

AFA Interviewees

Mike Fidler

by Stash Buckley & Carol Anne Calvin
Magnolia, New Jersey

We have enjoyed a telephone rapport with Mike Fidler for quite a while now but, unfortunately, did not have the opportunity to meet face to face until recently when he came from his native England to the U.S.A. to visit relatives. We arranged a barbeque and visit with a few friends and Mike Fidler flew up to meet with us and talk birds.

In England, Fidler is the Chairman of the Australian Finch Society for the umpteenth time. He has done presentations all over the world with the exception of the United States (other than the private slide presentation we got after the barbeque).

Fidler began keeping birds as a child and became a serious aviculturist at the age of 11 when he kept Budgies. He began specializing in Gouldians 34 years ago and has specialized in Australian and Parrot Finches ever since, receiving an award from the Avicultural Society for a first English breeding of the Pin-tailed Nonpareil Parrotfinch.

He is coauthor with Dr. Stewart Evans of two books: *The Gouldian Finch* and *Parrot Finches, the Aviculturist's Guide*. Fidler has a strong interest in conservation and preservation and is involved in a number of projects including the AFA's Red Siskin Project. He has also done field research on Australian and Parrot finches.

We took the opportunity of Fidler's visit to interview him for the AFA.

AFA – Which finches do you keep now and, among them, which are your favorites?

Fidler – Gouldians, of course, are my all time favorites and always will be. I have all the Parrot finches – other than the Katanglads – which are available at the moment in captivity. That includes the Tricolor, the Blue-faced, Red-headed, Pin-tailed, and Bamboos. I had Katanglads but lost them in a bad snowstorm that turned all the power

off for five days. that was a bit of disaster.

I also have some Red Siskins and some Australian Painted Finches. After the Gouldians, my favorites are the Bamboos and Painted Finches. I like them all, really. The Siskins are cute.

AFA – Do you plan to write more books in the future?

Fidler – Yes. I'd like to rewrite the Parrot Finch book for several reasons. It didn't turn out the way it was supposed to in the first place so we've got to do that one. The Gouldian book is out of print. We now have a lot more field information than we had when we first wrote it so we really ought to be rewriting it sometime.

Beyond that, the only things I really know about are the Australian finches and David Meyer from Newcastle, Australia is working on a book about them. If he ever does complete it I'd never compete with it. He's a very accomplished aviculturist himself. He has bred the Beautiful Firetail, the Red-eared Firetail and a lot of subspecies that most people in the world have not heard of. There is a small subspecies of the Red-browed Firetail which comes from Cape York. I had never even seen or heard of it until I saw it in his aviaries. There is a subspecies of Chestnut-breast that has never been mentioned anywhere in the literature. It also comes from Cape York. But, you see, he's got all that. He's got first hand experience. If he ever gets around to producing the book it could be an excellent one. If he doesn't produce the book, then, yes, I'll do a book on Australian finches.

AFA – When was the Australian Finch Society established and were you involved since the beginning?

Fidler – The Society was formed either in 1961 or 1962. The situation was parallel to the situation that is beginning to happen now with all the

other finches. All of a sudden we realized we would no longer be able to refresh our stock with wild caught imports. We were just chatting in a group when, lo and behold, someone said, "If we don't get our act together, we ain't going to have these birds." So we formed the Australian Finch Society. It started off as a group of people who decided to work together to make sure that we actually established in captivity the stock we actually had. You'd laugh if you saw our original magazine. It really was just a little newsletter.

We used to meet together every three or four months usually to discuss just one specific bird and the husbandry techniques that we were developing to breed it. What you all forget now is how hard to breed those birds were at that stage. In those days the Gouldian in particular was impossible to keep alive, never mind breed. People would literally come from miles around when I got eggs. And when I got one nestling that was really something. It made the headlines of the newsletter.

Then slowly the Society developed. We got to the stage where we were producing nestlings but they were still highly infertile and hard to breed. We used to keep them in glass cabinets, would you believe, all individually heated at tremendous temperatures and then techniques just developed. It was an exciting time. And the Society just grew and grew.

AFA – You began keeping Gouldians a year after the Australian export ban of 1961. Among the Australian finches not established are the Red-eared Firetail (*Emblema oculata*) and the Beautiful Firetail (*Emblema bella*). Could you confirm for us which of these were exported and, of these, speculate on the reasons for their demise in aviculture?

