

THE QUAIL FINCH

Ortygospiza atricollis

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QUAIL FINCH
SKIN

In that excellent publication, "Roberts Birds of South Africa", local races within this bird's large distribution are mentioned. There seems to be many sub-species that inhabit open grasslands, near water where possible, in Senegal, southern Sudan, Ethiopia, Natal, the north-eastern Kalahari and other suitable locations.



QUAIL FINCH IN THE WILD

Australian aviculturists are fortunate to house many of the southern African Finches in their aviaries. Over the years many articles have been written in Australia about these species, but the Quail Finch seems to be one of the few exceptions, and I think its rightful position in Australian literature should be recognised.



VIOLET-EARED WAXBILL

The colouration of the adult male could not be compared with the striking colours of the male Melba Finch *Pytilia melba*, or the male Violet-eared Waxbill *Granatina granatina*, both of which occur in the same areas as the Quail Finch. However, what they display is



MELBA FINCH

earthy colours that blend with the soil, and, no doubt, the open grasslands of southern Africa.

The male's colour is made up of grey, brown, black, yellowish-buff and white. Forehead and lores black extending on to the throat; eye-ring white, with a white spot under the chin; nape and back brownish mottled grey; wings dark brown; upper breast and flanks barred black and white; lower breast yellowish-buff; short tail blackish; bill red; legs light brown. Length 10cm.

The female's colours are less pronounced with head and throat greyish-brown, and the barring on the upper-breast and flanks less bold.

My first observation of this species in captivity was in the early 1970s in a friend's aviary in an outer suburb of Adelaide. The aviary was of good size

and divided into several sections, in one of which two pair of Quail Finches were housed with other finches and two pair of Scarlet-chested Parrots *Neophema splendida*.

The approximate size of the aviary section was 9.5 m deep, 2.5m wide and 2.5m high; included in the depth was a 2.75m shelter. Planted in the open flight were Guinea Palm Grass; exotic bushy shrubs; Milo (a cereal grain) and *phalaris* spp. Most producing seeds at different times of the year.

The walls of the shelter area were hung with *Hakea* spp. (needle bush) for other species to nest or roost in. In the front section of the flight was a shallow pond, partly covered from view by small bushy shrubs.

Quail Finches spend the majority of their time on the ground, so at the back of the pond a cleared area of bare soft earth was provided, along the edge of which was a thicket of grasses and shrubs.

When the Quail Finches required a drink they would emerge slowly from beneath the thick grasses; and once in the cleared area, they would run to the water's edge (not hop like many other finches) and drink, then return to the cover of the grasses. At times, either before or after drinking, they would walk to the clear area and sun-bathe, but only if they thought no one was watching.

Another peculiarity of the species is their love of scratching in the dirt, in a similar manner to a quail. It is, therefore, advisable to have a suitable area available to meet this requirement. Quail Finches can fly, usually steeply and fast in the manner of quail, including the sudden drop to the ground.

Do they perch? Yes, they can, and do; but from my observations over several years, I found that if they know you are watching they will quickly drop into a thicket or grass.

A large feed-tray containing panicum, canary seed, white millet, niger, Japanese millet and crushed sunflower, was in the shelter. A cake mixture was in a separate container, and white ants were fed daily.



Simon Harvey

The Quail Finch was first bred in South Australia by Mr. Simon Harvey in 1935; the following is his First Breeding Report:

"The Quail Finches arrived from Africa last February, they are kept in the large flight aviary where there is a fair amount of wild oats and clover growing, it was in this grass that they nested, having built a domed nest right on the ground. Four white eggs were laid but only 2 hatched, I cannot give (the) exact period of incubation, approximately a fortnight. The young left the nest on the 23rd instant, having survived the heavy rains without

artificial protection. They were well feathered and able to fly when they left the nest. Both birds are similarly marked being dark grey with white around the eyes, they had the phosphorescent spots each side of the mouth. Feeding usual seeds, hard boiled egg, cake and insect life which was in the grass."

In summary, the Quail Finch has been fascinating to write about, in many ways it is a secretive bird that sets a challenge for the aviculturist. It likes its own company but can be kept in a group. There seems to be no spite in any way, and I imagine it would breed well under the right aviary conditions.

Reference:

- Harvey, S. 1935. The Avicultural Society of South Australia, First Breeding Report.
- Risdon, D.H.S. 1949. Quail Finches. Australian Aviculture, Vol. 3—No. 7, "Cage Birds".
- Roberts 1957 Birds of South Africa.
Revised by G.R. McLachlan PhD.
and R. Liversidge BSc.



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