



Estrildid Finches  
in Aviculture...

# Indoor Cage Breeding Basics as Applied to the Red-cheeked Cordon-bleu

*Uraeginthus bengalus*

by Stash Buckley and Carol Anne Calvin  
Magnolia, New Jersey

If there is a finch known to practically all finch keepers, this is it. The Red-cheeked Cordon-bleu has been a mainstay for pet shops – commanding a high price, yet readily available. Now, with its status as a CITES III bird, things have changed. Although this bird has been introduced in Hawaii, we doubt you will see its importation from there. For all practical purposes, importation has stopped. This means that the stocks we have now are all we are ever going to have, and this situation is particularly troubling.

In Australia, where the importation/exportation ban was implemented in the early 1960's, this is one species that they managed to save in aviculture, but this may not be the case in our country. The situation, in fact, has become

so critical that a good friend, Levin Tilghman III, is finding it very difficult to find new bloodlines for his existing stock. He is the only person we know that we would qualify as a true breeder of these birds – namely, being self-sufficient, having various bloodlines, and breeding through to several generations.

The sad case of the Cordon-bleu reflects the basic scenario of American finch aviculture: when the wild-caughts vanish, the species vanishes. Another sad commentary is the quality of birds being bred. Levin informs us that the domestics he has purchased have been small and weak, a frightening situation for birds not that far from the wild-caught stock. We would advise breeders who would seriously like to

work with these birds to acquire wild-caughts while they are still available, as this would eliminate the possibility of getting in-bred stock. Be sure, however, to check into the laws of your state, as several states have laws forbidding the buying and selling of wild-caught birds.

The Red-cheeked Cordon-bleu is a dry grassland species – the first such bird to be discussed in this column. The husbandry techniques for the dry grassland finches are somewhat different from those for the wetland types. Although reputedly the most difficult of the Cordon-bleu types to breed, we found this bird surprisingly easy to breed and quite hardy.

We would recommend housing in a 3 ft. x 2 ft. x 2 ft. flight, with dried grass tussocks replacing the silk foliage used for the moisture-loving types. We use a Safeguard cage with the door on the long side, which becomes the front. The grassy tussocks are placed in the two rear corners, away from the door, with the small wicker baskets placed as high as possible within the tussocks. You may wish to use only one basket, leaving the other grass tussock available for use by the birds as a site for building their own nest. In the wild these birds have a preference for nesting in acacia trees, which are quite spiny, but in captivity like nesting in grassy tussocks. Either way, be sure to supply natural access perches running the length of both short sides of the flight, just inches away from the nest or

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grassy tussock so they can fly to the perch and hop inside the nest.

This is an aggressive species and should be housed one pair per flight. Pairs should not be allowed to see each other as cocks will try to attack each other and, in their frustration, could turn on their hens. Sometimes just the call of another cock can be aggravating. This holds true for hearing the calls of others in their family: the Purple Grenadiers *Uraeginthus ianthinogaster* and Violet-ears *Uraeginthus granatina*.

An arrangement which works particularly well is placing two three-foot flights side-by-side, with a burlap screen in between and a four-foot shop fixture containing two fluorescent tubes for lighting, placed directly on top of the cages. We recommend the use of Vita-lite full-spectrum tubes as they are the standard of the industry. With our involvement in the International Palm Society and the American Orchid Society, we have learned quite a lot about indoor cultivation of rare plants and trees and would not trust our birds to anything less. There seems to be much confusion about where to place these tubes as some bird-keepers have them mounted on the ceiling for general illumination. The important point to remember is this: if the bird is more than three feet away from the tube, the benefits are practically non-existent. Tubes should always be placed directly over cages, instead of over walkways. The full-spectrum lighting provides not just good illumination for video and photographic purposes, but also helps during the molt and encourages breeding. In a dry grassland birdroom there is no need to boost humidity, and the ambient house temperature should be adequate.

As with all finches, water is important. The receptacle should be non-porous, flat-bottomed, and shallow enough so they can hop in, bathe, and look around to give them a feeling of security. We use the Rubbermaid #1 sandwich-saver which is stackable for easy cleaning and seems to work particularly well. Regardless of the species of finch, we recommend the use of vitamins in the drinking water daily. Nekton S has proven to be the best for our purposes in maintaining happy, healthy birds and essential in any sound breeding program.

For a bedding for finches, nothing seems to work as well as a fine organic hay. Birds can use the grasses for nest-

ing materials, and various seed heads will be consumed as food. Much has been alluded to as to the dangers of hay, but if you systematically remove wet hay from around water dishes, you should be free of any problems. We have yet to have any disease problem that can be directly attributed to the bedding. With the addition of cut strands of burlap, approximately four inches long, this will complete your need for nesting material. We have yet to find a finch which

will not accept these and most have a preference for the burlap.

The basic diet for finches is, of course, seed. We cannot recommend one brand over another, but what you need to look for is a high germination rate. Soak a handful of seed in some damp paper towels and within a few days sprouts should appear. If you do not get a high germination rate, choose another seed brand. Finches love spray millet, and the Cordon-bleu is no exception.



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*Cock nest-building in a small wicker basket.*



*Juvenile Red-cheeked Cordon-bleu.*

We consider it a necessity, not a luxury. Depending upon the type of finch, it is either hung against a perch or placed on the floor. Cordon-bleus are basically a ground foraging bird, so place theirs directly on the floor.

Greens are important, and Romaine lettuce can be clipped to a perch by

means of a spring-type wooden clothespin.