Fidler – Actually, I kept Gouldians

three or four years before the Australian ban. And about the other two finches, they were, in fact, imported into the U.K. many, many years past, prior to the ban. I know of only four aviculturists who successfully established them in captivity. The reason is that these birds are not really suitable avicultural subjects. The Beautiful Firetail, first of all, stresses up dramatically. It is very territorial and becomes very aggressive. It is very shy. When I was in Australia taking pictures of them in David Meyers' aviaries the birds went berserk even though the aviary was about 30 feet long. They need a planted aviary and very heavy cover. Another factor is that part of their natural diet is clover. We would have to keep clover growing winter and summer to keep the birds going. To keep the Beautiful, one would have to set up a totally separate, dedicated exercise to look after it. I don't think that for most of us it is practical. The only place they've been bred is Australia and that only recently.

The Red-eared is also shy and territorial and stresses easily but not to the extreme of the Beautiful. I think, probably, the more advanced aviculturist could keep Red-eareds.

AFA – *Do you believe Australia will loosen up its export policies to allow exporting these birds for aviculture?*

Fidler – I can't answer that, of course, but I do know that there is a great deal of debate going on about whether they should or should not allow export. There is some talk that parrots are reaching pest proportions

in Australia and, maybe, should be exported. Ultimately, I doubt the export laws will be changed because nobody will make the decision to do so.

AFA – *For the Australian finches which did become established in aviculture, was there ever a point where a species' future survival was doubtful?*

Fidler – Yes. Some species are difficult to breed and others are not attractive. For example, The Yellow-rumped Mannikin nearly disappeared from European Aviculture because not many people find it attractive. They'd rather raise Gouldians. If it weren't for a few dedicated people who stuck by the Yellow-rumped through thick and thin, it would be gone.

The Crimson Finch is another bird endangered in captivity mainly because it is fairly difficult to breed. It is demanding in the amount of space required to successfully keep it and the average aviculturist is short of space. It becomes a question of keeping one pair of Crimson or two pairs of something else. Only one aviculturist I know keeps 20 pairs of Crimson so he is maintaining a reasonable, not good, genetic diversity for that particular species.

You've got some species which are not prone to the problems of inbreeding. Conversely, you've got other species – Katanglad and Peale's Parrot finch for example – which are very prone to inbreeding problems. Each species will behave in a different way to the problems of inbreeding.

AFA – *You have been to Australia to*

do field research. Could you tell us of some of your encounters with Australian finches in the wild?

Fidler – I can tell you that I can run faster than a King Brown Snake. Australia is really the most spectacular country in the world but it is a very hostile environment to people. The venomous snakes and the huge salt water crocodiles – I can tell you something about them. But that's not very inviting.

Together with Newcastle University we have a study site in Australia's Windom Valley that has been used for many years to study the population of Gouldian Finches. When the study was first started, the numbers of Gouldians coming to the water holes was in the dozens. Records now show that over the years the population in that particular valley, at least, has been growing steadily. According to my personal observation (although I haven't done the proper measurements) the Gould population at Mitchell Plateau (a different type of habitat) is also increasing so it seems that the Goulds aren't in a decline at least in the areas where we studied. But they were, let me stress.

What I'm trying to do is to study in the wild all the birds I keep in captivity. We've studied the Western Samoa Parrotfinch (*Cyaneovirens cyaneovirens*) in Western Samoa and it is a bird that is truly endangered. At the most optimistic, we estimate that there are no more than 300 birds in the wild. Later a typhoon hit the island and really flattened out the rain forest. When my friend, Stewart Evans returned to Samoa he was able to spot only one Western Samoan Parrotfinch – only one.

We also did an exercise in Fiji chasing the Peale's Parrotfinch. We were all outfitted in bush hats, boots, shorts and had tents and four-wheel-drive vehicles for the trek up near the rim of the volcanic peaks where the terrain is not cultivatable and the vestiges of the rain forest remains. This is where we expected to find the birds. As we walked into the hotel we were amazed to see two Peale's Parrotfinches frolicking under a couple of bushes on the hotel grounds. Seeing them like this was the eighth mystery of the world.

The next day in the mountains we searched hard and found no parrotfinches of any sort. We returned to the hotel after dark absolutely shat-

Video print by the authors.



"The English rose surrounded by two thorns" Jayne Yantz (left), Mike Fidler, Carol Anne Calvin. Sorry, Jane.

tered. The second day we zoomed out to the mountain in convoy and saw nothing. The third day was exactly the same. So we declared a day of rest.

On the day of rest, Evans and I were wandering through a botanic garden near the hotel when a whole flock of Peale's comes up. "Wow! Look at that!" I ran back to the hotel for the binoculars and returned to find Evans spotting flocks of Peale's all over the place.

