

# FOREIGN FINCHES

By Frank Scott

The following information refers to some of my experiences breeding some of the foreign finches that in most instances are favoured by finch fanciers. With this information, which covers their habits in the aviary, their requirements for nesting, and rearing of young, it is hoped to assist in some way, and perhaps provide an answer to adversities experienced.

Dealing with these species in alphabetical order, they comprise the species with which I have in the past obtained results, in some instances exceptionally good, and with others reasonable results that also bring along some of the troubles that we all experience from time to time. In addition to the species mentioned there are other species of foreign finches that are to be found in collections and to complete the list perhaps some other fancier who has experienced success with them maybe prepared to continue where I have left off, and in doing so provide for the less experienced at least a start in the right direction with whatever species is selected to be added to the collection.

**Aurora Finch:** These birds are ideal for housing in an open flight aviary and usually select a nesting site in brush in the open. The nest constructed is a dome-shaped structure consisting of dry grass and lined with feathers. When completed it has a side entrance. It is not a shy bird, and will tolerate a little interference with its nest, but while this is possible, it definitely pays to keep this down to a minimum with all species of finches. The incubation period is twelve days and a further three weeks elapse before the young leave the nest. Occasionally some young appear to leave a little prematurely, in which case they lack full plumage; others remain in the nest a little over three weeks and these usually emerge well developed and in excellent plumage. Live food is definitely essential if any measure of success is sought with this species. Sexing of these birds is not difficult, the cock bird being a steely blue, as against the hen which is a decided fawny grey, features which are easily detected in fully matured birds. It is possible to obtain good results from a single pair housed in an aviary, and also if they are housed two or more pairs to an aviary.

**Aberdeen Finch:** This is another finch that is suited to an open flight aviary and will select a nest site in a box or brush. I have found that they show preference for nesting boxes and for material select any type of grass, coconut fibre, leaves etc. and when this is completed it is a rough looking

structure. They are capable of laying up to eight or nine eggs in a clutch, but usually they comprise five eggs. This is another species that will stand a little interference, but it is generally accepted that this should be kept at a minimum. Their incubation period is twelve days and the usual three weeks before the young leave the nest. Sexing of these birds is very easy, the male bird having a red head, this even noticeable on young birds leaving the nest, whilst the hen is a light greyish brown all over. These birds are really gluttons for live food and will eat as much of this as it is possible to supply and yet strangely enough they will rear young without it although I do think



the percentage of young reared would be higher with birds that have access to white ants etc. It is possible to obtain good results with these birds if housed more than one pair to an aviary.

**Cuban Finch:** This very delightful and active finch is definitely a species that should be kept to one pair to an aviary or pen, and under no circumstances should they be increased in numbers. They may agree for a time but it is never possible to predict for how long and one day it is possible to find only one bird left. Once they decide to run amok it is a fight to a finish with the fittest being the only survivor. In spite of this they are a lovely little finch, always on the move uttering their chirpy shrill call. For nesting material they prefer cotton wool and coconut fibre and this in large quantities. Usually they build out in the open in brush or any site they may choose, often building more than one nest before they finally decide on a particular site. Their nest is a very cosy funnel type nest with a neat small pocket at the extreme end. They are a bird that flushes very easily, so much so that rarely are they seen leaving the nest; they are usually out and away at

the first sign of any approach in the direction of their nest, often leaving a doubt as to whether they are really serious when nesting. They usually lay clutches up to four eggs, but in most instances they comprise three, and when rearing young they will eat live food, but it is possible to rear them without as they are very partial to plain cake, and this while they are feeding young is all they require. Sexing of these birds is easy, the male featuring black on the chest, whilst the hen is without the black and has a smaller yellow collar than the male.

