I well remember the time in 1969 when my grandmother gave me a copy of “Australian Finches” by Klaus Immelmann for my 15th birthday. That book, with so much detail on each species, played a big part in stimulating my interest in finches and it was read and re-read many times over the years. I still have it.

Since then we have had many excellent avicultural texts, but this magnificent book by Joseph Forshaw and Mark Shephard with illustrations by Tony Pridham is the first since Immelmann to deal extensively with Australia’s unique fauna of grassfinches and is very likely to become a treasure for anyone captivated by our finches in the wild or in aviculture.

Joseph Forshaw is one of Australia’s foremost ornithologists and well known author of many bird books (Australian Parrots, Parrots of the World, Kingfishers and Related Birds, Trogons). As he notes in the Preface it was childhood experiences with finches which first stimulated his passion for birds and so this volume has been a long time coming. Forshaw’s books are characterised by an amazing attention to detail and typically become the definitive text on a group, as this one no doubt will. Mark Shephard has had a lifelong interest in Australian birds (notably parrots and finches) and in conservation, and is the well known author of the acclaimed “Aviculture in Australia–Keeping and Breeding Aviary Birds”. Third member of the team, Tony Pridham, is one of Australia’s leading painters of birds and for this project his aim was to see every species and subspecies of Australian finches in the field, so that each species was studied and depicted in its natural habitat. The end result is outstanding.

This large format book of 318 pages is beautifully produced by CSIRO Publishing but it is the detail of the text by Forshaw and Shephard and the wonderful illustrations by Pridham, that are most impressive. The layout features an extended Introduction in which we learn the latest on the systematics of grassfinches, and an overview of distribution and habitat preferences, movements and feeding, courtship and breeding behaviour, and the growing
importance of conservation of several wild populations. Following the introduction is a valuable 24 pages by Mark Shephard in which he provides a detailed overview of Australian Grassfinches in Aviculture, with generic information on housing, breeding, nutrition, health and ailments and some interesting historical detail on past episodes of extensive trapping for the avicultural trade (indeed I well remember the spectacle when stocks of hundreds of trapped finches arrived at my local dealer, Better Birds, in Sydney!). He also provides a perspective on changing values and abundance of each species in aviculture based on an almost forensic review of well known avicultural magazines.

The main part of the book then begins and works through each of the 18 species commencing with the Painted finch (*Emblema picta*) and ending with distinctive Pictorella Mannikin (*Heteromunia pectoralis*). For each species Forshaw provides a morphological description, an account of taxonomic relationships and history with full coverage of recognised subspecies, distribution and basic biology, together with an historical account of each species, drawing on extensive literature to give a sense of the changing abundance of each species in the wild. Along the way he brings out some fascinating anecdotes and records. For example, the first descriptions of several Australian finches by John Gould in the 1830s were based on specimens collected during the third voyage of the Beagle, with the Pictorella described from two specimens procured from “the north-western coast of Australia” (not a very specific locality for a Type specimen). The book also captures the early paintings of convict Thomas Watling of the “White Headed Finch” (Diamond Firetail) which was common around the early settlement at Sydney Cove and notes comments from Gould in 1865 that the Black-throated finch was “tolerably abundant” on the Liverpool Plains and the drier country to the north-west – areas from which they are now unfortunately completely gone. Another snippet is that the White-eared Masked Finch was first discovered during the epic Leichardt Expedition when a specimen was collected in 1845 on the Lynd River by John Gilbert, the famous naturalist. For me these historical items add so much depth to the book.

For each species, Mark Shephard then provides a specific avicultural account covering current status, housing, compatibility, feeding, breeding and mutations. He draws extensively on the avicultural literature throughout and provides numerous details that will be of benefit to aviculturists. Indeed the bibliography is extensive and provides access to all the literature, including many references to the work of Dr. Richard Zann to whose memory the book is dedicated.

A unique feature of this book is that all the illustrations are full-colour paintings or line drawings - there are no photographs. This feature gives the book a distinct artistic quality, and the quality of Pridham’s colour plates for each species are a joy. The magnificent depiction on
the front dust jacket of Gouldians, Pictorellas and a Yellow-rump at water merely whets the appetite for the range of high quality paintings within. Of course we will all have our favourites. Mine are the illustrations of Diamond Firetails on a fence, a pair of Black-throats allopreening and of course the group of Pictorellas, shown with what looks like flowering Gossypium austral. To my mind only one colour plate doesn’t quite capture the form and character of the species, but this is such a small fault that I won’t expand on the point.

On the inside dust jacket is a stunning colour plate which includes a Crimson Finch, Gouldian, Zebra, Long-tailed, Double-bar, Chestnut-breasted, Blackthroat and a Masked and enigmatically in the centre is a Java Sparrow. Indeed the book includes coverage not only of the Java Sparrow, but also the White-headed Munia and Black-headed Munia. While some reviewers have commented on the inclusion of these species as a fault, they clearly have not appreciated Joe Forshaw’s thoroughness and his explanation on page xi of the Preface that these species do in fact occur on Australian territories (Java Sparrows on Christmas Island), or have verified records from Australia (the nuns). So they are included for completeness.

Overall this book will become the authoritative text on Australian grassfinches and is a must for the bookshelf of any serious finch enthusiast. It is excellently written, beautifully illustrated, and is a book you will delve into regularly. While it is expensive, I would view its acquisition as an investment for life, not just a book purchase. Believe me it is worth every cent.

Copies of Grassfinches in Australia can be ordered through our Book Steward
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November 2012