



Estrildid Finches
in Aviculture...

The Melba Finch

(*Pytilia melba*)

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Over the years we have read many articles on the Melba Finch. They invariably fall into the same pattern. The authors describe this bird as being impossible to breed in a cage and that they require a large well planted aviary. Parent birds are said to need huge amounts of live food in order to raise young. Even when these criteria are met, failure is likely to be the end result. Fortunately, we have found this to be false. This bird is a classic example of how misinformation is recycled over and over again in the misguided belief that it is somehow working for someone. As we have discovered with most finch species, community flights just do not work. We suspect that the Melba's reputation for poor breeding stems from this type of set-up. Our friend, Dale Thompson, related to us that on a recent visit to Australia he saw large well planted flights devoted to only one pair of finches. This is testimony to the fact that Australians are learning to cater to the territoriality of finches. Unfortunately, the Melba is still considered a rare bird in Australia.

Meanwhile, back in the States, the Melba is not on any CITES list, so we can breath a sigh of relief. This sigh, however, should be tempered by the facts. It is common belief that the new laws are going to stop the trade in wild caught birds, but this is not so. The real end of importation will be dictated by the airlines, since more and more are refusing to carry birds. Until a few years ago there were as many as 40 importers in California. This number has now dropped to two or three. The importation of birds from Africa was a relatively straight forward process. A Dutch airline would be used, picking up the birds in Africa, with a stopover in Amsterdam, and then flying the birds directly into the States. Nowadays, it has become more like running a gauntlet. Birds have to be brought from Africa to Europe and then shuffled around the European continent with a tariff to be paid on

each bird to each country the shipment must visit. This has made the importation of birds very expensive, with only the most dedicated aviculturists willing to endure the red tape and expense to bring in a handful of finches. Some importers have by-passed these problems by chartering their own planes. This is extremely expensive, and the costs are becoming prohibitive. The end of importation will not come through the new legislation, but with the importers finally throwing in the towel in this increasingly impossible and expensive proposition. After all, the importers are in business to make a profit. When a profit is no longer possible, they will turn to other endeavors.

If you are still on the market for wild caught birds, we hope you are not, at this late stage of the game, buying one pair of this and one pair of that, but, rather, additional pairs of a select species, giving you more pairs with which to work. We recommend a minimum of three pairs and preferably five to 10 pairs of each species you choose. Remember, finch breeding in the U.S. has traditionally been done in such a slipshod manner that you do not want to rely on sources outside your own aviary for breeding stock.

Often one is given the impression that a certain species is being bred. But when you pursue the offspring you find to your horror that the "breeder" was not actually producing independent fledglings raised to breeding age, but, rather, had a nest with eggs which may or may not be fertile, eggs which may or may not have been incubated, chicks which may or may not have hatched, hatchlings which may or may not have been fed, and, most likely, fledglings which did not survive to a breeding age.

Then there is also the sad reality of those who call themselves breeders but were suddenly unable to supply birds to the market when importation stopped. How strange that their

"breeding" of domestics stopped at the same time importation did. Apparently these people were jobbers buying wild caughts and passing them off as their own, not breeders.

Melbas are *Pytilias*, a family of finches which is very stable and calm in a captive environment. This can be used to your advantage. In fact, Melbas have always been the most popular of the *Pytilias*. They are very distinctive and cannot be confused with any other *Pytilia* except, perhaps, the Orange-winged *Pytilia*, *Pytilia afra*. The Orange-winged is a very rare bird in this country. In fact, many dealers and bird keepers have misidentified any Yellow-winged *Pytilia*, *Pytilia hypogrammica* that have had an orange hue on the wings as Orange-winged. The Orange-winged can be easily identified by the reddish-orange beak, which is black in the Yellow-winged species. Also, the general color of the Orange-winged is far more like that of the Melba than that of the Yellow-winged. The Orange-winged can be distinguished from the Melba by its lack of any yellow or orange on the breast.

