

THE AFRICAN FIREFINCH

by John Williams

Introduction

The species of Fire-finch which is held in Australian collections is the Red-billed Fire-finch, (*Lagonosticta senegala*). This nominate form comes from Senegal in Western Africa, down to Sierra Leone and eastwards to Nigeria. There are at least another five races recognised, which extends the range of this finch to almost the whole of the African continent.

Distribution and Habit

D. Goodwin, in his marvelous work 'Estrildid finches of the World', reports that the firefinch appears to inhabit dry areas where there is abundant cover with surface water. They are generally found in pairs or small flocks and usually in the vicinity of villages and towns, seeming to approve of mankind and his works. In fact they have often been observed feeding on spilt pieces of seed from grindstones, well within arms reach of the operator.

Common Names

In Australia this waxbill is known as the firefinch or Ruddy.

Description

It is approximately 85mm (or 3 ½ inches) long, making it one of the smallest of all the finches we now keep in Australia.

Male: The general colour is a crimson red, tending to a light brown tinged with red on the back and top of the head. The wings are slightly darker brown. The rump, upper tail coverts and most of the tail are a deeper red. The sides of the breast are spotted with small white spots, varying in individuals. The red of the chest merges into a light brown on the belly. The beak is pink through to red, the brown eyes have a yellow, conspicuous rim and the legs are flesh coloured.

Female: The female lacks the crimson colouring of the male, except for the rump and tail and a stripe from the bill back to and over the eye. Her general body colour is shades of light brown. The white spots on the sides of the breast are usually more extensive than the male, both in number and size.

Immature: The young on fledging are similar in colour to the hen but lack any white spots and red on the face. The bill is black. Birds can be sexed when the first white spots appear on the hen and a red feather or two appears on the chest of the young cocks. The white spots on the cocks appear to come after those of the hens.

Avicultural Notes:

The firefinch should be purchased and the pair established as soon as the birds can be sexed. It is a bird that will do well in a mixed collection of non-aggressive finches, whether kept as a single pair or in colony. There would seem to be no danger of cross-breeding in such a collection, although I have observed cock birds when housed without hens attempt to mate with other species, and in particular newly fledged young. In its wild state, firefinches are reported to roost in shrubs or trees and sometimes in buildings, but not in old or disused nests. This roosting habit in captivity may be due to weather extremes. Courtship is commenced by the cock holding a feather or piece of grass in his bill and approaching the female. He angles his tail towards her and bobs up and down several times, then offers the object with a deep bow. Copulation may follow the female soliciting with quivering tail. Sometimes copulation is attempted without any ritual display and this can especially be seen if you introduce a strange hen to an aviary with single cock birds or even a mated pair. Nesting is generally in brush but they will build in cane baskets, shrubs, creepers or grass clumps. The round nest has a side entrance without the entrance tube constructed by some other finches. Small grasses and coconut fibre make up most of the nest and feathers are used extensively for lining. An interesting thing about the nest is that when a sitting bird leaves, a feather blocks the entrance so that observation inside can only be done by moving it aside. Normally three or four eggs are laid and are incubated by both birds for 11-12 days. Young fledge at 18 days, but sometimes they will leave the nest early — this can usually be attributed to an inquisitive aviculturist. If this happens you will probably need to bring them inside just before dusk and release them early in the morning as it is unlikely they will remain in the nest if returned. Firefinches usually prove to be good parents and strong, healthy young birds can be expected.

Livefood is not necessary for raising young, although they will consume termites, gents and small mealworms when offered. M. Morel, in her study of this species in Senegal, found that insects made up a very small part of the diet of both adults and nestlings. Seeding grasses are also eaten, although not to the extent that the Cuban finch seems to enjoy. The cock bird has a pleasant although soft, flirting song, generally performed when a hen is absent or out of sight. Allo preening between firefinches and sometimes other species of small finches occurs in the aviary. The small seeds commonly supplied to finches by Australian aviculturists (pannicum, millets, canary seed) are suitable for firefinches. In addition I provide a piece of rock salt, charcoal, shellgrit and cuttlefish at all times and various seeding grasses, silver beet and apple, depending on the availability at the time.

General:

Firefinches are one of the inexpensive foreign birds available and have been well established in aviaries. Care should be taken with hens which may suffer from eggbinding — daily observation will pick a hen so afflicted as she will be fluffed up on the ground and easily caught. The red-billed firefinch is one of a number of firefinches that inhabit the African continent. For an excellent description of these additional firefinches I would recommend you read D. Goodwin's book "Estrildid finches of the World". I believe some of these other species were available in Australia before the import ban but I am unsure if they have survived the years since.

References:

1. Goodwin D., 'Estrildid finches of the World', 1982.
2. Boosey E. J., 'Foreign Bird Keeping', 1956.
3. Queensland Finch Society, 'Finch Breeder's Handbook', 1982.

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