

# White-bellied Crimson Finch (New Guinea Blood Finch)

(*Neochmia phaeton evangelinae*)

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There are two types of Crimson Finches (also called Blood Finch), the Black-bellied (Australian) and the White-bellied (New Guinea and Cape York). The Black-bellied comes from Australia and while it is being bred at the present time in Europe, we know of only five Black-bellied Crimson Finch in the United States at this time. The White-bellied comes from the Cape York Peninsula of Australia, and from southern New Guinea. The major difference between the two types is in the male birds and, as evi-

denced by their respective names, the abdomen of one is black and on the other a cream color (not white). The males of both types are alike except for the abdomen. A written description does not do these birds justice, being a burgundy red on the back with bright red tail, secondary flight feathers being the same color as the back. It is a very attractive and very active finch.

The first breeding that we are aware of in the U.S. was by John Vanderhoof in 1981. The birds that were bred at

that time were dispersed and nothing more was seen of them. In 1992, a shipment of 200 birds came into a quarantine station in Los Angeles. This group of White-bellied Crimson Finch came from New Guinea. We obtained four pairs from this group of wild-caught birds. One pair promptly went to nest in an outdoor flight which contained several different species of finches and Australian Grass Parakeets, however this hen died of egg-binding at that time. It should be noted here that it appears that Crim-

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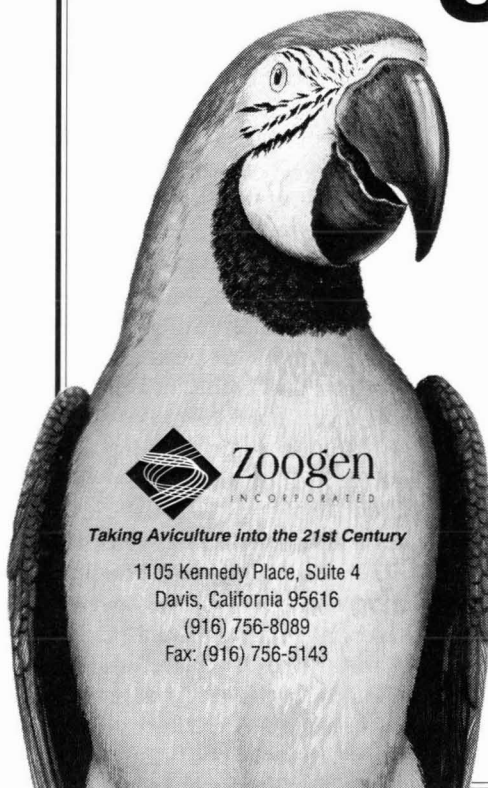
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sons are prone to egg binding in cooler or cold weather. Since they will go to nest at any time of year, as our experiences indicate they have no set breeding season, this needs to be carefully monitored if you are breeding outdoors. Another pair was set up in a small planted flight (6' high x 3' wide x 5' long) and the third pair was set up in a cage in a "bird room", as we were not sure they could acclimate to southern California winter temperatures when the nights can get down to the mid '40s where we are. We each had a pair at our respective homes, and kept in touch as to their progress. After several months, it was realized that the male of the pair in the outdoor flight was too aggressive for the hen and always kept her hiding in the bushes. Whenever she came out he would chase her and she wanted nothing to do with him. At about this same time an extra hen became available and we bought it and had it in the bird room. We decided to trade hens to see if a different hen would have any effect on his behavior. Immediately on releasing her in the aviary, the aggressive male flew right over to her

and started posturing aggressively and instead of flying away she did the same thing back to him. It was love at first sight! Within two weeks they were on eggs. In the meantime, the pair in the cage in the bird room did nothing. When the Crimson Finch were first bred in the early '80s by the Avicultural Institute of Southern California, they were bred in cages that were 30" wide x 13" high x 12" in depth. Since these are a very active finch (much like the Red-headed Parrot Finch), I thought a slightly larger cage would be better so I used a 3' long x 2' wide x 2' high cage. For the next four months this pair did nothing but look at each other. In this cage a small wicker finch basket had been hung as this is what the hen who had died from egg-binding had used in the aviary but this pair totally ignored it. After waiting, it was decided that something else had to be tried to induce them to breed. In talking with noted finch breeders Carol Ann Calvin and Stash Buckley in New Jersey, where birds are bred indoors, we thought we would use a technique they use for some of their rare finches

