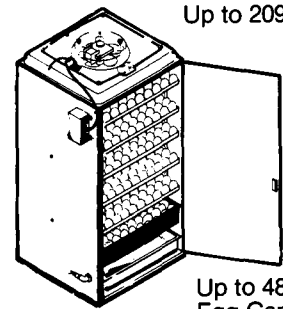
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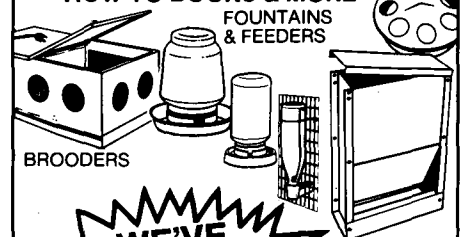
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Photo courtesy of Ian Hinze

Ian Hinze, some of his well planted finch aviaries in the background.

looks around to see all is well before uttering a low cry to its mate. Sometimes the sitting bird will quickly appear before the relieving bird enters, or it will wait before its mate is actually in the chamber before coming out. Once out, the relieved bird never strays far from the vicinity of the nest and is able, at least in captivity, to feed/drink/rest while, at the same time, keep guard. Should one enter the birdroom, the non-sitting bird will utter an alarm call which brings the



Photo by Ian Hinze

Fledgling Black-rumped Waxbill (*Estrilda troglodytes*). Note white outer tail feathers.

sitting bird out of the nest immediately.

If we relate this to the birds' wild counterparts, we will deduce that these anti-predator devices are aimed primarily at saving the adults. The young or eggs could well perish—but the adults live to breed another day. Should the young be close to fledging, however, they, too, may erupt out of the nest to avoid a danger considered too close for comfort. This, also, can be proven because there are cases of nests being disturbed whereupon the youngsters seemed to burst out. Caught up and put back they tended

never to settle and continually jumped out (I have personally experienced the young of Goldbreasts *Amandava subflava* doing likewise).

As mentioned, both sexes share in the incubation of the usually, three to five eggs (personal observations) but, while the hen is sitting, it is not uncommon for the cock to continue adding material to the roof of the nest with the result that it may appear constrictive and one wonders how on earth the birds manage to gain access. Interestingly, the nest is not unlike a miniature cave and the bird's Greek specific name *troglydytes*, meaning "cave-dweller", is very apt, i.e. from *trogle*, "a hole" and *duo* "to plunge into". However, it must be realized that con-generic species also build similar constructions.

Owing to the Black-rump's secretive nature while nesting, reports on the fledging period of the young tend to vary. All things considered, a realistic estimation is 17 to 21 days—which is not uncommon in estrildids, to which family they belong. The fledglings are approximately two-thirds the size of the adults, drab brown above and pale buffish below. While there is an apparent lack of vermiculations on the feathers, close observation will reveal the slightest indication of the red eye-

Photo by Ian Hinze



Fledgling Rosy-rumped or Sundevall's Waxbill (*Estrilda rhodopyga*). Note crimson of rump and wings and lack of white outer tail feathers.

stripe. The bill is black and at its base can be seen conspicuous bluish white tubercles or gape marks. Also, though the tail is short it carries the diagnostic white outer feathers —a tremendous help in ascertaining which species it is when there are also fledgling Rosyrumps (*E. rhodopyga*) of similar age flying around the birdroom.

The juveniles, despite their lack of coloration, are extremely endearing and reasonably steady. It is only after a few days of liberty from the nest that they take on the flightiness of their parents. With great affection I well recall that, after entering the birdroom one morning, I was confronted with five recently-fledged youngsters perched all in a row. A couple of hours later, however, and they were nowhere to be found. Their parents had enticed them back into the relative safety of the nest! (The young regularly return to the nest with their parents for the first few days).

Because of their lively and gregarious disposition, I would not recommend housing the Black-rump in cages less than 6 feet long by 2 feet wide by 2 feet deep. For an even greater chance of success I would strongly recommend as much wing space as possible. Last year I was successful in parent-rearing 16 young to maturity in a "free-flying" birdroom (a British record in a single season) — the norm is around three —five where I can prevent the temperature falling below 60°F. As with all other waxbill species, it's all right for keepers to say that their birds are housed outside all year round —but the national breeding results of both Britain and the U.S. do not endorse such husbandry. I will, no doubt, be accused by the odd Philistine of pampering my birds —but if pampering brings me results then I shall continue to practice it.

A truly beautiful and endearing species with which to specialize, the Black-rump has much to commend it. It is attractively colorful without being over-gaudy, peaceful, vivacious and, providing the criteria laid down in this article is adhered to, I see no reason why it cannot be propagated in birdrooms for posterity. This will only be achieved, however, if a concerted effort to establish it is made now! Otherwise this much underrated little bird, a vanguard symbol for aviculture itself, will join the ranks of the unavailable. ●



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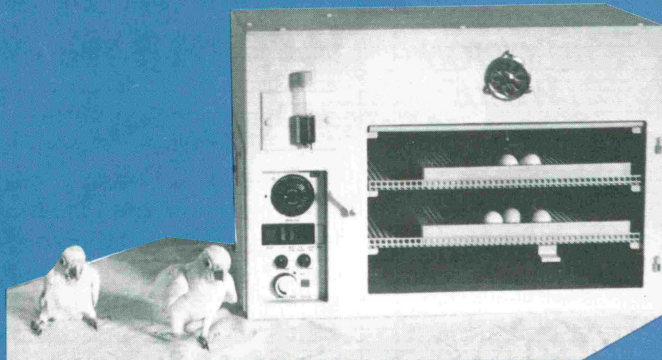
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