

## CARE AND MANAGEMENT OF AUSTRALIAN SEED-EATING FINCHES

*During the twenty years (1958-1977) the late Eric Baxter edited our magazine he wrote numerous articles appertaining to the care and breeding of finches, both native and foreign. Although some of those articles are now fifty or more years old the basic principles enunciated by Mr. Baxter are as valid now as when they were first written. It is my intention, over the next few months to reprint some of these articles many of which may jog the memory of some of our experienced members, but most importantly, will be of help to those new to the joys of finch breeding. Eric's favourite bird was our own magnificent Gouldian Finch. So what better way to start than with this beautiful, but often frustrating species. Ed.*

.....

### #1 THE GOULDIAN FINCH

*Erythrura gouldiae*

By Eric Baxter

In recent months I have received many letters in reference to the breeding of the Gouldian finch from members interstate, and overseas, and enquirers have come up with problems that cover many aspects relevant to the ultimate achievements they are desirous of obtaining from this most beautiful finch, which the world over is being bred by many aviculturists, in some instance with meritorious results.

Specialists in this field have profited by their experiences in almost eliminating the scourge of mortality that at one time accounted for most of the young birds bred, either prior to their big moult, or during the moult into adult plumage. In recent years he established with of the yellow-headed form in large numbers has intensified the interest in this phase of aviculture.

Their capabilities to breed are well known to most who have kept them more, but unfortunately early experience with them has in some instances accounted for a high percentage of mortality from in young birds, some in immature plumage, and others well into the moult to adult plumage room. However, this need no longer be considered a problem, as in recent years many fanciers have achieved results were equal to those they have achieved with other species that rarely have come into this category of mortality.

It must at all times be remembered that their natural habitat is an area with climatic conditions entirely different to that in which we expect them to settle down and breed, and with this in mind facilities made available to them must be adequate to compensate for the change in climatic conditions, which in some instances can be most severe and trying. Being a bird that is very susceptible to drafts, every effort should be made to provide facilities one that are absolutely draught-free.

Many are inclined to debate this theory, quoting facts in support that they have had these birds housed in open flight aviaries, and that they have camped in shrubs and out in the open during nights that have been cold, windy and unsettled. In actual fact many have experienced this, and their birds have survived for a period of time in what could be considered almost boisterous conditions, but usually the climax to this has been disastrous, and with the exception of a few isolated cases, the final tally of birds reared to maturity has been very low.

Under these conditions adversities can develop rapidly, and in a surprisingly short period losses can become more severe. For a period of time almost any species of bird will survive under these conditions, but even the most hardy will eventually deteriorate and losses will losses will occur. There is a vast difference between draft conditions and the conditions existing in a well protect open flight; the former condition can be created by constructing aviaries and cages that virtually lack facilities to prevent draught even if only a slight breeze condition exists. These conditions usually exist if the shelter lacks depth with, is inadequately protected on each side, and is faced in the direction that allows little sunshine to reach their quarters.

Actually all living quarters, whether these comprise a box cage, the shelter and small flight type, or are a large box type cage, should either face east or north, and not under any circumstances should they be faced either west or south. Perhaps some species of parrots may be hardy enough to stand up to these conditions, but with finches I feel that little will be gained from, and subjected continually to harsh conditions they become dejected and show little interest in breeding activities.

For Gouldians the box type cage is ideal, but they should definitely be no less than four feet six inches<sup>1</sup> (1.4m) in depth. Cages up to six feet (1.8m) in depth are ideal, and the height of these should be six feet (1.8m) or more room. The length of these is important, and if they are too long they become draughty, and their value is greatly decreased. Box type approximately wrong five feet (1.5m) deep, six feet wide and anything up to seven feet (2.13m) high are ideal room.

The top portion of the front should be covered with for at least eighteen inches (45cm) or even a little more; this protects the birds, and if camping facilities, are placed well to the back and not lower than this covered portion, then they will receive the full benefit of this type of cage. Added to this, and with little extra cost, further protection will be given the birds if the ceiling is lined with either plywood or some other suitable material.

If a flight is desired a cage of similar dimensions can be utilised as a

<sup>1</sup>as this article was written prior to the introduction of metric measurement, metric sizes have been added in brackets.

shelter, and added to this a flight of approximately six feet (1.8m) in length will be ideal. Further additions should be a veranda approximately eighteen inches and one (45cm) in width extended from the front of the shelter towards the front of the flight, and both sides of the flight brushed in to prevent choppy winds from penetrating their shelter quarters.

This type of cage is very comfortable, and the draught at any time is practically non-existent. A cage of this size will accommodate up to five pairs of Gouldians, and will permit the spreading of nesting facilities in a manner suited to the birds. If the veranda is included as suggested, it will be possible to hang several logs or nest boxes under this, which no doubt will be appreciated by some pairs.

Nesting facilities in the form of logs or nest boxes are optional, and provided these are of suitable dimensions, little difficulty will be experienced to encourage them to use in either. Logs should be approximately twelve inches (30cm) in length, and three or four inches (7.5–10cm) in diameter, with either a side or front entrance provided. Boxes of a size similar to those used for budgie breeding are ideal and an excellent substitute for logs. At least half as many more nest boxes or logs as pairs housed should be provided to allow the birds to make a satisfactory choice.

