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Estrildid Finches in Mixed Flights – the Death Blow

by Stash Buckley and Carol Anne Calvin
Magnolia, New Jersey

Favorite bootleg Rush CD: "Over the Europe"

Favorite TV show: "Oprah Winfrey"

In fact, when people call us, they hear on our answering machine that we do not pick up between 4 and 5 p.m., as this is when her show is broadcast in our area.

Mixed community flights, however, are *not* one of our favorite things.

As Josef Lindholm, birdkeeper at the Ft. Worth Zoo, once said to us — when it comes to breeding finches, America is a nation of amateurs. This is, indeed, true as, being the world's number one importer of wild-caught birds, we have very little to show for it. As the number of species declines in our country, it is getting harder and harder to argue against the case for stopping importation.

Finch species are not established in this country for the simple reason that Americans took the easy road. We are sure you have all read somewhere the question, "I have an aviary so and so by so and so, and how many finches can I put in it?" This is an amateur question and is asked by the bird keeper, not the bird breeder.

Breeding finches in mixed flights is an accepted procedure in the U.S.A. and has less to do with breeding birds but more with convenience and collecting. We have yet to find an example where this method actually works. Generally, what breeds is the more dominant species and the rest suffer.

If one wants to learn how to breed finches successfully, one should look towards the experts, primarily the Dutch and the Germans. Generally,

they are not interested in large collections but, rather, limit themselves to a few species set up one pair per flight, breeding their birds indoors. By successful finch breeding, we mean having quite a few pairs of a particular species with which to work, breeding them generation after generation, and being self-sufficient, acquiring new blood only when needed.

The basic situation in this country is that someone gets a pair of some species, breeds them, sells the offspring and then loses the hen. They then place an ad somewhere, looking for another hen. This is certainly not successful finch breeding.

A few years ago, we were bringing some birds out of Europe and were quite surprised at what was offered to us: Chestnut-breasted Negro Finches *Nigrita bicolor*, Grey-headed Olive-backs *Nesocharis capistrata*, Locust Finches *Ortygospiza locustella*, Rosy Twinspots *Hypargos margaritatus*, Blue-breasted Parrot Finches *Erythrura tricolor*, and we just missed the Black-masked Sweet or Dufresne's Waxbill *Estrilda melanotis* on two occasions. The Europeans have these birds because they are willing to work with them and take them seriously. We did, in fact, bring in some of these birds and regret not bringing in the Rosy Twinspot, as in a later conversation with Jayne Yantz, well-known *Bird Talk* columnist and acknowledged for her work with twinspots, we learned she would have loved to have had the opportunity to work with this species. We feel she would have certainly had success with it

since she even managed to survive one of our barbecues. We know of no importations of this bird into this country, but would not be surprised if it was brought in and died out, along with such rarities as the Grant's Blue-bill *Spermophaga poliogenys* and the Black-masked Swees. Rare birds have come into this country and the community "mixed flight" breeding situation has been the death of them.

We once saw an ad by someone with a Black-masked Firefinch hen *Lagonosticta vinacea*, looking for a cock. We contacted him and were told he would not part with the hen until he was sure he could not find a mate for it. We were sure the bird he had was *Lagonosticta vinacea nigracollis* as we were certain this was the only type of masked firefinch imported and, at that, being a very rare bird. The other variety is the Black-masked Firefinch *Lagonosticta larvata*, the largest of the firefinches and looking superficially like the Rosy Twinspot. Eventually he did call us back, informing us that he could not find a mate for the bird, and that it was indeed a *larvata*, looking and acting like a cross-over between twinspots and firefinches. We found this hard to believe, being sure that the bird was a *nigracollis*, but did not want to argue with him as we wanted the bird to pair up with one of our cock Black-faced *nigracollis* Firefinches. He informed us he would have to make a trip to the East Coast, we agreed upon a price, and he would bring the bird with him.

