

In Days of Yore

Until comparatively recently birds were mainly kept as pets, or for their beauty. Little effort was made to breed them, and husbandry methods were, by today's standards rudimentary, but as the following shows early fanciers were keen observers of the birds they kept.

The following article is taken from "*THE NATURAL HISTORY OF CAGE BIRDS*",
by J.M. Bechstein M.D. - 3rd edition, 1812.

The Amandava

Frigilla amandava

(Now known as the Red Avadavat or Strawberry Finch, *Amandava amandava*)

"This beautiful little bird, which is brought to Europe in great numbers from Bengal, Java, Malacca, and other tropical countries of Asia, is only four inches long, of which the tail measures one and a third. Most ornithologists class it with the sparrows, but it seems to me that it belongs rather to the grosbeaks. (It is now belongs to the Munia family.) Its beak is short and thick, being only four lines in length, and the diameter at the base three. Its colour is deep bright red; the iris is also red; the feet are six lines in height, and of a pale flesh colour; in the male the head and under parts of the body are of a fiery red, the upper part of a dark grey, but the feathers have a broad red edge, so that this colour seems to prevail; thus the feathers on the rump make it appear of a brilliant orange, though, like the belly, it is properly black; the feathers of the back, tail, sides of the breast, the wing-coverts, hinder quill-feathers and both tail-coverts, are terminated at the tip with shining white spots, which are largest on the hinder quill-feathers, and large wing-coverts, the colour of which is otherwise black.

The female is one third smaller than the male; part of the upper mandible is black; the head and upper part of the body, including the wing-coverts, are a dark ash-colour; the feathers on the rump have only an orange edge, with a light tip; the cheeks are of a light grey; the under part of the body is pale sulphur, the pen-feathers (sic) blackish; the greater and lesser wing-coverts are finely speckled with white; the tips of the tail-feathers are greyish white.

The male varies in its colours for several years before it permanently acquires those above described; it may be seen with the back grey, slightly

tinted with red, the belly black, speckled with yellow; others with the back reddish grey, spotted with bright red, and the belly of a sulphur yellow, with black rings, and more or less speckled, &c.

Observations. — *These birds are as sociable as waxbills; if there should be twenty or thirty in the same cage, they perch close against one another on the same perch; and, what is more singular they never sing together, but one after another, the rest keeping quite silent to listen to the songster. Their song resembles that of the hay bird^{*}, and continues through the winter. The females do not sing; those are wrong who think the contrary. They are very active, often bowing and spreading their tail like a fan. In their native country their food consists of different seeds, particularly millet; this also given in the cage, as well as canary seed. They eat and drink a great deal. They will live from six to ten years."*

* My research revealed this to be the Willow Warbler, a very common and widespread leaf warbler which breeds throughout northern and temperate Europe and Asia. At the time Dr. Bechstein's book was published this bird was classified as *Sylvia trochilus*. However, it is now known as *Phylloscopus trochilus*. Ed.
