

# CARE AND MANAGEMENT OF AUSTRALIAN SEED-EATING FINCHES

## #2 THE BLACK-THROATED FINCH

*Poephila cincta cincta*

By Eric Baxter

Known as the Parson Finch, and rarely referred to as the Black-throated, the former name has more or less been generally accepted in much the same manner as Diggles to identify the black-rumped Black-throated Finch (*P. c. atropygialis* Ed.). The Parson for many years has been a firm favourite with aviculturists, and results obtained have in most instances been well above average, in fact quite prolific.

Occasionally a report comes to hand quoting them as a little pugnacious, and causing some trouble but generally this is attributable to lack of space when at nesting time they are merely concerned to guard zealously the area they have selected for their nesting site. Should the aviary be of large dimensions, and providing site facilities are spread well the entire area of the aviary, then very rarely will squabbling be prolonged, probably in most instances just a case of chasing an intruder for a brief period after having ventured too close to their chosen site.

This habit applies not only to the Parson, under conditions not suited to them; many other species of finches will react in much the same manner if they are sharing quarters that are restricted, and perhaps in some instances overstocked.

However, it is not a problem that warrants excluding them from a mixed collection, and although in some instances it may be necessary to refrain from housing some of the timid species with them, it is quite possible after selecting species that match their aggressive nature to overcome this problem. Concentration on providing nesting facilities that are spread over the greater portion of the aviary will assist most of all in this regard.

The distribution of this finch extends from north-western New South Wales to areas in Queensland, and their habitats are confined to grassland areas in these regions. Quite frequently they have been reported as being seen in large numbers, and it is quite possible some flocks are in close proximity to the areas frequented by the Diggles, or black-tailed Black-throated finch, as occasionally Parsons are available<sup>1</sup> that feature a rump colouring not completely white, being reduced considerably by the black that is a feature of the Diggles.

This apparently applies to the birds of each form that inhabit the fringe areas in much the same manner as the Long-tailed Grassfinch and the Hecks finch, in which instance they produce birds of an intermediate form, but retaining all the body colouring characteristics in each form, but featuring a beak colouring that suggests the presence of both forms in the one area. However, in the case of the Parson this appears to be confined to areas in the north of Queensland, which greatly reduces the possibility of any large scale infiltration of both forms.

<sup>1</sup>when this article was originally written wild trapped Black-throated Finches were still available.

Although they lack bright colours they are still an attractive bird, and the chocolate brown on the back of the wings is most conspicuous. This blends softly with the silvery-grey colouring on the head, and the slightly lighter chocolate body colouring. Black flank markings extending from the upper portion of the rump are a prominent feature on these birds. The upper rump is a dull black, the remainder of the rump white, and the tail feathers are black. Throat patches are black, and the beaks of both sexes are black.

To sex these birds is not a difficult task; throat patches, head colouring and flank patches, the variations of which serve to identify the sexes<sup>2</sup>, are in the case of the female slightly reduced. The throat patch is smaller and narrower, the flank markings are also narrower and do not extend so far on the abdomen, and the head a duller grey. As mentioned earlier, their habits in the aviary depend largely on the conditions provided for them, and in a very short time they will select a site either for camping purposes, or if in breeding condition, a site to carry out their parental duties. Their choice varies; some pairs will prefer to nest in logs or nest boxes, others will select a site in either brush, shrubs or tall growing grasses. Height of the site also varies, and this may be anything from about four feet (122cm) to the highest possible position in the aviary.

Their nest when constructed is a bulky structure and consists of coarse dry grass for outer construction lined with finer grass and feathers. This is a domed shaped structure with aside entrance, from which long pieces of grass trail, serving as a platform. In most instances freshly liberated birds prefer to build their own camping site, and this will be done even though they may not be ready to commence nesting. Very rarely will they take over an old site vacated by other birds.

Egg laying commences soon after the nest is completed, and clutches vary from four to seven eggs. Incubation usually commences after two or three eggs have been laid, and this is shared by both birds. In carrying out these duties they sit well, and unless disturbed accidentally they do not flush easily. Should they be flushed they soon return to their nest when the aviary is vacated. Incubation takes approximately twelve days, and another twenty-one days elapse before the young leave the nest.

Feeding is not a great problem, as they readily take to white ants, and also mealworms, and possibly the best results will be obtained if this type of food is included in their diet. White ants<sup>3</sup> fed morning and late afternoon, and mealworms fed during the day will meet their requirements. However, mealworms should be fed in limited quantities, definitely no more than six per bird per day. These fed in larger quantities can be harmful; in fact it can be accepted that they will harm the birds if overdone in feeding. They appear to develop a special taste for them, and once having acquired this they neglect to eat sufficient seed to balance their diet, and eventually lose condition which in turn may cause them to abandon a nest of almost fully fledged youngsters.

<sup>2</sup>another method is to compare the under-side of the lower mandible shape. See illustration on page 15. Ed.

<sup>3</sup>these days fly pupae could be substituted for the white ants. Ed.

Seeding grasses will always be relished, and these are equally as important as the live feed. The food values of all seeding grasses in a semi-ripe condition are very high, and with the addition of this good healthy and robust youngsters will leave the nest.

The supply of shell grit and cuttlefish will also be appreciated, and the usual seed mixture supplied to all other species of finches will meet their requirements.

Generally the young birds on leaving the nest are a vigorous type of bird, and are inclined to fly around in a timid manner, with no sense of direction, but after a few days they commence to settle down. However, once they have become accustomed to their surroundings they are quite at home, and the parent birds have little difficulty in settling them in a camping site each night.

In approximately three weeks they become independent of the parents, and after about another month they can be transferred to a holding cage. Transferring them to a holding cage is recommended, as very often the parent birds will go to nest again, in which case the young birds will be a source of annoyance to them, and results obtained from a second nesting may be down considerably. When transferring the young birds to a holding cage facilities should be available for them to camp in at night. If only perching accommodation is available, and they are forced to camp on these night after night, they will not be happy, and this could result in losses.

The young birds, on leaving the nest, are a dull brown colour, with blurry bib markings, which at this stage give no definite indication of their sex, and the beaks are black.

The Parson will hybridise quite readily with the Black Heart and Hecks (yellow and red-beaked Long-tailed Finches), and for that reason they should not be housed in an aviary with either of the latter two species. The progeny of these will, in most instances, resemble the Parson finch, but eventually they will grow short pin tail feathers about an inch (2.5cm) in length, which is not characteristic of the Parson, nor is it a semblance of the beautiful pin tail the Black Heart or Hecks feature.

The housing of the Parson and Diggles [together] should also be avoided; the result will, in most instances, be similar to that mentioned earlier in regard to the birds procured in the fringe areas of each form. They have also been known to hybridise with the Masked finch, so with these tendencies to hybridise, and the little value hybrids carry in the propagation of species, no great purpose will be achieved if they are encouraged along these lines.

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