Nesting facilities should be conveniently placed to allow the birds easy access, particularly when nest building is in progress, and provided these are spread out suitably to prevent a little squabbling that takes place occasionally, they soon settled down to carry on in the nesting site of their choice. Nesting material should consist of short pieces of dry grass, reasonably fine in texture, and an abundance of this. It is always advisable to shape up a nest in the log or box before it is placed in position, as quite often the hens will commence laying before the male has had an opportunity to build a nest, and should this happen they usually lay on the bare wood and in due course the nest is built and the eggs are covered with nesting material.

It is most important that every effort is made to procure young from the first eggs laid, so that these when hatched and the young reared to maturity will eventually be well over nine months old when the next season is due to commence. Added to this fertility is usually high at the beginning of this season.

Reverting back to the nest building, their choice of material is quite a process and each time they decide to carry some to their nest, it is a beak full, and is done by the male, and as mentioned earlier if an abundance is available they appear to be more eager to complete the task of nest

building.

I have found that the addition of an extra male to about four pairs of Gouldians will give excellent results. This has a tendency to overcome that problem of choice of partners. It is quite possible with a even pairs that an odd bird may not respond to the choice of man-made pairs, and with the addition of the extra male prospects a much better and the hens will have little time to go on lazy. Soon after nesting has commenced the birds settled down to incubation, usually after two or three eggs have been laid, and the period of incubation is twelve days. Clutches of eggs vary and anything up to six and seven is not unusual. The birds sit well and incubation duties are carried out by both birds during the day and towards evening the Hen returns to carry on for the night. A further three weeks elapses before the young are ready to leave the nest, and following this in approximately another three weeks they become independent of the parents.

On becoming independent I have for years removed the young to a holding cage, and a holding cage that provides the comfort they require, being cosy and draught-free. In this they are held until they are fully moulted and ready to pair up will. This I contend and is the first essential if it is when desired to hold the birds, and even in the days prior to the introduction of antibiotics this method was instrumental in keeping down to a minimum the mortality that many were experiencing. I did on occasions resort to the use of Parish's Chemical Food<sup>1</sup>, and possibly this assisted to overcome this adversity. However, since antibiotics have become available this task has become much easier, and losses reduced to a very low percentage. I recommend the use of these immediately the winter commences, and although some fanciers prefer to mix some with seed diet (*sic*) I have always supplied this with their drinking water. The method I have used is easy to apply, and I feel is most effective and accordingly when the birds are mature they are robust and well prepared for their breeding season. This consists of Ovadol<sup>1</sup> in the water once a week as directed by the manufacturers, and Terramycin<sup>2</sup> also in the water, and this as directed is supplied once a fortnight.

In reference to Ovadol, this is quite effective if supplied mixed in the seed diet, but in the event of some birds not being keen on seed soaking in this, little will be gained and certainly no benefit will be derived. In addition to this they are given a regular supply of cuttlefish, and of course any seeding grasses that are available. Eggshells and shell grit are also supplied, and this really is relished by them. All this does involve a little extra work,

<sup>1</sup> probably no longer available.

<sup>2</sup> it is now recognised that the regular use of antibiotics results in an immunity build up.

generally it is well worth the extra trouble, and most certainly rewarding when results at the end of the season comprise birds that have survived the mortality nightmare.

Gouldians also very fond of iodised salt, or if this not available rock salt will be most beneficial to them. In addition to this a lump of lime mortar is of great value to them, and is placed in a convenient place will keep them occupied quite frequently breaking small pieces which in turn will help their digestion and supply their system with proteins vital to their health.

Some fanciers might have difficulty in procuring iodised salt or rock salt, and if this is the case there is a product available that contains many trace elements that are beneficial to the Gouldian. This product is Boots "Mindif Block"<sup>1</sup>, and is a little smaller than a brick weighing four and a half pounds (2.04kg), and the cost is very little. This has been used by a number of fanciers, supplied in a crushed form and usually placed in a small dish so that the birds can partake of this whenever they wish. Other species of birds also take a little of this, but generally not to the extent of the Gouldian.

This generally covers the requirements for this species of finch, the basic essentials for housing, breeding, and the care of young during the critical stage of development. However, climatic conditions in some areas may make it necessary for added precaution, and in this respect it can be accepted that the Gouldian will really appreciate added comfort. For instance it might be considered that even box type cages are a risk. If that is so it is quite possible to breed these finches in cages similar to those used for budgie breedings (*sic*), but of course this limits them to one pair to a cage. Here again, if it is considered this type of breeding client would serve to overcome adversities, some thought must be given to comfort, and by this I mean to point out it would be futile to hang a cage of this type out in the open; it would need to be kept in a well lighted bird room.

However, whether it is a box type cage, small flight type cage or aviary, the main features to be considered are housing, with the extra care to ensure draught-proofing, and the care of the young during the period of their development. Having achieved this the progeny that are reared are usually good strong and healthy birds that the most eager to go to nest when the season is due. One point I may have omitted is that in all my experiences with this finch I have obtained best results breeding in colony, and this by excluding all other species of birds from their quarters, in which conditions they appear to be more contented, which means a lot.

Reprinted from Bird Keeping In Australia, Volume 7, No. 1, January 1964

<sup>1</sup> probably no longer available.