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Breeding the Bamboo Parrot Finch

Erythrura hyperythra

Designing an Indoor Tropical Birdroom

Stash Buckley and Carol Anne Calvin
Magnolia, New Jersey

After the publication of our Pintail Nonpareil article *Erythrura prasi-*na in the March/April 1995 issue of the *AFA Watchbird* (Vol. XXII, No. 2), we had a very pleasant conversation with Robin Restall of Hong Kong. For those of you who are unfamiliar with him, he is known worldwide for his writing on finches and is currently finishing his new book on mannikins *Lonchura* Southeast Asia has disclosed a disturbing trend in Pintails which we feel should be passed on to American aviculturists. In many areas of its range, he is afraid the population has fallen below the level from which it can recover, and in many of the bird markets where it was once plentiful, it is now absent. This is not due to overtrapping for the bird trade, as is so often stated to explain the drop in numbers of wild bird populations, but rather a result of government pressure put on farmers to produce more rice. Robin shared with us the horrifying account of children with coffee cans filled with Pintail eggs collected in the effort to eliminate this crop pest. We have urged Josef Lindholm, as members of the Taxon Advisory Group (TAG) on finches, that zoos should take this species seriously as a breeding subject. We urge American aviculturists to do likewise, for captive breeding could well be its salvation.

Robin Restall considers the Bamboo Parrot finch the highland equivalent to the Pintail, and we agree. Breeding considerations are very similar to that of the Pintail, with some differences. Those we shall discuss here. Unlike the Pintail, we do not consider the Bamboo a colony bird, but individuals live very well in a colony situation. We believe this to be the best formula for success. In fact, Bamboos will live in harmony with Pintails. We have even videotaped a hen Bamboo feeding a recently

fledged clutch of Pintails. We have not observed any inclination to hybridize, and do not feel that this would be a problem.

Bamboos like to nest high, so we suggest placing nests as high as possible. These birds will readily utilize the nesting stations we described for Pintails, and we feel another good idea would be to obtain orchid baskets (the hanging type used for Vandas) and strategically locate these around the birdroom. These need not be placed against a wall, as silk foliage and grass tussocks could be tied around the wood. A large wicker finch basket can be placed inside, with an access perch stuck between the wooden slats. These orchid baskets are generally made of cedar or teak and can be an aesthetic addition to the birdroom.

Like the Pintails, Bamboos are primarily vegetarians, so be sure to provide Romaine lettuce, especially if you have live plants in the birdroom and wish to keep them. Unlike the Pintails, Bamboos tend to be calm and quite bold. In fact, when giving out lettuce to the birds, they will often come to steal their portion from the "mother lode" before they are served theirs.

Bamboos like to nest in secluded areas and this can be accomplished in many ways. The first and undoubtedly most aesthetic is by the arrangement of live plants and trees. Live plants obviously need light and we suggest Vita-lites. Obtain 4-foot shop fixtures housing two tubes each and hang these from the ceiling. Arrange these in rows no more than 3 feet apart.

Many plants do very well in an indoor situation and the most vigorous are weeping figs *Ficus benjamina* and philodendron *Philodendron species*. Philodendrons are reportedly dangerous to birds, but we have not noticed any problem. Our only consideration

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AUGUST 5-9

would be to stay away from the variegated forms, as these tend to be too fragile. If you wish to look a bit more tropical, musas are ideal – bananas, heliconias, Birds of Paradise, Travelers Palm, etc. However, chances are these will not flower in an indoor situation.

If you are feeling a bit bolder and wish to really go for the jungle book, many true palms are ideal in the birdroom. Besides the popular Arecas and Kentias, palms of the genus *Licuala* are very striking and beautiful, particularly *grandis* and *ramsayi*. Larger simple-leaved palms such as *Phoeniophorium* species can be the focal point for a room, due to the needle-like spines they produce. *Aiphanes caryotifolia* also produce large spines and are very hardy. If you place large grassy tussocks rising to the ceiling behind these, birds will feel secure here. This is particularly true of the African estrildids. Some stilt-root palms produce these roots quite early with the addition of needle-like trunk spines and large simple leaves. *Verschaffeltia splendida* is a stilt-root palm of breathtaking beauty and one of our favorites.