What happened, we presume, is that Peale's feed on grass seed. The best grass seed in the entire area is where people are. The Peale's Parrotfinch is to Fijians what the sparrow is to us. It was actually the most common bird around human habitation. It's one of those situations where the human habitat change has helped the bird rather than hindering it.

We had hoped to spot the Pink-billed or Kleinschmidt (as we call it) finch also but saw none. Although we went to all the sites where they had been reported in literature, and where other people had seen them for many years in the past, we actually never saw any of them. We did search quite hard. I'm not saying they are extinct. All I'm saying is that we searched very hard and couldn't find any. Hopefully, there are some pockets of them somewhere.

AFA – *We have heard that Gouldians in the wild are smaller, more streamlined, and have longer tails than their domestic counterparts. Have you noticed any other dramatic differences between Australian finches in the wild and in aviculture?*

Fidler – Some years ago (12 years after the ban) Newcastle University imported 40 wild caught Gouldians to do a study on the early effects of domestication. I had the birds for a period of time to try to breed them and treat them exactly the same as my domestic ones. I don't think I bred any of the wild ones at all. They are infinitely more difficult to breed in captivity than the domestic birds.

Secondly, we noticed that the domestic birds were brighter in color because, I suppose, we have been breeding for what we would term as improved color.

Thirdly, the domestic birds were probably an average of 15-20% larger. The domestic birds also had longer tails than the wild ones.

Newcastle University claimed that

the wild birds were more active than the domestic but I disclaim that because of the method used to measure activity. The birds were more nervous and reactionary to the presence of humans. A researcher had a clicker and clicked each time a bird moved. But the guy was too near the cage and the birds were under pressure. In the wild, the defense mechanism of the Gouldian is to fly into a tree and to stand absolutely still with its back to you and its bright belly toward the center of the tree. Seeing a Gouldian in a tree in the wild is extremely difficult. They blend in with the tree. Their body looks like a leaf and their tail looks like the stem of the leaf and they sit still. You can't tell whether it is a bird or a leaf even when you know the bird is in the tree. It's amazing.

AFA – *It is becoming clear that Gouldians are threatened in their native Australia. Do you believe that these wild populations can be saved?*

Fidler – Yes, I believe they can be saved. And, secondly, I question how endangered they are in the first place. It is said that the wild Gouldians are declining because they all have air sac mites. That is total nonsense. No doubt some birds in some areas do have the mites, but keep in mind that I have first hand experience with 40 wild caught Gouldians and none of them had air sac mites. That was proven scientifically and totally. The claim that the wild birds got air sac mites from birds released from aviculture is as wild a claim as can be made. The infested birds were caught as far from any aviculturists as the east coast of the U.S. is from California. It is more likely that the Gouldians became infested through poultry or wild migrating birds.

The other statement that there are only three populations of Goulds left in the wild is absolute and total nonsense. Australia is the size of the entire United States [excluding Alaska and Hawaii] and has a population of just 16 million people. And that population is largely in just four towns. Tell me how a band of no more than three scientists managed to check where all the populations of Gouldians are in that huge land mass. I can give first hand evidence that there are more than the three populations that have been quoted. I also know that in the areas we keep an eye on, the Gouldian seems to

be recovering quite well.

AFA – *Do you believe the Mindanao Parrotfinch as a species is on its way out and, if so, how would you propose to save it?*

Fidler – First of all, the bird was only discovered about 30 years ago so it cannot have been very common not to have been noticed before then. It is a bird living on one island, as far as I know, and on one mountain on that island. There are two mountains and the bird lives on Mt. Katanglad above 2,000 feet. I suspect its habitat is being destroyed especially if the bird depends on trees. In order to fund their movement, the rebels are chopping down all the trees and selling the wood. Robin Restall found a person who used to be a trapper and who can travel back and forth to Mindanao at will. This guy was willing to trap some wild Katanglads, (as I call them). I thought it was a jolly good idea as our European stocks are so inbred and suffer from fertility problems. He sent a report back saying that he had seen only two or three pairs at a great distance and the normal habitats where the birds used to be found are no longer there. And this trapper, of all people, should have known exactly where to go to find the birds. This leads me to believe that this species is now very threatened.