The Melba is not as aggressive as some species. Indeed, some species such as the Violet-eared Waxbill, *Uraeginthus granatina*, can be so aggressive that, if you're interested in generation breeding, pairs should be kept one per room.. Melbas, however, are quite tolerant of each other's presence. A small colony can be kept in a room provided they are kept one pair per flight and Melba cages are not adjacent to one another. One point we would like to make clear: when we specify one pair per flight, we mean a cock and a hen Melba, no other birds whatsoever. Therefore, five pairs of Melbas would require five separate cages, one cock and one hen per cage.

The Melba was the first finch we were very successful in breeding, having a wild caught pair breed and raise their young in a commercial 18 in. cage, quickly filling a holding cage (which we called Melbaville) with their offspring. A well known finch personality politely but firmly informed us that we must be mistaken. We could not be breeding Melbas for they were such a difficult bird to breed. Imagine this person's surprise when viewing our holding cages full of juvenile



This wild caught pair raised their own in a commercial 18 inch cage. Notice the nest mounted on the outside back wall of the cage. There is a second nest on the left whose entrance is concealed by philodendron. This is the nest they use most often.

Melbas, Peter's Twinspots, *Hypargos niveoguttatus* and Purple Grenadiers, *Uraeginthus ianthinogaster*, each species, of course, in a separate cage.

That was long ago and far away, but one point stands perfectly clear; what was flawed was not the Melbas but the techniques Americans used to breed them.

The Melba is an African, dry grassland bird but we have noticed that increased humidity is a good breeding stimulus. Some dry grassland species, such as the Violet-eared, when supplied with extra humidity develop eye and respiratory problems and become lethargic. Fortunately, this is not the case with the Melba. Despite many articles to the contrary, Melbas are extremely sturdy birds and are easily maintained in captivity.

Although our initial breeding success was accomplished in an 18 in. cage, we recommend a minimum cage size of 3 ft. x 2 ft. x 2 ft. This should be generously decorated with silk foliage and grassy tussocks. We cannot recall a Melba ever building its own free standing nest, but using a large wicker finch basket. Don't forget the basics: be sure the nest entrance is concealed by foliage and provide access perches. We are not sure if this is significant, but try to keep your Melba cages up at eye level. They like to nest at this height in the wild and this placement may encourage them. Once you obtain your Melbas they should be set up in their respective breeding cages, one pair to a flight. Avoid housing any extra

Melbas with any other species as they can prove argumentative in a mixed flight.

In just a superficial look at the Melbas, one cannot help but notice the long, pointed beak. This is indicative of an insect-eating bird. Also, when observing their behavior, you'll often find them happily hunting on the ground. Therefore, we suggest supplying more live food than one would for Australian finches and keeping treats such as millet sprays on or close to the ground. Eggfood, in our experience, was eaten but not ravenously so. Its consumption was increased, however, when chicks were in the nest. Eggfood containers should also be placed on or near the ground.

Melbas are an intelligent, curious finch and a stable, quiet environment will help encourage breeding. They will readily accept meal worms. These need not be the "mini" sized preferred by so many of the other African Estrildids. Once again, burlap strands will be used in nest building as well as the hay which should be used as bedding on their cage floor. Hay also fills the need these birds have for foraging, as they can poke among the stems looking for insects and other interesting tidbits. We found a potful of soil also helps to satisfy this need.

Perhaps we have been very fortunate, but we have not noticed any aggression in the pairs we set up for breeding. You may not be so lucky, though, so keep an eye on the hens. Watch for puffiness and bald patches

behind the head – signs of incompatibility. This should not be confused with ritualistic pecking of the hen by the cock during pre-mounting, as this pecking about the nape of the neck will not result in loss of feathers.

The cock Melba has a beautiful, melodic song full of whistles and musical gurgling sounds which he likes to sing from a perch. This is a good indication that he is ready to breed. With the application of a misting routine, it now becomes a matter of patience.

Many aviculturists are notoriously impatient when it comes to seeing breeding results. It would seem they expect instant gratification. We have received



Cock and hen mounting. Notice the dimorphism in these birds. The cock has the red face patch and yellow breast which is absent in the hen.



