

Editors Note

Estrildid Finches

The editors of the *Watchbird* magazine felt there was a great need for publishing good information on the Estrildid finches because this group of birds will soon be in very short supply if aviculturists do not breed these finches in captivity to the point where they are established in American aviculture. The Estrildid finches are very popular especially the waxbills originating from Africa.


A new column on these birds called "Estrildid Finches in Aviculture" will be written by a very knowledgeable team of aviculturists. Carol Anne Calvin and Stash Buckley will highlight one of the species or group of Estrildid finches in each issue of *Watchbird*.

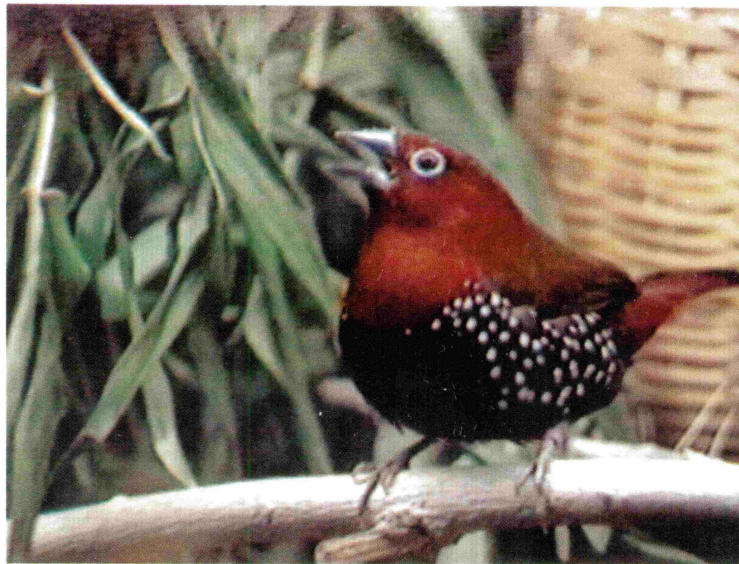
Carol Anne Calvin and Stash Buckley have written many articles for the *Watchbird* magazine. They are recipients of four U.S. First Breeding Avy Awards given out by the A.F.A. They also have received 13 Breeders Certificates from the Australian Finch Society of Great Britain who also awarded them the "Best Overseas Breeder in 1990."

Carol Anne Calvin and Stash Buckley are contributing editors and American co-ordinators for THE ESTRILDIAN. They are also coordinators of an international research project on Estrildid finches. These two excellent finch aviculturists are the producers of the Palm Tree Video "Reference Series" on finches, which have been sold worldwide.

We welcome these two authors and know our readers will benefit from their contributions through this column.

Dale R. Thompson

Editor-in-Chief 

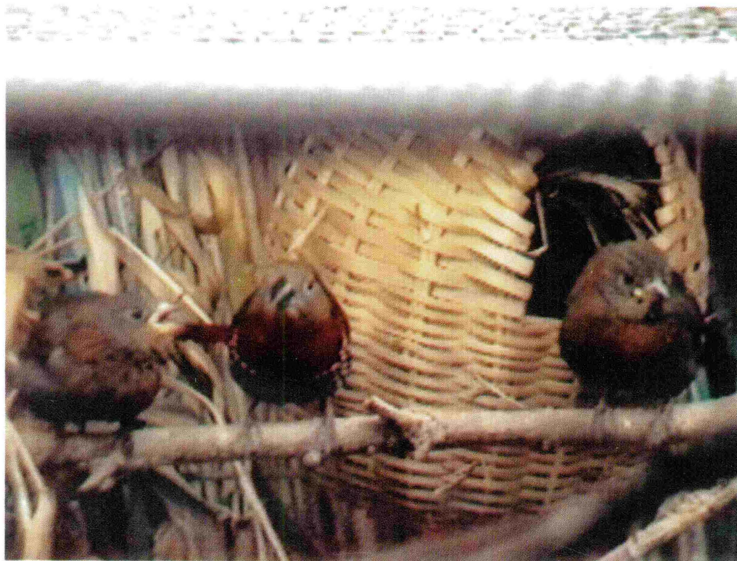


Cock Peter's Twinspot in ruffled display



Photos by Carol Anne Calvin and Stash Buckley

Hen Peter's Twinspot in ruffled display in response to cock



Fledged juveniles with hen



Estrildid Finches in Aviculture...

The Peter's Twinspot

(*Hypargos niveoguttatus*)

by Stash Buckley and Carol Anne Calvin
Magnolia, New Jersey

This is a good example of a bird which has been commonly imported in the recent past, but is becoming increasingly difficult to find. Although not on CITES, importers are reluctant to bring them in because it is difficult to get permits for large enough numbers and the more common bread-and-butter birds such as Orange-cheeked *Estrilda melpoda* and Red-eared Waxbills *Estrilda troglodytes* which are CITES listed, are not available. Although not difficult to breed and maintain, Peter's Twinspots are slowly disappearing from American aviculture.

As a general rule, red birds do not work and play well with others, and the Peter's is no exception. We have heard of devastating results when kept in outside aviaries — one breeder losing all 10 of his hens in less than a year. Peter's Twinspots are easily bred indoors in a standard 3ft. flight: 3ft. long X 2ft. wide X 2 ft. high. These must be housed one breeding pair per flight. If you keep more than one pair, flights should be arranged so the pairs cannot see each other. Although they may have a communal display in the wild, we have found that if pairs can see each other cocks will attack and kill their own mates in frustration — not being able to reach and attack a perceived rival cock. We have even observed two hens which were housed together attack each other when in sight of a cock in a separate cage, presumably also out of frustration and competition for the possible mate. Therefore, it is a good idea to watch these birds carefully when setting up pairs for breeding, as you can lose hens very quickly. However, when pairs are established, we have found that they will remain compatible for years.