[Editor's Note: *I was in Mindanao November of 1995 and spent some time in the hills. The Mindanao Parrotfinch also inhabits Mt. Apo, the other mountain Fidler referred to. The Filipino Muslims in Mindanao are fighting for independence from the Philippine government, so Fidler is correct about the small civil war going on and the rebels' devastation of the habitat. Indeed, the Philippine Eagle Foundation had to move its facilities off of Mt. Apo because of the constant and heavy shelling between the government troops and the rebels. Not good for the finch. S.L.D. ed.]*

AFA – *Apparently the Green-faced Parrotfinch was first noticed in the United States when an individual turned up in a pet shop. Others have since been rumored to have entered the country but these claims have not been substantiated. Is this bird now or has it ever been in European aviculture?*

Fidler – The only stock of Manila Parrotfinch, as we call the species, that I've seen are the ones I kept myself. I once called a fellow who advertised

Green-faced Parrotfinches for sale. I didn't believe for one minute that they really were that species. I thought they might be immature Pintails. When I went to see the birds, lo and behold, they really were Green-faced Parrotfinches. He had 30 of them and I bought the whole lot. The best we ever did, though, was to get nests. We never did breed them. Later as I went through a Jakarta bird market, I saw three Manilas. One was slightly larger and had far more yellow on its belly. It was differently colored and I instinctively thought it was a cock. Actually, I now believe in retrospect that by some weird accident I got 30 hens or, perhaps, 30 cocks. The ones I just mentioned are the only ones I've seen in captivity – ever. Even in the wild it occurs only occasionally.

AFA – *The Pink-billed Parrotfinch is apparently unknown. A recent attempt was made to bring some in for serious study. Have you ever seen this bird and is it in European aviculture?*

Fidler – It is not now in European aviculture at all. The last known bird in European aviculture was in Italy. I did not see it first hand but I saw a photograph of it. Needless to say, it did not breed. If it's not extinct, it is highly endangered.

AFA – *Obviously the "in" Parrotfinch right now is the Blue-breasted. Do you feel the pure bloods will be established in British aviculture or that they will be corrupted by the onslaught of outcrosses as is happening in this country?*

Fidler – First of all, the Tri-color, as we call it, is established. It's now being bred very regularly. Very many people have it. I don't think there's any danger of its being corrupted by hybridization. There is absolutely no chance of anyone in the U.K. hybridizing that bird. It would have no value if they did.

AFA – *We know you are involved with the AFA Red Siskin Project. What is the status of Red Siskins in the U.K.?*

Fidler – Perilous, I would say. I know of one other person who is keeping Red Siskins in the U.K. They are bred in Italy which seems to be the hot spot for Red Siskins in Europe. I know one fellow who bred 200 of them last year. There are quite a few Siskin breeders in Holland also. I got some of my stock from a very successful breeder there.

AFA – *That's it Mike. Thank you very much.*

Fidler – My pleasure. 

The Special Appeal of Ring-necked Parakeets

Psittacula krameri manillensis

by Tom Marshall
Leesburg, Virginia

I think that Europeans and Australians practice aviculture far differently than we do. My readings tell me that they seem to be less inclined to raise birds strictly for pets and therefore, rely less on handfeeding and incubator hatching. More often than not they will allow the parent birds to raise their young and they often concentrate their breeding efforts in producing color mutations. Whereas we may appreciate our birds in small cages in the home, they savor their collections outdoors in spacious aviaries.

One species of bird that particularly attracts overseas aviculturists is the Indian Ringneck Parakeet. Europeans, in particular, learned during the hard times, brought on by World War II, that Ringnecks will thrive on most any diet; they are hardy and excellent breeders and parents. These impeccable birds have also held a special appeal for me and, to date, they are the birds with which I have had the most breeding success.

Their "symmetric arrangement of parts" or their conformation makes the Ringneck, in my opinion, the most exquisitely constructed parrot of all

the 300+ species. The bright apple-green plumage perfectly enhances the black ring that encircles the neck and the rose pink half-ring at the back of the neck in the adult male. The red upper mandible also contributes to the stunning impression these birds give. If you have never seen Ringnecks in full adult plumage with their incredibly long tapering tails and tightly held feathers, you may fail to grasp how beautiful these birds are. The production possibilities of a wide array of colors in Ringnecks simply adds to their popularity among those who know them.

Lutinos are a particularly vibrant shade of buttercup yellow, with red eyes. The male sports a pink neck ring with a white (not black as in the normal) half ring, or mandibular stripe. My favorite is the powder blue which has black and white rings on the neck of the adult male. (Males attain adult status and their characteristic rings as early as 18 months to two years).

Other colors are being bred overseas and in the United States, a California breeder developed a green and yellow

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