Imagine our surprise and amazement when he came through the door. We looked into the cage and there was, perhaps, one of the rarest finches in the world of aviculture — a hen *larvata*. It was obviously much larger than *nigracollis* and, indeed, did look like a small twinspot. When he saw our Kulikoro Firefinches, he remarked that that was what the cocks looked like but with a black face mask. Apparently, he had procured a cock and two hens from an importer. The birds must have accidentally arrived with a shipment of Rosy-rumped Waxbills *Estrilda rhodopyga*. He had kept these birds in a mixed flight and could not tell us what they had been eating as they were probably being chased away from the food dishes and all he had left was the one hen.

The pair should have been kept in their own breeding cage, separate

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As of January 1, 1990, AFA's policy was reaffirmed to no longer allow hybrid birds to be offered for sale in its official publication, the AFA Watchbird.

from any other birds, and any cock offspring paired up with the extra hen. These birds are so rare that in an article in the February 1991 issue of *Gefiederte Welt*, a German ornithological publication, Professor Dr. Jurgen Nicolai was quoted by the article's author, Lieselotte Hanisch, stating that the Black-masked Firefinch *larvata* had never been imported into Germany. We agree with the author that Dr. Jurgen Nicolai's competence is without question, making the *larvata* a truly rare bird. The fact that these birds were "dumped" into a community aviary with other birds adds fuel to the fire that Europeans look down on the competence of American breeders. If they sell us rare birds at all, it is usually their "junk" and perhaps that is what we deserve.

Perhaps the most intriguing and revered finch of all is the Royal Parrot Finch *Erythrura cyaneovirens*. We heard through a well-respected importer in Germany, who deals with zoos and high-end collectors, that two people did indeed have them and one person bred them. Mike Fidler, well-known for his book *Parrot Finches: the Aviculturist's Guide*, did indeed track down one of these people. He told us that person did have the birds, but did not breed them and lost them. The successful breeder still remains a mystery.

A good friend of ours from Holland sent us a collection of photographs of rare finches, one of them being the Royal Parrot Finch. Due to the less intense blue of the plumage, we are assuming it is from the seed-eating group, the fruit-eaters having a much deeper blue. When we inquired as to the origin of the bird, he was quite vague, but did allude to Germany. We suspect this photo could have been from the successful breeder's birds. It is unfortunate to state that if these birds had reached this country, they probably would not have been bred at all.

Generally speaking, the way to breed finches is indoors with one pair per flight. We truly believe that Australian finches are beginner's birds. There is very little difficulty in breeding any of them, except, perhaps, for the Pictorella *Lonchura pectoralis* which takes incredibly long to wean, the Yellow-rumped Mannikin *Lonchura flaviprymna* (of which our chicks failed to survive, we believe,

due to excessive inbreeding), Black-bellied Crimson Finches *Neochmia phaeton* due to their aggressive nature, and Masked Grass-finches *Poephila personata* due to their shyness. These are minor obstacles in breeding these birds, except, of course, for the inbreeding we suspect in the Yellow-rumped Mannikins. We personally believe that the Masked Grassfinch is the exception to the one-pair-per-flight rule and does better in a very large area in a colony situation.

In the parrot finches, one pair per flight is the rule. This is especially true for the Peale's Parrot Finch *Erythrura pealii*, for although parrot finches are not known to be aggressive, this one can be. Similar to the Masked Grass, Bamboos *Erythrura hyperythra* and Pintails *Erythrura prasina* are shy birds and do well in large, planted quarters in colonies. This is especially true for the Pintails, which are polygamous.

The hardest of the finches to breed and, indeed, probably the first to vanish, will be the Africans. Seedcrackers *Pyrenestes* and Blue-bills *Spermophaga*, although always rare birds, were brought into this country in sufficient numbers to be established. However, due to the import ban and lack of sophistication among American breeders, these birds are well on their way out. Other birds such as the Violet-ears *Uraeginthus granatina* and Purple Grenadiers *Uraeginthus ianthinogaster* are quickly becoming scarce.

The Violet-ears are not difficult to breed. The problem here is the difficulty in turning the fertile egg into a fledged juvenile. We have heard that Violet-ears cannot be fostered. This simply is not true. The problem lies with American Society Finches. The problem is so bad that we found it necessary to bring our Society Finches in from Europe — birds specifically bred for fostering. These look like what is called in the United Kingdom

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"dark chocolate selfs with strong breast mottlization." They have done an incredible job for us. Although we no longer work with Violet-ears, we feel these superior Societies would have successfully raised the chicks if supplied with eggfood fortified with Skipio's Soya Musca, which contains 69% protein from dried musca larva, spirulina and soy protein concentrate.