and that is to let them have the freedom of the bird room and not confine them to a cage. The birds were released from their cage on February 25 and on March 6 the hen was laying eggs! The ironic part of this is that she laid her eggs in the basket in her old cage as we had left the door open to it. We believe the success was due, in part, to the pair having access to molted feathers from the other birds as they line their nest completely with feathers. In this bird room there are English Budgies which seem to be perpetually dropping feathers and the pair of Crimson Finches are searching under their cages for feathers constantly when they are nest building (along with any other material they can find such as paper pieces, grass, insulation, stems from spray millet, etc.). They will almost completely fill the finch basket and also line the dome of it so that it resembles a tunnel.

The original pair in the aviary fledged two babies and within five days of fledging the hen was back laying. This was also the case with the pair in the bird room. We have found that the Crimson Finches go back to nest immediately with the male continuing the feeding of the fledged young while the hen starts incubating the next clutch. At this time, a pair (from the same original wild caught group) was obtained from an aviculturist who had not had any luck breeding them. Although they had gone to nest for him, they hadn't raised any babies. Again, within two weeks of putting them into a heavily planted aviary next to the other pair (they could hear but not see each other), this pair laid five eggs and fledged four young and immediately reclused and hatched five more! From these three original wild-caught pairs we have raised over two clutches of young from each pair in a four month period! We are currently in the process of obtaining several more pairs to make sure we can establish this finch here in the U.S. where it has been lost to aviculture once already. With the new federal laws that eliminate importation of either wild or domestic birds, this is of extreme importance as we will not be able to get new bloodlines. With this in mind, we have attempted to locate as many of the original group of birds as we can. Since these were all wild-caught, the odds of unrelated birds is extremely good.



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One of the conclusions we have drawn from our experiences with this beautiful little finch is: the case that wild-caught birds went to nest would seem to indicate that this should be a fairly easy bird to establish in captivity since first generation domestic reared young among all bird species generally breed much easier and go to nest more readily than their wild-caught parents. Although, it would seem unlikely that they could go to nest anymore readily than these wild-caught pairs.

What is needed to get the birds to breed? Ideally, a small heavily planted aviary to themselves. However, as is the case with most birds, there are no absolutes here. While two of our pairs only nest in small enclosed wicker finch baskets and totally ignore the finch nest boxes that are also provided, the third pair went to nest in an enclosed finch nest box and ignored the baskets. One thing is for sure, however, they need plenty of "building materials" to furnish their nests. We provide six and eight inch grass as the primary component and, as stated earlier, feathers. We try to give each pair a cup of feathers collected from the other aviaries, with the exception of the pair flying free in the bird room who collect their own by going from cage to cage. To show just how industrious these birds are, they will have the cup of feathers gone and in place in their nest within 30 minutes!

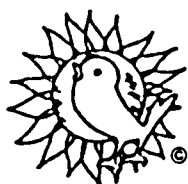
Feeding: a standard seed mixture (parakeet mix) heavy on canary and white millet is the primary seed, along with lots of spray millet. CeDe eggfood and mealworms are provided when they are feeding young, along with fresh greens such as cucumber slices and romaine lettuce and apple. They seem to particularly like the cucumber. Again, there is a lot of individuality involved. The pair in the bird room will not eat the eggfood and eat very few mealworms, they much prefer the parakeet seed mix over the finch mix. Their young fledged out the same as the others in spite of this "seed only" diet.

Historically, in older articles on the Crimson Finch they have stated that they are: 1) extremely aggressive and 2) you can't keep them with any bird that has red as they will attack it immediately. *This is not accurate!*

We have kept them in community flights with Scarlet-chested Parakeets

and Red-headed Lady Goulds so they are not automatically aggressive with birds that show red. In the case of the pair in the bird room, they were with ten Lady Goulds that were also free flying in the room. They will attack a similar colored bird such as the African Fire Finch, and will definitely attack others of their own kind. From six months on, they must be kept in single pairs, but may be kept with other species in aviaries. The key here is observation! This is the last opportu-

nity to establish this finch in captivity in this country, as after this year the chances are very remote that we will ever get any more in. There are enough birds here with enough unrelated bloodlines so that there should be no excuse as to why we can't get them established given the ease with which they go to nest. They have many attributes to endear themselves to the avicultural community, they are beautiful, active, hardy, very inquisitive and excellent parents! ●



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