

Estrildid Finches in Aviculture...



Breeding the Pin-tailed Nonpareil Parrot Finch

Erythrura prasina

by Stash Buckley & Carol Anne Calvin
Magnolia, New Jersey

Years ago, the Pin-tailed Nonpareil Parrotfinch was one of the staples of the bird trade, being brought in by the thousands. Not much effort was spent on actually trying to breed these birds, since in most cases it was easier to replace them than to breed them. The Pin-tailed Nonpareil, the scourge of rice-growers in Asia, is now becoming very depleted in the wild, as it is in our birdrooms. Some people actually consider it a threatened bird due to efforts to eliminate it as a pest in its native range. On importers' lists it was always a relatively inexpensive bird - about \$60 per pair. It now goes for as much as \$250 per pair, and we have heard of domestics commanding a top price of \$400 per pair. The situation is only going to get worse.

This is not an easy bird to breed and one, in our experience, which seems to go against the standard rules of finch breeding. We first bred the Pin-tails in the summer of 1989. We fostered our first clutch to a pair of Society Finches, the eggs hatching on July 7, 1989, and continue to work with this species today, concentrating on the yellow-bellied mutation (see our video print in the February/March 1992 issue of *AFA Watchbird* - "Parrotfinches in American Aviculture" - p. 37). Those who try to breed this bird in cages will be sadly disappointed. Even in our larger cages, which are 4 ft. long x 3 ft. high x 2 ft. wide, it remains a shy, nervous bird, with much individual quarreling and a reluctance to breed. However, when released into a larger situation, as our in-

door tropical birdroom which measures 24 ft. x 12 ft. x 8 ft. high, the true nature of the Pin-tailed Nonpareil is immediately revealed. The long, streamlined shape of the Pin-tail does indeed reflect its nature, as it becomes readily apparent that this is a bird which loves to fly. Our birdroom, which is well-planted with trees and hanging baskets, some real, some silk, provides a beautiful background for study of the behavior and personality of this beautiful bird. One of the first things that becomes apparent is that this is indeed a community species. We do not recommend one breeding pair per flight, as we so often recommend in the breeding of estrildid finches, but rather a colony of at least three pairs in a large enclosed area. Also, surprisingly enough, this bird mixes very well with other species. It does not seem to care about what other estrildid finches with which it is mixed, with the exception of the Mindanao *Erythrura coloria* and Blue-breasted Parrot Finches *Erythrura tricolor* which we have seen males taking a liking to. Other than that, we feel this is one of the few estrildid finches that can be kept in a mixed situation. This bird will breed, bathe, molt, and even sleep as a colony. It is not unusual to see 10 or so individuals sleeping inches from each other in a hanging basket.

Pin-tails are opportunistic breeders and although we do not consider them cavity breeders, they do seem to like nooks and crannies. The height of these locations does not seem to matter, as our males have nest-built from the floor up



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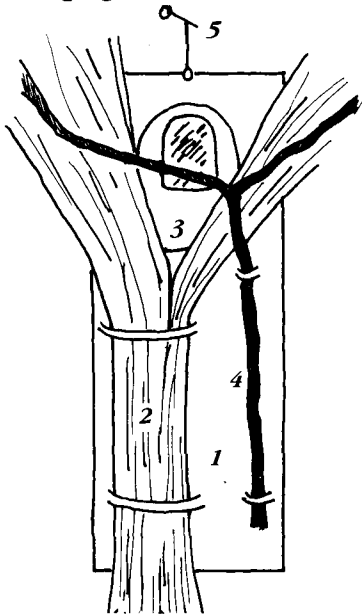
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**How to Construct
Hanging Finch Nest Station**



1. Cut rectangle of hardware cloth, approximately 18" high x 8" wide.
2. Attach tussock of grass to one side.
3. Part grass and attach large wicker finch nest at center top.
4. Attach natural branch to other side, forking out to provide nest access.
5. Hang station from nail or hook high on birdroom wall.

to the ceiling, as evidenced by the nest that one built under the sink while another pair chose a very public spot between a Society fostering cage and a sheet hung by the door to prevent drafts. Although these birds will build their own nests, and one indeed built a tube-shaped nest with a hidden exit on the bottom in a hanging basket of philodendron, they have a preference for large wicker finch baskets. These should be hung from waist height to as high as possible in the birdroom, secluded by branches, leaves, etc. to provide security. We construct hanging nest stations which we place at various high locations around the birdroom walls which can be conveniently hung on a nail or hook. These are easily removed to permit nest-cleaning, egg-fostering, etc. and are quite useful since many of our birds have a preference for them.

Pin-tailed Nonpareils like it warm. Our birdroom averages 80° F with 80% humidity. We encourage our birds to breed by misting. Pin-tails do not react to a hot and cold season, but rather to a wet and dry one. If you mist your birds along with the foliage, this will give a sudden rise in humidity and the birds

will respond by bathing in the leaves and vocalizing their harsh, raspy breeding call. This may be accompanied by holding a strand of burlap in their beaks — our birds' nesting material of choice.