Palms require high humidity, and this is also good for the birds. Birdroom humidity should not fall below 70% and temperature should not go below 78°F. We have heard accounts of Bamboo Parrot finches being kept outdoors, hopping around in the snow. We do not believe in hardening off tropical finches and it is unusually cruel to abuse a bird with such low body mass in the misguided belief that it is somehow strengthening the bird. We have heard too many reports of such birds dying of egg-binding and “unknown” causes. A season outside in the snow will not alter a bird’s thousands of years of evolution to fit its natural environment. In ideal situations, finches can conservatively be expected to live for seven years and remain fertile for at least four of these. The actual count can be much higher. For example, we had a Black-capped waxbill hen *Estrilda nonnula* that remained fertile for at least eight years, eventually dying from egg-binding. Of course, your choice of birds for an indoor tropical birdroom should be limited to those which do well in this type of environment. The reference we use to determine this is Derek Goodwin’s classic work, *Estrildid Finches of the World* (1982). Palms should be misted at least once a day. While you are at it, mist the birds inside their



Video prints by Stash Buckley and Carol Anne Calvin

Bamboos' mating display. Cock on right holds a symbol, in this case, a piece of dried grass, while bobbing up and down, approaching the hen. Cocks generally have a richer chestnut color on the breast and more extensive and richer dark blue above the beak.

cages.

Many other plants are also ideal. Orchids can be particularly stunning with their exotic foliage. However, many of these will not flower without significant drops in temperature. This, of course, should be avoided in the birdroom. If we have whetted your appetite, we would suggest you obtain the book, *Exotic Plant Manual* by Alfred Byrd Graf, and for the diehard, *Tropica*, also by Graf. We would also suggest membership in the American Orchid Society, 6000 South Olive Ave., West Palm Beach, FL 33405-9974 and the International Palm Society, P.O. Box 368, Lawrence, KS 66044. Needless to say, all live plants should be situated so their growth tips are no more than one foot below the Vita-lites.

For the monitoring of birdroom temperature and humidity, there is no substitute for professional instruments. A good source for these is Wind & Weather, P.O. Box 2320, Mendocino, CA 95460-2320. We believe the safest and most reliable source of heat is electric. We use two 220-volt baseboard heaters connected by a relay and governed by a thermostat which is accurate to $\pm 1/2$ degree. These precision thermostats are far more accurate than ordinary home models, and we feel you should insist upon them when you design your birdroom.

Grasses such as miscanthus can grow as tall as 15 feet, and can be grown in your backyard and harvested in the fall after they have dried. They will act as a wonderful breeding stimulus. Fortunately, or unfortunately, the finer miscanthus will be broken off by the birds for use as nesting material, so it

should be replaced as needed. These reed-like dried grasses can be bundled together in bunches and secured in flower pots and strategically located.

If you don't wish to go the live plant route exclusively, we would suggest mixing live with silk foliage. We buy ours from a company called Petals which handcrafts “trees” of silk foliage leaves and flowers attached realistically to natural wood trunks. They also produce



Juvenile Bamboo Parrot finches



Cock Bamboo Parrot finch

a fine assortment of hanging baskets, in which many estrildids love to nest, especially the Yellow-bellied Waxbills *Estrilda melanotis quartinia*. Around the base of these silk foliage trees and baskets Petals often places Spanish moss. We contacted one of their representatives about this – whether it was treated with any chemicals which may be harmful to the birds. It is indeed treated, but they couldn't tell us with what, so play it safe and replace the treated moss with your own untreated fine, dry grass. Petals produces four seasonal catalogs a year which may be requested from Petals, 1 Aqueduct Rd., White Plains, NY 10606-1097.

Humidity is best supplied by use of a humidifier. Unfortunately, we have yet to find a model which lasts more than a few years. These must be considered a rather expensive disposable item. Another approach, but less precise, is to equip your tropical birdroom with recirculating fountains. We like the copper ones best, but make sure none of the saucers or reservoirs are deep enough for the birds to drown. Many birds respond favorably to the sound of running water. In fact, when we first set up our fountain near the Crimson Seedcrackers' *Pyrenestes sanguineus* cages, they seemed magically drawn to it, sitting as close as possible. They are, after all, essentially a marshland bird. When we released our Mindanao Parrot finches *erythrura coloria* into a free-flying situation, within hours the entire colony was clustered around and in the fountain. Indeed, safe, peaceful running water can be a great stimulus for breeding. Our only concern is that when free-flyers have young ready to fledge, netting must be placed over the reservoir so they cannot drown. Avoid overly ornamental fountains which could provide "traps" where birds could become entangled. A good idea is to surround the fountain with real or silk foliage bushes where birds can feel secure while waiting their turn to enter the water.