**Jacarini Finch:** This species which inhabits South America is a very shy bird in the aviary, until such time as they have young, and then they become very tame and will come right up to you and almost beg for mealworms. They seem to have no fear at this stage, and can be observed really well, which compensates for the period they appear to go in hiding. They build a very neat open cup-shaped nest similar to that of the Siskins, and Singers, this being constructed of cotton wool and coconut fibre, and fine pieces of dry grass. Usually their clutch comprises three eggs and after incubation the young will leave the nest when only ten to twelve days old, being very immature and unable to fly, and being content to live under a shrub or in the lower branches until such time as they are able to move around capably. In most instances they seem to rear only one young at a time, but occasionally it is possible to get a pair that will rear up to three at one nesting. The male is of a shiny navy blue, and this seen in the sun is really a beautiful colour, as against the hen which at all times is plain grey colour with a brownish suffusion, very much like a small version of a sparrow. In between seasons the male loses the brilliant sheen of navy blue and moults into drab colour very similar to that of the hen, regaining the brilliant colour as it comes into breeding condition.

**Melba Finch:** Here again we have species of finch which must be kept on their own, one pair to an aviary or cage. These birds are one of my favourites regardless of the fact that they require more attention in keeping up their supply of live food. This type of food must be kept in abundance for them, preferably white ants, which they relish and are capable of consuming in large quantities. (In this regard I agree with the writer; my estimate is that they can consume ten times more than any other finch, and will always be the first at the ant tray and the last to leave. Ed.) Their nest when completed is a dome-shaped structure built of dry grass and lined with feathers. Unfortunately, for no apparent reason they have a nasty habit of throwing out their young when they are about ten days old, this being a disheartening break to the young aviculturist. The male is a very pretty bird featuring quite a lot of red on the head, throat and chest, with stripes or bars on the front, and the back a greenish fawn. The hen is minus the red, but

has very distinct stripes across the front of her body. Both birds have a rufous red rump and tail.



**Nun Family:** In all I keep the four types that are available, namely the Black-headed, White-headed, Tri-colour and Burmese. These I find all have similar habits, and are of the easiest of foreign finches to cater for. They are most docile, and can be kept in as many pairs as the size of the aviary will permit. In addition they do not require live food; if this is available they will eat some, but generally their main diet is seed and seeding grasses, the latter being eagerly sought after and in enormous quantities when they are feeding young. I find these birds among the hardiest of finches, and they appear to stand up to extremes in weather very well in comparison to many other finches. Sexing of any of these species is very hard. With the Black-headed and Tri-coloured the best means to discern the sexes is to examine the head and beak. The hen has a narrow head, and also the beak is narrower, as against that of the male which features a broader and longer beak. The White-headed and Burmese appear to be a little easier, particularly at a distance. The head colouring is more pronounced on the male, being lighter, and in this manner they can be sexed more easily than when held in the hand or in a small cage. The Burmese is the easiest of all to sex. It is similar to the White-headed, being smaller, has a golden rump, and is slightly darker on the back and wings. The White-headed, like all of this variety, is a close-feathered bird, always looking neat with never a feather out of place. The back and wings of this species are a deep chocolate. The Black-headed is of a deep chocolate colour all over and has a black head, producing a very striking conspicuous bird. The Tri-coloured,



when viewed from the back is similar to the Black-headed, but is white on the abdomen and has black lower down around the vent. Incidentally, all these birds will cross and for this reason it is advisable to house each species separately. When nesting, the birds select sites in brush, shrubs and trees, and the material they use usually consists of dry grass and feathers if these are available but these are not essential.

**Orange Breasted Waxbill:** This is another species that can be bred in community. As a matter of fact, I think they do better this way than if kept



in single pairs. They select sites in shrubs, brush (in the latter either in the open or under cover) and use a variety of material for nest construction including coarse and fine grass, and coconut fibre. They are particularly keen on lining their nest with feathers and when it is completed, the nest is

very cosy and comfortable. This is also a bird that will do much better if fed live food; however occasionally an odd pair will rear quite a good brood if fed an abundance of seeding grasses. Sexing is not difficult as the male is brightly coloured as their name suggests, whilst the hen is minus the bright orange breast and brow.

