

BREEDING RED-FACED PARROTFINCHES

By "Denise"



Normal Red-faced Parrotfinch
Photo: Trisha Shears

I started to breed Red-faced Parrotfinches, *Erythrura psittacea*, in 2007. I obtained two pairs, one pair of Sea-greens along with a heavily pied Red-face cock and a normal Red-faced hen. A small 3m by



Pied Red-faced Parrotfinch

1.5m aviary was constructed along side my husband's bird-room, which is a small converted metal shed. The aviary was planted out with seedling grass and miniature bamboo with branches of various bushes surrounding the wooden breeding boxes that were hanging from the sidewalls.

Their seed and mineralised grit was placed in an old birdbath to get it off the ground. I put in an automatic waterer as well as a large, shallow ceramic saucer that was placed on a pot so the birds could bathe. I have found they love bathing throughout the day. They are very social birds and when one takes a bath they all join in. They bathe for quite a long time, four or five minutes not being unusual. They are just so fascinating to watch.

To try and make the aviary vermin proof the floor was netted over; also a safety door was a must for these fast flying energetic little birds. A word of warning here, never leave buckets, pot plants *etc.*, in the safety door enclosure. Unfortunately I lost one of my hens due to her flying behind a pot plant. As I opened the door the bird flew out to a nearby Hibiscus bush. In no time she quickly disappeared into the blue sky never to be seen again. The safety door enclosure was quickly emptied, it was a lesson well learnt.



The essential safety door

Before going on with my successful breeding of the Red-faced Parrotfinch I first must mention some of the problems I had early in the season. After replacing the escaped hen with another bird tragedy struck. I was using hessian and coconut-fibre for the birds nesting material. I was already aware that the coconut-fibre could be dangerous if too long so I cut up the fibre with a pair of scissors. Then one early morning while checking my birds I found the hen hanging from a long piece of coconut-fibre right outside the entrance to the nest. Sadly the bird was dead. I never used coconut-fibre again. I use hessian cut into small 7.5cm (3") squares. I then tease out the strands; this mixed with dried grasses and white feathers from our local bird dealer is the material used to make their nests.

I have found that they make a two-chambered nest with the eggs or young in the bottom chamber and the top chamber is used for the adult birds to keep an eye out when they have young. One mistake I did make however was that during the very hot summer of 2007 the boxes were placed too high. With days over 40 degrees the nest became too hot and I lost one round of young. I quickly realised the problem and lowered them. My nest boxes have a lid on top that can easily be opened. I reconstructed the nest so it was not so dense at the top and during the day I left the lid half opened so as the young inside could cool down a little. The birds did not mind me sorting out their nests. Normally I would make weekly inspections but during this time I checked them every day.



"Food please Mum!"

The next problem I had was ants. On one hot afternoon with the temperature hovering over 40 degrees, while giving them fresh water I noticed a trail of ants leading into the aviary. On checking the young in one of the nest boxes to my horror I found the young infested with small ants. Although I cleaned them up and reconstructed the nest I lost all of the young in the nest. Three fat little partly feathered babies bitten to death. Yuck! I immediately declared war on ants. I bought a large bottle of ant-rid powder and sprinkled it around the aviary and over every ant in the area. I then sprayed around the perimeter of the aviary and nest boxes with an insect surface spray. I have not had an ant problem since. I regularly still check for ants every day, I never want to see a sight like that again.

When my finches have babies I supplement their seed with an egg-food mix made from Farex six-month baby formula mixed with breadcrumbs from a multi grain loaf as well as a good vitamin powder. This is fed with a high-grade seed that has been placed in the micro-wave for six minutes. Another essential is cucumber. My birds seem to be addicted to it. When they have young they are fed cucumber twice a day.



Hand-feeding the young

As I have mentioned before my breeding of the Parrot finch has not always gone as expected. After the ant incident my pied/normal pair did not feed their young for a couple of days. With my daily inspections I realised what was happening and I hand fed the nestlings three or four times a day. I fed them from the nest as the parent birds were still keeping them warm. I made a paste using whole eggs, shell and all, mixed with Heinz high-protein multi-grain mix, (as used for feeding babies) a



"Open wide"

a vitamin supplement made for birds. This mixture was made runny by adding water then it was placed in a syringe that I obtained from the local chemist. (The syringe did not have a needle attached). I place the tiny young in my hand and slowly topped up their empty crops. It was a fiddly job but within two days the parents were back feeding their young. They managed to rear the three nestlings without any further problems. I was so proud of myself, having a hand in saving these beautiful little birds.



The end result...full crops and satisfied

With all the ups and downs of the season, I ended up with eight sea-green and seven split-pied young. Not bad for my first season, if I do say so myself. I just love these fast flying little birds they have such a personality. I now have another two outdoor aviaries and I intend to breed more of these splendid little birds. I hope this article can help others who want to keep this special little finch.

All photos, except normal Red-faced, by "Denise"

In Days of Yore

The keeping of birds is a centuries old pastime, and of course, the treating of sick birds has been practiced ever since the first cage-bird became ill. The following are some remedies from the early 19th century.

Consumption, or Decline

"This disorder may be known by the extreme thinness of the breast, the swelling of the lower part of the belly, the total loss of appetite, and similar symptoms. As a cure Dr. Handel recommends the juice of the white turnip to be given to drink instead of water."

Costiveness

"This disease may be discovered from the frequent unsuccessful endeavours of the bird to relieve itself. Aperients will be of use. If a spider does not produce the desired effect, anoint the vent of the bird with the head of a pin steeped in linseed oil; this sort of clyster generally succeeds; but if the disease attacks a bird that eats meal-worms, one of these, bruised in sweet oil and saffron, is the most certain remedy, and the bird will swallow it without the least hesitation. Boiled bread and milk is generally of great use." ** (Administered orally. Ed.)

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

Neither The Society, or Editor, recommend the use of these treatments, modern avian veterinary methods are by far preferable.

R.V.C.