Since these are shy birds, reluctant to come to the ground, we keep their food (half canary mix, half finch mix) and water dishes at eye level, to help enhance their feeling of security. We also hang their millet sprays, which they love, from the exposed beams in the ceiling by means of large spring paper clasps which are hung over a nail. One can truly observe and enjoy the acrobatic nature of these birds when they are clinging to these suspended millet sprays. We also keep a large, shallow box of burlap strands and fine grass up high to give them easy access to nesting material. These practices will help to provide the security they need to encourage breeding.

It is also important to mention, if you keep live plants such as palms or musas (bananas, heliconias, etc.), Pin-tails will eat the growth shoots until they are completely shredded. It is therefore advisable to clip large leaves of Romaine lettuce where the Pin-tails have easy access as they are ravenous eaters of greens. This species is not big on insects, but protein can be supplied by providing them with eggfood. This must be rationed, however, as they will develop a great fondness for it, and over-consumption will lead to liver damage and, possibly, death. It is best, therefore, to offer it when they are molting and breeding and only sparingly or not at all when you are just maintaining them.

Pin-tails are polygamous, and we have observed two males trying to mount the same female at the same time, one male trying to mount two females at once, and two pairs maintaining three nests. It is therefore very difficult to monitor bloodlines to prevent inbreeding, but this is unavoidable in this species, which might not breed at all otherwise. Pin-tails have an unusual breeding ritual in which the male angles his tail in the female's direction and vibrates it while stroking the nape of her neck with his beak. Clutch size averages about three or four eggs, and both parents are surprisingly tight sitters, not leaving the nest when you must pass close by to do your routine bird chores. Incubation is approximately 14 days.

The chicks are light-skinned and can be easily fostered to Society finches. Many breeders, however, have a high

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Photo by Buckley & Calvin



Male Pin-tail — left, female Pin-tail — right.

chick mortality rate. It seems unclear as to why this happens. We once received a call from a breeder in the UK who could not figure out why his chicks were dying in the nest or fledging very weak and then dying, which seems to be the pattern in a lot of situations. We had this problem also for awhile, but then it seemed to vanish. The UK breeder told us his nests were very clean, with very few droppings, while ours were quite covered. The only major difference in our techniques was that the UK breeder's birds would not eat the greens and he offered his commercial eggfood. We believe greens are essential for this species, as greens are important for proper elimination of wastes from the body, although his commercial eggfood may prove to be a factor. We do not use a commercially prepared formulation, but always supply our own eggfood mixture: mashed hard-boiled eggs, crushed baked eggshells, and wheat germ.

The Pin-tails have proven to be good parents, but we recommend fostering the first one or two clutches, to be sure. Pin-tail chicks are quite unusual in that their begging cries are reminiscent of a locust's buzzing call and they have a strong tendency to hang their heads outside the nest. As the chicks get closer to fledging (at about three weeks of age), their begging cry changes from insect-like to more bird-like. This is an interesting adaptation for survival in the wild where insect noises might be overlooked by a predator. Also of note, the gape tubercles of this parrot finch species are smaller than those of others. Perhaps this relates to the chicks' habit

of hanging their heads outside the nest, making the larger tubercles unnecessary. Also, upon fledging, juveniles have horn-colored beaks and are a washed-out version of the female in appearance. Males may molt from juvenile plumage into female plumage and then, in the next molt, into male plumage. This would explain "singing hens." Pin-tail

pairs can be quite prolific, constantly recycling until they reach the next molt.

The Pin-tails are also abundant when it comes to mutations. Besides the yellow-bellied, there is a blue-bodied, a yellow-bellied with speckled blue, a yellow-bellied with a gray head, a sea-green, and, perhaps the most beautiful of all, a white. This multitude of naturally occurring mutations among wild-caught individuals could be explained by their polygamous breeding habits which lead to inbreeding in a restricted area.

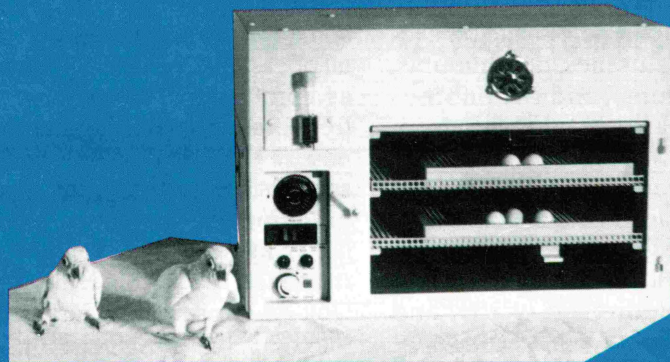
Wherever Pin-tails are being successfully bred around the world, it is considered quite an accomplishment. Parent-reared Pin-tails are practically unheard of in the UK. It is our opinion that this delightful bird will not be established in a aviculture when importation stops.

Editor's Note: *The Pin-tailed Non-pareil Parrotfinch has been nominated for a U.S. First Breeding Award. Anyone having knowledge of a previous successful reproduction of this species, please notify Dale R. Thompson, Avy Awards Chairman, through the AFA Home Office in Phoenix, Arizona.* 🌿

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