



Estrildid Finches
in Aviculture...

The Red Strawberry Finch

Amandava amandava

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This is probably many aviculturists' first introduction to finches, as indeed it was ours, when we bought our first pair of Strawberries at a local pet shop on Wednesday, September 23, 1987. This was the first pair of birds we ever owned, and outside of one Yellow-naped Parrot and a few odds and ends, our hearts were definitely stolen by the family of estrildid finches and have not strayed since.

We currently work with the pied mutation only, due to space restrictions, but would not hesitate to acquire the normals once again if space allowed. This is the first finch we bred, in spite of our over-crowded mixed flight. Much of the bird's popularity is due to this readiness to breed, its relative lack of most finch ailments, and perhaps one of the most melodic songs in the estrildid world. Although most keepers of this finch are quite aware of this song, this bird does have a rather large repertoire of vocalizations.

Some of the most interesting Strawberry finch vocalizations that we have recorded are: an electric buzz, uttered by the cock within the nest, with his beak closed, apparently to attract his mate, and a low-pitched growl made by cocks in a high-stress fight situation when they are unable to flee. A cock which we received from Hawaii had an interesting digression from the usual song, consisting of a simple up and down trill, free of any flowery overtones. It would be interesting to do a study of the Hawaiian birds to learn if the entire Hawaiian population is simplifying the song or if it was just this one individual.

There are three subspecies and all are wet, marshland birds. The largest and most beautiful is the nominate *Amandava amandava amandava* from India, which also boasts the largest white spots. Unfortunately, this bird is no longer available to aviculturists since India has now shut down. *Punicea*, from Indochina, is a smaller version of the nominate form with smaller white dots.

Flavidiventris, from Timor, is similar to *Punicea*, but has a much stronger yellow on the breast. We strongly recommend that breeders who still work with the nominate group keep it pure, for it would be a shame to compromise its stature and markings with the less striking forms. The population in Hawaii appears to be comprised of the nominate and *Punicea* subspecies. There is also an introduced population in Puerto Rico which is all but trapped out. We have not seen these birds and therefore cannot comment upon them.

The Strawberry is the only estrildid finch of which we are aware that goes through an eclipse plumage, where cocks in breeding season are red (nuptial plumage) and the rest of the year are a drab grayish-brown (eclipse plumage), resembling the hens. This well-known bright red color phase is very attractive against the white spots and gives rise to the common name: Strawberry Finch. In captivity, cocks need not be in the nuptial phase to breed.

This species, as we mentioned before, is not difficult to breed. For this very reason, we recommend one pair per flight. If you insist upon mixed communities, the most aggressive species will be the only one to breed. There is little doubt that this will be the Strawberry. If you wish to breed less assertive species of finches as well, this bird should be kept separate. They should be housed one pair per flight, but may be kept within sight and sound of other Strawberries as non-breeding pairs may be encouraged by breeders.

We recommend a three-foot flight: 3 ft. long by 2 ft. wide by 2 ft. high. This should be generously planted with a half-and-half mixture of silk foliage clusters and tussocks of dried grass tied against the hardware cloth. Tussocks of dried grass are particularly effective when encouraging marshland species to breed. Hidden in at least one corner should be a large closed wicker finch basket. Housed in this type of environ-

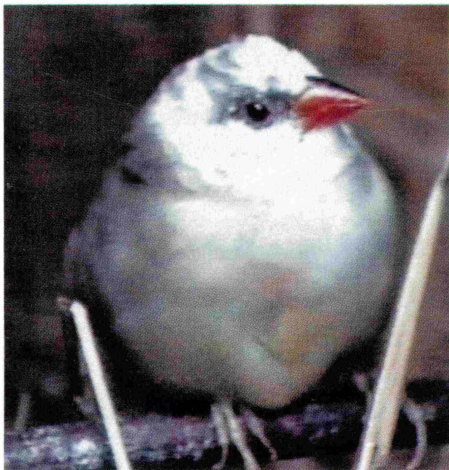
ment the Strawberry can be very prolific.

Strawberries build a typical domed estrildid nest using dried grass and strands of burlap. However, we had one pair build a tube-formation nest, open at both ends, allowing light to pass straight through, which permitted easy observation of the chicks inside. They generally make good parents if mealworms and whiteworms are provided for protein. We had one cock which was particularly fond of earwigs and would go hunting for them when his water dish was removed for cleaning. They will also take some eggfood.

Chicks are light-skinned, and for this reason are easy to foster to Societies. Clutch size in captivity seems to average three or four and chicks in the nest make buzzing begging vocalizations, similar to insect sounds — perhaps a protective factor developed to disguise low marshland nests from predators.