We would suggest placing a "jungle" at either end of the birdroom, with the lighting over them on a separate switch from that over the birds' cages, so when the birds' lights go out for the night, the jungle lights remain on for about an hour longer to provide a twilight for the birds before all lights go out, except, of course, for the night lights (one 25 or 15 watt bulb at either end of the birdroom) which remain on all night to



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prevent panic. All our lights go on at 7 AM. The bird lights go out at 9 PM, with the jungle lights following at 10. A very interesting behavior of the Bamboo Parrot finch is that during this twilight, they become very active and display an ability to hover, which we have not observed in any other estrildid finch. With their unusually large, black eyes one might assume they are more nocturnal than other estrildids, an assumption we discussed with Robin Restall (who has a particular interest in Parrot finches) who found this observation most interesting and worthy of further study. A good way to control areas of lighting is through the use of power strips.

A major concern for a closed system is purifying the air. We consider an air filter an absolute necessity, for it not only moves the air, but transforms an otherwise stale, smelly environment into a sweet, fresh one, very similar to being outdoors. Be very careful when choosing your filter, and read specs carefully. Many manufacturers make grandiose claims, but fail to provide adequate specifications. We use an old Teledyne Water Pik system which filters down to .01 micron, effective enough to pull out viruses. You could pay hundreds of dollars more, and get less. Again, be careful. Also, when positioning your filtration unit, be sure to angle it so that the flow of air blows away from any caged birds. We would like to state here that, as elsewhere in your home, it is a good idea to have smoke detectors in the birdroom.

When designing your birdroom, bear in mind that free-flying birds will have to be caught up once or twice a year for nail inspection. Therefore, it is wise to have an area where birds can be chased and caught. Our tropical birdroom is L-shaped with the smaller angle being reserved for cages with Societies (Bengalese) used for fostering and a sink area. Here we attach to the ceiling a rolled-up nylon netting of 1/4" mesh (as used to protect fruit trees from birds). We chase free-flyers in and let it drop to the floor. In this way, the birds are in a confined space for ease of catching in a net and it also reduces trauma to the rest of the birds in the birdroom. Although vertical perches and branches will help to wear down birds' toenails, we still find it necessary to occasionally catch them for trimming. Also in this area is a 40-watt incandescent light bulb in a reflector clamped above a perch, which burn 24 hours a day.

This provides emergency heat for free-flying hens which might have become egg-bound and which otherwise would be lost in the dense foliage. Also, birds that have recently bathed in the water fountains, water dishes, or recently misted foliage enjoy drying off under this light.

When we first started working with Bamboos, we kept them in 4-foot flights in the birdroom. Although they remained calm, they showed little inclination to breed. When released into a free-flying situation, they became much more relaxed and social interaction could be easily observed. Remember, Bamboo Parrot finches are essentially shy birds in a new situation, and it may take a year or more for them to settle down and breed. These birds are also becoming more difficult for importers to find, and prices have jumped from approximately \$100 a pair a few years ago to now approaching \$250 a pair.

Although closely related to Pintails, they have a very different breeding display. The cock will clump small strands of nesting material in his beak, approach the hen, utter his crackling song, and slowly and rhythmically bob his head up and down. A receptive hen will move her head sideways. In the absence of any hens in the colony, a cock may assume the hen's role and act accordingly. Therefore, this display is not a positive indicator of sex. This fencing ritual is absent in the Pintail. The only other Parrot finch in which we have noticed such a display is in the Blue-breasted Parrot finch *Erythrura tricolor*. However, in the Blue-breasted both sexes bob up and down in a much more frantic and less structured fashion.

As in practically all tropical estrildids, the rains encourage breeding by bringing a bounty of insects. Since our Bamboos didn't touch the livefood we provide after a misting, make sure they get a supply of eggfood to meet their protein needs. Unlike the Pintails, this need not be rationed as we have not encountered any liver problems in Bamboos due to over-consumption of eggfood. Interestingly, we observed Pintails eating livefood for the first time only a month or so ago. A cock flew down to the ground and broke up a clump of soil containing whiteworms (provided for the Yellow-bellied and Black-capped waxbills) and apparently ate them. This cock had chicks in the nest, so this behavior may also hold true for Bamboos - only pursuing livefood

in the form of small invertebrates while feeding young.