This is a ground-loving species, and if you tend to stack your cages in the birdroom, this is a good candidate for the bottom level. Pairs will sometimes

nest on the floor of the cage itself. If you use hardware cloth (1/2 in. X 1/2 in.) for breeding cages as we do, it might be a good idea to wrap three sides of the cage with burlap as these are secretive finches. We recommend using a large closed wicker basket with a little dried grass in the bottom to encourage breeding. We partially conceal these nests in a clump of silk foliage which is much easier to maintain than the real thing and as readily accepted by the birds.

We have two separate birdrooms — one for dry grassland birds and one for tropical wetland species. The Peter's

Twinspot is a moisture-loving species and we house ours in our "jungle" room, in which the temperature varies from 78° - 85° F and the humidity from 70 - 80%. We do not believe in "hardening off" birds which appears to be a common practice among American breeders and which, we feel, has helped put American aviculture in the deplorable state in which we find ourselves today. It is interesting to note that the Germans, who are among the most successful breeders in the world, tend to keep their birdrooms hot. It is a good idea to have two rooms, for the proper environment



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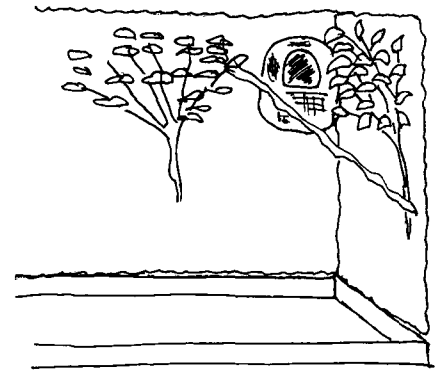
can be a very powerful stimulus for breeding. Being moisture-loving birds, we do not recommend drip tubes for drinking, but rather open, shallow water dishes on the cage floor for drinking and bathing. We feel this will greatly enhance your chances of their breeding as they enjoy having access to open water.

Peter's Twinspots are highly insectivorous and will readily accept "mother" of insect foods — mealworms. Some pairs will accept eggfood and this should be encouraged. Since they are primarily ground-feeders, we place their seed (half canary mix, half finch mix) close to the floor and the millet spray directly on the floor of the cage. They also enjoy Romaine lettuce clipped to a perch with a wooden spring-type clothes pin.

Peter's are opportunistic nest builders, whether using the dried hay from the cage floor bedding, or the 4 in. long strands of burlap which we provide for nesting material. Also of note, if you supply access to large leaves such as the *Ficus benjamina* or larger, the cock will use them in his display, which is performed on the ground. The hen responds with a piece of grass in her beak, the pair dancing around each other in a semi-circular pattern, heads moving upward and downward with body feathers puffed out in a ruffled display. This dance is accompanied by the cock's sweet, mournful song, which is similar to that of a saw being played with a violin bow.

If your birds have nest-built, displayed, and are still not egg-laying even though you have provided livefood, try misting. This is a simple but surprisingly effective technique, as many finches will breed during or after the wet season, feeling there will be an abundant supply of food for the chicks. You can easily fool your birds by misting them, their bedding, their foliage, etc., but make sure that their cage completely dries within an hour or so, as you do not want fungi and mold to grow.

Clutch size seems to vary between three to five eggs. Whether or not you choose to parent-rear is your option. Personally, we choose to foster at least the first couple of clutches of a given species to be sure we have them, before experimenting with parent-rearing. Peter's Twin-spot chicks are dark-skinned, so it would be wise to have "proven" Society finches which will not reject such chicks. If you decide to parent-rear, make sure you provide sufficient livefood. Some pairs can consume up to



Typical Peter's Twin-spot breeding set-up, showing nest high in corner of 3ft. X 2ft. X 2ft. cage, secluded by bundles of silk foliage tied into hardware cloth. Back and sides of cage are covered on outside by burlap, with full-spectrum lighting fixture on top. Natural branch gives access to nest.

hundreds of mealworms a day. We do not recommend the rationing of mealworms at this time. We would also advise you to try whiteworms, waxworms, etc. Birds that will feed their own young on eggfood are quite valuable, as their offspring are also more likely to do so, making the husbandry of such birds much easier.

It is suggested you remove the juveniles upon independence, for if you allow them to remain with their parents until the young cocks color up, the father is likely to kill them as perceived rivals. An interesting phenomenon which we have only observed with this species and the Pintailed Nonpareil Parrot Finch *Erythrura prasina* is that young cocks may molt into the hen plumage, then, upon succeeding molt, show their true colors.

We do not know of any mutations of this bird, but we have seen an individual who has a cross between a Peter's Twin-spot and a Western Blue-bill *Spermophaga haematina*.

We do not advocate such hybridization and believe this bird to have been an "accident" — the product of a mixed-species aviary which can often produce such offspring of uncertain parentage. We do not know if this bird proved to be capable of reproducing.

Despite its aggressive nature, if properly housed and understood, the Peter's Twin-spot can prove to be a beautiful, rewarding birdroom occupant, both a joy and a challenge for those who are willing to go that extra step: to observe them carefully, meet their needs, and see that they are successfully bred to keep their numbers high enough to ensure their presence in our birdrooms in the future.