**Red-faced Parrot-finch:** This is one of the most popular of the foreign finches, and rightly so as their colouring and manner leave little to be desired. They can be kept in single pairs, and if the aviary is large enough up to five or six pairs will agree and breed reasonably well. When nesting they seem to prefer a site that is in a secluded position in the less lighted portion of the aviary, such as in the shelter or in a nest or log. They also select sites in the thick brush which also offers some form of seclusion. In regard to nesting material they use anything they can find, and will use coarse straw, decayed leaves, cotton-wool, fibre, etc. When the nest is completed it is a large structure, very cosy and with an entrance that from near the bottom leads into the centre. The Parrot-finch is a bird that does not require live food, and they only seem to take a little when this is available. However, they are very partial to plain cake and are always the first down if seeding grasses are supplied. Sexing of these birds is not an easy task but it is generally accepted that the red on the male extends beyond the eye and that they also have a larger head. Also after a while it is possible to discern the sexes by observing their characteristics; as the male usually utters a trilly call, but even with careful observations it is possible to make mistakes.

**Blue-faced Parrot-finch:** This is similar in habits to that of the Red-faced, but if anything a little shyer when nesting. They appear to be easier to breed, but on the other hand are a little harder to hold as they seem to be more susceptible to ailments than the Red-faced.

**Rufous-backed Mannikin:** This is a very neat little bird and quite conspicuous, featuring a black head, brown back, white front and a speckled strip on the side of the body which extends from the head to the tail. They are extremely hard to sex, and the more one endeavours to sex them, the more difficult the task becomes. I find the easiest way to do this is to let them work it out for themselves, and just change them around until you have pairs, or if possible run a number of birds together, as they do well in community. These birds are fond of live food, but it is possible to rear young without supplying this type of food. Their nest is usually constructed of dry grass with a few feathers added.



**Bronzewing Mannikin:** Similar in habits is similar to that of the Rufous-backed. The colouring of this bird is not quite so conspicuous; it lacks the spots down the sides, and has the bronze colouring in the wing. They also appear to be more spiteful than the Rufous-backed.

**Strawberry Finch:** I think most aviculturists know this bird by sight, and when in full colour the male is a beautiful little finch featuring a maroon-coloured body flecked with white spots, whilst the hen, although not so bright, is still a very pretty little bird. When the male is out of colour (and this occurs normally in between each season) it can be sexed by observing the white spots on the sides of its tail. These can also be noticed when they first came into colour, and this lends towards the sexing of young birds. When selecting sites they mostly prefer these in dry brush, and outside. Nesting material usually consists of dry, coarse grass, coconut fibre and the usual white feathers. They have a very good habit of taking their young back into a nest at night after they have had a full day of flying around. These birds need live food, and I think they prefer mealworms to white-ants, particularly if small mealworms are fed to them. The Strawberry finch is also a species that does well when bred in community, and is similar in habits to that of the Orange-breasted Waxbill; in fact they will readily cross if mixed. There are two species, the Bombay and the Chinese, the Bombay being the larger, whilst the Chinese is slightly brighter red. The hen of this species has more yellow on the body: than the Bombay variety, which is a cream colour on the body.

**Singing Finches:** These finches are an asset to any collection. The male, which is a beautiful songster, features a bright yellow in colour on the body, and darker markings on the back and head which gives it a striking appearance. Provided the aviary is large it is possible to run several pairs, but generally they do much better if housed as single pairs to an aviary. The nest this species builds is a cup-shaped nest constructed with cotton-wool and fibre, the latter usually as a neat lining. They like to help themselves to material placed in a fork of a tree or shrub, from where they will take small pieces and gradually build their nest. The two main varieties kept here are the Green Singer which is sexed by observing the throat colouring (the hen has a dark bar across this, whilst the male is pure yellow), and the other variety, the Mozambique, which can be sexed by observing throat colouring. The hen features a small white mark close up under her beak, and the male is a brighter yellow. The white mark on the hen in most instances can only be observed if the bird is held in the hand, and sex can only be ascertained if the birds are of mature colour. They are fond of live food when rearing young, and will take either mealworms or white ants.

There are many more species of foreign finches being kept by fans, but the species listed in this article are the species with which I've experienced my troubles and successes.

Reprinted from "**Bird Keeping in Australia**", June, July and August 1963