

# **THE AFRICAN FIRE FINCH**

## *Lagonosticta senegala*

The Ruddy Waxbill or African Fire Finch is, as its name suggests, native of Africa where it is known as the Red-billed Fire-finch. It is one of the commonest and most familiar birds of the Ethiopian Region, usually being very tame and seemingly preferring to live near human habitations.

I am sure that it is partly this tameness and tolerance towards humans that make this charming little finch so popular with Aviculturists. The fact that it is an attractive and interesting species is an added advantage.



These birds are less than four inches long and their compactness and neatness emphasises their smallness. The male is dark rose-red over much of the head and body and on the rump and tail. The centre of the tail is black, and the red shades in to pale brown on the belly and to darker brown on the back. There are a few tiny white spots on the breast but these are hard to see from a distance. The female is dull brown, with a little of the male's reddish colouring in front of the eyes and on the tail. Both male and female have dark reddish beaks. They tend to prefer to feed on the ground and appear very short legged seeming to shuffle about on the ground, as they pick up small seeds or occasionally minute insects, if these are available. White ants are a great favourite with African fires and they are always the first of our finches to alight on the termite cakes, and gobble up

the little devils, poking their beaks deep into the holes to gain each tasty morsel. A tray of compost is constantly moistened and turned over each morning, and even before two paces have been taken the Fires are there in a group excitedly picking up goodies too small for the human eye to see. They like to have thick cover nearby, to which they can retreat when they are disturbed. They have no song, but when they fly up they often give a double tweeting call note.

The nest is an untidy ball of fine dry grass, rags or fibrous material densely lined with feathers, and is constructed by both male and female. It is usually placed low down in thick shrubs or dense growth provided along the south or east side aviary wall, and often a nest box or small hollow log will be used. However, in our aviary the favourite site has repeatedly been in a small hole, about 30" up in an artificial "tree trunk" made of scrub and paperbark purposely tied round one of the upright pipe supports. This was done not only to help camouflage the pipe support, giving a more natural appearance, but to offer a suitable nest site. The Fires found it, liked it, and have used it successfully ever since. Although we thus know the location of their nest it is not always easy to keep track of their breeding cycle, as not only do they tend to be rather secretive in their visits to the nest, but we notice that each bird blocks the entrance hole with feathers from the lining when leaving the nest. This makes our inspection for possible eggs difficult. However it seems that between four and six eggs are usually laid, and both birds take part in incubating them. The incubation period is usually twelve or thirteen days and when the young hatch, both birds again take part in feeding them. The young call loudly for food, and it is at this time that we make sure there is a constant supply of termites in order that the youngsters get all the nourishment they need.

The young leave the nest anywhere between seventeen and twenty-one days and soon find their way around the aviary their tiny white cheek spots at each side of the gape showing prominently at this stage. Weaning time varies from one to two weeks on average after the young have left the nest, and the whole family group will frequently visit the water vessel for a splash and a bathe, especially in the hot weather.

African fires are probably the best breeders in the Waxbill family, so if you've got them in your aviary, why not give them a go, as they mix well with most other finches.

Reprinted from "**Bird Keeping in Australia**", March 1982