



The Bar-breasted Firefinch is very rare in American aviculture. This species also has the red bill as does the common Senegal Finch. This is the cock bird.

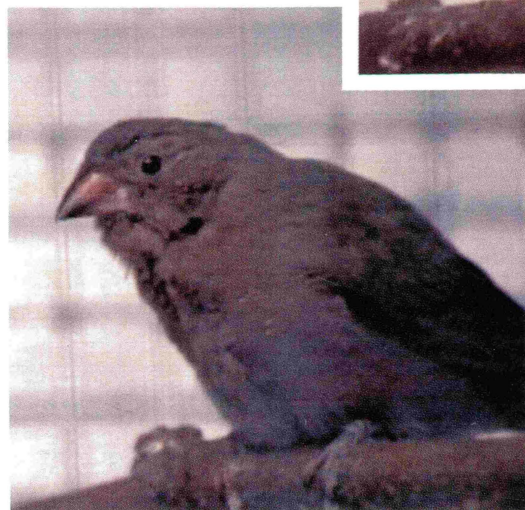
Breeding the Bar-breasted Firefinch

(*Lagonosticta rufopicta*)

by Carol Anne Calvin and Stash Buckley
Magnolia, New Jersey



The hen Bar-breasted Firefinch shows the broken light bars on its chest as does the cock.



The immature Bar-breasted is dull in coloration compared to the parent birds.

We acquired our first five, wild-caught Bar-breasted Firefinches out of quarantine from an importer in October of 1991. They were in worse than typical "quarantine condition" — barely recognizable as Bar-breasted and, certainly, of undetermined sex. Even after regrowing their feathers, breeding the Bar-breasted was a difficult challenge as they are not dimorphic, the sexes looking quite similar. Setting up a true pair was not an easy task.

The Bar-breasted Firefinch, only rarely available, is about the same size as the very much more common Senegal, or Red-billed Firefinch (*Lagonosticta senegala*). It also has a red beak, making it possible to distinguish it, the Senegal, and the Brown Firefinch (*Lagonosticta nitidula*) from all other firefinches, the Senegal being the most commonly imported and the Brown probably never imported. A pattern of white spots on the breast gives the Bar-breasted its broken bar effect.

Of the five birds we had acquired, we set up two tentative pairs as soon as their feathers had regrown. As with our other wild-caught breeding pairs, these were set up in separate four foot by two foot by three foot high flights. Small, closed wicker baskets were supplied high in the corners, with clumps of dried grasses shielding the entrance and a natural perch positioned for easy access to the nest opening. A small handful of soft hay was placed in each nest basket as a "starter." Dry, untreated straw was scattered on the flight floor. Drinking water with Nekton S added was provided in an open, shallow dish on the flight floor. A finch/canary seed mixture was offered in a hang-on plastic dish, with several millet sprays hung against perches and left lying on the floor.

Mealworms were offered in a shallow, open plastic dish on the floor, but these were most often ignored. Egg-food was also offered, with no apparent interest. Nesting material was provided in the form of four-inch strands of burlap. Nest building commenced shortly thereafter, with both wicker and free-standing nests being

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used. The free-standing nest was constructed of straw and burlap strands.

Several months went by with no further signs of breeding. Doing further research, we discovered that Bar-breasteds like a moister environment than the Senegals. As they were housed in one of our upstairs "dry grassland" birdrooms, we decided to try misting them with warm water in an orchid mister two times a day. In addition to mealworms, tiny thread-like white worms were served. The Bar-breasted picked at these, but really became excited when we decided to try them on wingless *dry-sophila* (fruit flies). We believe it was the combination of misting and the proper livefood that spurred them into breeding.

It was early in June of 1992 that we discovered three eggs in a small, closed wicker basket. These eggs were removed to a pair of Society foster parents, along with two *Pytilia* eggs. After the usual 13 days of incubation, two of the three Bar-breasted eggs hatched, on June 15, 1992, along with the two *Pytilia* eggs. After about two weeks, the Societies got "lazy" and, fearing starvation, we decided to pull all the chicks for handfeeding. The *Pytilias* (Red-headed mutation Crimson-winged Auroras) were easily distinguishable from the Bar-breasted since they had a white edging to their beaks which is absent in the Bar-breasted. Also noteworthy is the observation in subsequent clutches of Bar-breasted that the chicks are very dark on top and light-skinned on the bottom, a two-toned skin that we've never noticed in any other Estrildid chick.

After handfeeding in our Animal Intensive Care Unit on a mixture of half Kaytee Exact handfeeding for-

mula and half Skipio's Soya Musca, the chicks grew at a remarkable rate. We are always trying to find a better formula for handfeeding finches, and this Exact/Skipio's mixture has proved to be the best to date. The Soya musca provides the extra protein boost so necessary to a young chick's feather development. These birds were easily weaned at about four weeks of age (mid-July 1992) when perches and a Society with clipped wings were introduced into the unit to encourage perching and self-feeding.

The Bar-breasted in this and subsequent handfed clutches proved to be eager eaters, presenting no problems. We have most recently discovered a live food which the parent Bar-breasteds seem to devour ravenously and feed to their chicks — wax worms (wax moth larva). We have found it best to leave the chicks with their parents as long as possible to get a maximum of beneficial bacteria, only pulling them when the parents seem to be losing interest.

As far as firefinches go, these Bar-breasteds are very shy birds, requiring more cover and more time to settle down. They have a very sweet call, similar to the short call of the Crimson Seed-crackers, only much softer.

We believe the Bar-breasted has a very slim chance of being established in this country due to the very limited number of individuals. This beautiful bird is simply another example of America's lack of commitment to establishing species while they were still available and now we fear it is probably too late for them to be established in American aviculture. ●

Editor's Note: Any persons knowing of a successful breeding of the Bar-breasted Firefinch prior to dates stated in this article, please notify Dale R. Thompson, Chairman, Avy Awards Committee, through the AFA Home Office, Phoenix, Arizona.

For information about contacting any of these member clubs, please call that club's state coordinator.

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