As a standard rule, we suggest housing African finches one pair per flight. The only exception we have found to this is the Black-capped Waxbill *Estrilda nonnula*, a very gentle, submissive bird which does well as a colony. Even here, their only free-flying companions are a breeding colony of Blue-breasted Parrot Finches. These two groups seem to totally ignore each other, while a single pair of the *brunneiceps* subspecies of Senegal Firefinches *Lagonosticta senegala brunneiceps* has proven to be quite nasty towards the Black-caps and will be removed to individual breeding quarters when they complete their current breeding cycle.

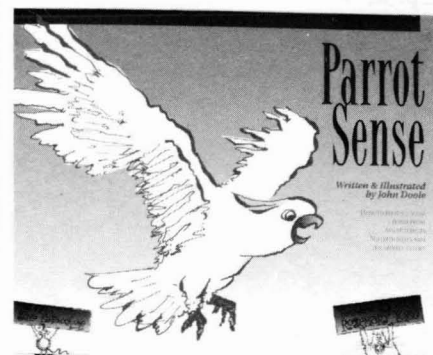
Interestingly, the *brunneiceps* cock has no white dots and has quite a deep shade of red, looking like a small Dark Firefinch *Lagonosticta rubricata*. The hen is gray and does not have the yellow coloring of the more common form, *Lagonosticta senegala senegala*. Their vocalizations are also different. Their contact call is much like a begging juvenile Society and their song similar to that of a Bar-breasted Firefinch *Lagonosticta rufopicta*. There is sufficient question now as to whether this qualifies as a new species of firefinch and when the research is completed and analyzed by Dr. Luis Baptista, results will be written up in both *The Estrildian* and the *AFA Watchbird*.

In breeding mannikins, in particular the New Guinea and Asian types, we still recommend one pair per flight. In fact, when working with any species for the first time, it is always preferable to stick with this one-pair-per-flight formula.

It is our sad opinion that when the import ban is finally totally implemented and no more wild-caught birds will be imported, the remaining stocks of African, Indo-Pacific and New Guinea finches will die out quickly in this country. Perhaps the last to go will be the Senegal Firefinch and the Cordon Bleu, which will be a

hybrid of all three blue waxbill types — *Uraeginthus bengalus*, *U. angolensis*, and *U. cyanocephala* — since breeders, out of ignorance or desperation, are already considering this option. Since the law, as it is currently written, allows for importation of most of the Australian finches, this is what we will continue to have — not due to our competence as breeders but to the continuous supply of imported domestics from Europe. How sad it will be when we look back upon the days when we had such a variety and quantity of finches from which to choose to fill our flight cages. The establishment of the rarer finches was questionable at best, but there is no excuse for failure with such birds as Orange-cheeks *Estrilda melpoda* and Peter's Twinspots *Hypargos niveoguttatus*. When they're gone, they're gone. Those who wish to stop the trade in wild-caught birds need do nothing more than look at the facts we as breeders (or non-breeders) have provided them.

Although it is too late to establish most of these species, we still have the ability to document behaviors and vocalizations, thereby adding to the scientific knowledge of these birds. For an example of how little is known about these finches, when we told Dr. Luis Baptista that we would be parting with our Pictorella Mannikins, he asked us not to do so until we had documented their breeding display for it had not been done before. He suspects there might be a subsonic vocalization during this display — perhaps the first to be documented and maybe the only such vocalization in *estrildid* finches. Needless to say, we were quite excited when we got the required video and then passed the birds on to a good friend and fellow breeder. The point is this: even if we can no longer have the birds in our aviaries, we have the satisfaction of knowing that we contributed to the body of scientific knowledge which will live on long after the birds are gone. This sort of observation would be impossible in a mixed flight situation where so much confusion and competition would make it extremely difficult to get good, clean video and audio recordings. We believe the mixed flight concept will, indeed, be the death blow — the one-two knockout punch killing both breeding and research. ●



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