Although some individuals are prone to egg-binding, this may be prevented by the addition of calcium to the diet. Cuttlefish bone is a good source and should be securely attached where birds can easily get to it. We have

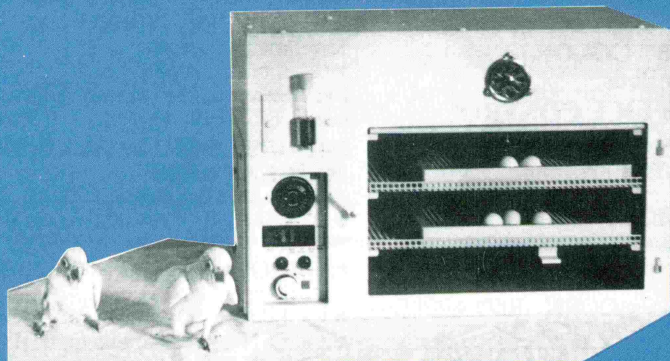


*Cock Cordon-bleu displaying with symbol - a piece of grass. The hen shows her sexual excitement by the triangular head display.*

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*Cock and hen preparing to copulate. The cock exhibits the bright red cheek patch which is absent in the hen.*



begun experimenting with crushed cooked chicken eggshells. This has proven to be readily accepted even among finches which tend to be quite finicky. Save the eggshells from hard-boiled eggs used for your eggfood, bake at 300° for about 20 minutes, and grind in a coffee mill used exclusively for this purpose. Try for a consistency somewhere between sand and dust. The "sand" (larger) particles can be placed in a small dish and served to the birds as is and the "dust" added to your eggfood recipe.

Our eggfood is very basic. Its main purpose is the addition of protein to the diet and as a nestling food for chicks. We boil two eggs for at least 30 minutes, shell them, and put them through a ricer twice. To this we add about two tablespoons of wheat germ, approximately four good pinches of the eggshell powder, and about one teaspoon of Skipio's Soya Musca. Mix well with a fork and store in the refrigerator for up to two days. This eggfood mixture is served to feeding pairs three times a day. We strongly suspect that the feeding of crushed eggshell to birds will increase clutch size as our Red-cheeked Cordon-bleus lay clutches of six (a little on the large side).

Make sure that all your service areas (food, water, etc.) are placed well away from nesting sites to avoid disturbing breeding pairs. Also remember, nest inspections are always a risky business, but when dealing with non-Australian finches they should definitely be avoided. Many African estrildid chicks, particularly those of the family *Uraeginthus*, which includes the Red-cheeked Cordon-bleus, are very quiet in the nest. Just because you don't hear them does not mean you don't have them. Please resist the urge to snoop! Satisfying your curiosity may cost you a clutch of chicks.

In stimulating the breeding of finches, and, of course in the Red-cheeked Cordon-bleu which we are discussing here, we recommend the use of live food and misting. Contrary to popular belief, finches are not somehow magically tied in to the "breeding season" in their native lands. This is, we feel, all too often used as an excuse for failure to breed. We, as aviculturists, carefully engineer our birds' immediate environment and "breeding season," and it is to this our birds respond!

Misting should be done at least once a day, using warm water in an orchid-

type mister, as when the water comes in contact with the air, it cools off dramatically. Birds, bedding, and tussocks should be misted, but try to avoid getting the seed wet. Birds may be terrified at first, but should come to accept and enjoy it. Live food should be provided immediately after the misting in the form of mini-mealworms (newly molted ones are best – they appear white), waxworms, wingless dryophila (fruit-flies), and whiteworms (enchytraeae). Watch to see what your birds like, as some forms of live food may be greedily gobbled, while others may be ignored. Levin Tilghman has gone this one step further by going out to the woods to collect live termites for his Red-cheeked Cordon-bleus. These were ravenously consumed and fed to the chicks. His domestically bred birds are now accepting eggfood and mini-mealworms, making their care much easier. In fact, Levin has been so successful that rarely a week goes by without him calling to tell us of some new breeding accomplishment. His habit of feeding live termites was jokingly referred to by a friend as "cheating," but it dramatically shows what hard work and perseverance can achieve.

We have had Red-cheeked Cordon-bleus raise Society Finch chicks on little more than seed, as we had taken the Cordon-bleu eggs to foster to Societies and replaced their eggs with Society eggs. We were surprised at how willing they were to raise them, so with the addition of live food, there is no reason they should not raise their own chicks. The Cordon-bleu eggs fostered to Societies were also successfully incubated and hatched. The chicks are dark-skinned and have a side-to-side head-swing begging posture. This behavior may prove difficult for non-conditioned Societies to accept. Ours, however, did raise the Cordon-bleu chicks to independence.

Juveniles look much like pale hens with dark beaks, and cocks could take months to color up. Parent-reared juveniles should be removed before this happens, as the cock could possibly be stimulated by the red cheek patch on his male offspring and become aggressive towards them.

There are quite a few mutations of the Red-cheeked Cordon-bleu and most of them occur in Australia. Perhaps the most dramatic is the pied form. A friend tried to bring these in, but unfortunately could not obtain enough for

export. The pied appears as white patches, not yellow, which increase with age, similar to the pied Red-headed Parrot-finch *Erythrura psittacea*. Another is a bird in which the red cheek patches are replaced by orange. This orange color is also carried over to the beak. There is a naturally occurring mutation in which the red is replaced by yellow. A particularly striking one occurs in Germany, in which the body is white, but the cock still has the red cheek patch.

This African estrildid is a delightful, lively, and beautiful species which could very well be the challenge for which keepers of the more sedentary Australian types are looking. As mentioned before, we do not consider this a difficult bird to breed, with the adoption of these indoor cage-breeding techniques. We see no reason why the Red-cheeked Cordon-bleu cannot be established in this country for the enjoyment of future generations. ➤

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