We have not had any of our Bamboos build a free-standing nest, but instead use a large wicker basket. These birds are typically opportunistic and will use whatever nesting material is provided. In our case, of course, it is fine hay and burlap strands. A good way to encourage and watch the breeding display is to provide a shallow dish with lawn clippings and fresh sphagnum moss. The cock Bamboos do indeed look comical with their small fuzzy mustaches. Despite their calm nature, these birds tend to be nervous sitters, leaving the nest at the slightest disturbance. We urge you to avoid nest areas as much as possible.

The chicks are light-skinned and are easily fostered to Societies. Clutch size appears to be small – three or four. Our first clutch, consisting of three eggs, was fostered. These eggs were laid by a free-flying hen on or about March 24, 1990 and hatched on April 6, 1990. The three chicks fledged about three weeks later on April 28, 1990.

One interesting observation was the mandibulation of chicks in the nest. These birds had their eyes open and would rapidly open and close their mouths, flashing their iridescent gape tubercles, producing a fantastic display without uttering a sound. We did indeed videotape this and when discussing it with our friend, Dr. Louis Baptista, we learned that the rationale behind this behavior is unclear. Is it a threatening posture to the videographer or an encouragement for him to feed them, since they have seen him all their lives? Clearly, Bamboos can beg quite loudly while soliciting to be fed. We would encourage others who may have observed this behavior to contact us, and perhaps the riddle can be solved. If you avoid disturbances and supply eggfood and Romaine lettuce, Bamboos do make very good parents in a captive situation. We suggest you try parent-rearing after you have fostered a clutch or two and have them “under your belt.”

A disturbing behavior of newly-fledged juvenile Bamboos is their tendency to find their way into little nooks and crannies and getting lodged there. We have lost individuals behind fostering cages, between the tubes of 4-ft. shop fixtures (yes, *between* the tubes), etc.

Sad to say, we came to expect to lose one individual out of a clutch of three to four Bamboos. Be aware of this



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behavior and try to regularly check on the location of newly-fledged individuals. Unlike Pintails, which tend to clump together for about a week after fledging, Bamboos tend to scatter, so this can be a difficult task. We know of two mutations of the Bamboo. The first is a pied which we bred from slightly pied stock and the second is a blue-bodied bird which Robin Restall described.

In our article "Estrildid Finches in Mixed Flights – the Death Blow" (*AFA Watchbird*, Nov/Dec 1994, Vol. XXI, No. 6) and, indeed, in most of our writing, it is obvious that our philosophy can be summed up in four words: One Pair Per Flight. We have yet to find an estrildid finch which does not become aggressive during breeding, except, of course, the Society finch. However, some species have a very low level of aggression, and these birds can be safely mixed. You will still need to carefully observe these birds, however, since some individuals may prove to be uncharacteristically aggressive for their species. We want to express a strong word of caution. Our recommendations come from years of study of behavior and absolutely, positively do



View of one end of tropical birdroom. Notice how foliage is intertwined with cages.

Video print by Stash Buckley and Carol Anne Calvin

not arbitrarily mix estrildid finches together. It is a wonderful thing when your obligations of the day are complete, you come home, enter your birdroom, and watch various species displaying and rearing young in harmony. The birds we feel can be safely housed together and should be kept in colonies are: Bamboo, Pintailed, and Blue-breasted Parrot finches, Green Twinspots *Mandingoa*

nitidula, Gold-breasted waxbills *Amandava subflava*, Black-capped and Yellow-bellied waxbills.

Of course, when you enter your birdroom, it is no fun to stand for an hour watching your birds, so obviously you need a place to sit. The problem is that with all the misting, most readily obtained garden furniture would rot or rust in no time. For this reason, we recommend teak. It is a very dense and beautiful wood and can take anything you or your birds can dish out. Its expense is more than offset by its lasting good looks, durability and natural aesthetic beauty in the birdroom. We recommend Country Casual, which supplies plantation-grown teak English park and garden furniture – the real thing, imported from England. Their catalog may be requested from Country Casual, 17317 Germantown Rd., Germantown, MD 20874-2999.

All of this work and detailing may sound a bit expensive, but we suspect that you probably got into finches in the first place for the same reason we did: for the love and beauty of the birds. Very little in aviculture can give the level of satisfaction that watching your birds behave and breed in a natural environment can provide. It may be cold and snowy outside, but inside it is warm, lush, tropical, and full of life. After all, it is the immediate environment to which your birds respond. So as the palm trees sway in the air-filter breeze, the Vita-lite sun sets overhead, and the copper fountain stream lulls your birds to sleep, you will enjoy a great sense of satisfaction as you realize you have achieved your original goal in bird-keeping: enriching their lives and yours as well. ➤

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