Cock Melba peering onto the nest. This large wicker finch basket is the nesting receptacle of choice.

numerous calls from breeders who felt they had waited long enough – at least three or four months. We then explain that it may take a year or longer for newly acquired birds just to settle in, let alone breed. This is true of all non-Australian finches, whether domestic or wild caught. A good example of the waiting game: we had to wait three years before our Crimson Seedcrackers, *Pyrenestes sanguineus*, produced chicks.

Melbas are a bird with which you should absolutely, positively refrain from any sort of nest inspection, unless you plan on handfeeding when the parents desert. If your Melbas desert as, indeed, ours did at first, there is one thing we want you to remember: please be patient. Do not think that since these birds are wild caught they might be old and at the end of their reproductive lives. German studies show that most wild caught finches are no more than one or two years of age. Finches simply do not live that long in the wild. Their first clutch under your care may be their first clutch ever. It's not unusual for birds to fail at their first breeding attempt, so persevere.

Melba chicks are dark skinned, so

you may have problems trying to foster them to Societies. It is, therefore, all the more imperative to keep their daily routine stable. Melbas are particularly sensitive to change in their environment and something that may be inconsequential to another species may cause Melbas to desert. Our pairs have raised on their own on nothing more than mealworms, eggfood, Romaine lettuce and, of course, a good finch mixture of seed. Juveniles should be removed when self-feeding and placed in a holding cage. Male and female juveniles live together peacefully for about a year until the breeding urge seems to hit overnight. At this point you will have to separate individuals or losses will occur. Domesticated of this species are particularly steady and are a real joy to work with. We know of no mutations of this finch.

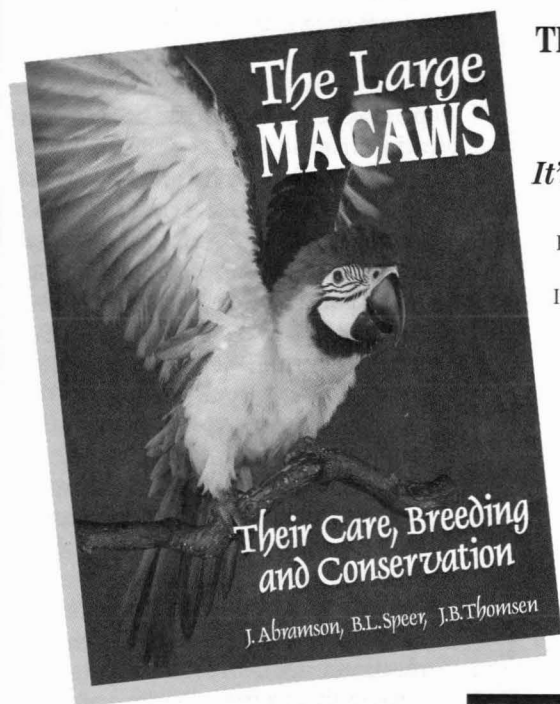
We are sure that you have all read in pet bird magazines or have heard somewhere about "talking" finches. No doubt, like us, you had a good laugh at this. On Dr. Luis Baptista's visit we asked him about this, fully expecting him to dismiss it. We were surprised

when he did, indeed, confirm the finches' ability to talk. This talent, however, may be limited to (you guessed it) – Melbas and Cut-throats, *Amadina fasciata*.

We want to hear from anyone who actually has a talking finch. Please contact us and Dr. Baptista at the Estrildid Research Project c/o Stash Buckley and Carol Anne Calvin, 215 W. Washington Ave., Magnolia, NJ 08049-1703, telephone (609) 783-2039. Please include your phone number with your correspondence. Any talking finches will be heard from first in the *AFA Watchbird*.

Unfortunately, the Melba is becoming rare in aviculture worldwide. Indeed, its availability is subject to the ebb and flow of importation. If this situation is not corrected, the last importation of Melbas into this country may well be the last time they are available. A year or so after that happens, they may be totally absent from American aviculture. What a shame this would be for such a charming species. Remember, like the Cadbury Easter Bunny says, "When they're gone, they're gone". ➤

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