Fledged juveniles have an interesting begging posture on the perch and on the ground, wherein they squat low, both wings outstretched and quivering, head twisted to one side. In captivity, where food can be more abundant, this behavior may be reduced to just one wing, or may not occur at all. It is a good idea to place millet sprays on the floor of the cage to help parents teach fledged juveniles to eat independently. Although parents do not seem to show aggression towards independent juveniles when it comes time to recycle, we recommend removing them to separate quarters to avoid interference.

Although relatively free of problems, one major concern in the housing of Strawberries in captivity is the fact that their nails grow at an alarming rate. This is because they are primarily a marshland bird, spending much time clinging to vertical needs rather than horizontal branches. It is for this reason we suggest supplying some natural vertical or nearly vertical perches as well as taking care to see that nails are regularly trimmed to prevent mishaps. Also, Strawberries have the habit of recycling in a favorite nest, so it would be wise to clean out the nest between clutches. If this is a wicker basket, be sure to leave a small bit of grass in the bottom to encourage recycling. If it is a free-standing nest, remove the nest and they will usually rebuild in the same location. Bonded pairs will sometimes form what appears to be a cup-shaped nest on the floor of the cage. We do not believe that these are true nests, as our birds do not lay eggs in



Pied Strawberry hen of nominate race A. a. amandava — this is a very rare mutation and will probably not be established.



Timor Strawberry cock on left, A. a. flavidiventris, and out-of-color nominate subspecies cock on right, A. a. amandava. Notice the larger body size, proportionately larger white dots, and smaller beak of the nominate than the Timor Strawberry.

Cock and hen Timor Strawberry, A. a. flavidiventris, also known as Yellow-bellied Strawberry, cock on left, hen on right. A. a. punicea is practically identical, except cock and hen exhibit far less yellow. Hen puniceas will have a more orangish belly and cocks will probably have less yellow around the eye.



Cock feeding chicks, A. a. amandava — notice the very large white spots of this nominate subspecies in relation to its body.



them, but rather are a sort of roosting nest in which to pass the day. These are a good indication that your birds are content and feel secure in their surroundings. Another concern is that if you house your birds outside and need to worm them, do not use medications containing Levamisole phosphate or Levamisole hydrochloride as it appears to be particularly toxic to Strawberry Finches, causing liver damage leading to death.

Newly imported Strawberry Finches in nuptial plumage exhibit in intense red which most likely will not return in succeeding molts. This is most unfortunate as those who have seen these birds may be disappointed in them in the long run. There are many theories as to the cause of this fading. One theory is that cold temperatures may be the cause as birds kept in outdoor flights in Europe do not retain the color of their wild-caught ancestors. Another theory is that lack of humidity is the cause. We recommend keeping these birds in warm, humid conditions: 70-80° F and 70-80% hu-

midity, under full spectrum lighting, such as Vita-lites, and supplementing their diet with a red coloring agent, like Nekton R. Birds that are kept in poor conditions will turn black — a condition known as melanism, not a mutation. In fact, in the early days of importation, birds out of color in India were painted rainbow colors for the bird trade. This illustrates how important brightly colored birds were to the trade and is a sad commentary on the bird buyers that would not accept birds out of color.

There are two known mutations. One, as described before, is the pied. This is a mutation of the nominate subspecies from India. A friend who obtained ours for us commented that out of approximately 40,000 normals, these were the only two pied he found, both of which were hens. This appears to be a dominant gene, for when paired with normal cocks, they produce approximately 50% pied offspring, which could be either cocks or hens. This is a different kind of pied mutation than the pied Red-headed Parrot finch, for example, in that the juvenile has all the pied markings he will ever have when he goes through his first molt, rather than getting more and more pied feathers with each successive molt. This gene also affects the orange color in the rump, which comes out a creamier version than in the normal. Interestingly, when the cock piers go into their nuptial plumage, they retain the white pied markings, highlighted against a bright red background. This gene also impacts reproduction, as 50% or fewer of the eggs tend to be fertile and adults, especially hens, seem to be delicate and prone to respiratory problems. The only other known mutation is one in which the red is replaced by yellow. We have heard of only one such bird.

This finch, unlike so many others, has a good chance of continuing to be a mainstay in American aviculture as long as care is taken to introduce new blood and produce a new generation each year. It is imperative that breeders be willing to cooperate with each other in trading for fresh blood as, although the Strawberry Finch appears to be rather long-lived for a finch (seven years or more in captivity), its reproductive lifespan may be much shorter — only three or four years. Hopefully, if steps are taken to insure pure, productive bloodlines, the Strawberry Finch will continue to be a perennial favorite among finch keepers and breeders in this country and around the world. 🐦