

THE RED-FACED PARROT FINCH

By Bruce Dixon



In setting out to write this basically simple article I do so, on the basis that despite my searching, I could not find a volume of any nature devoted to this particular breed. Whilst they do gain mention in books written on foreign finches, I found the information, whilst valuable, does not in my opinion do justice to this magnificent little bird.

The enjoyment that I have gained in breeding the species has been invaluable, and whilst not my first choice of bird when starting off in aviculture, has possibly been instrumental in not only maintaining my interest, but making me really hungry to find out more and more about this delightful aviary character, and characters they certainly are.

This article then is not designed or written as an authoritative text on the breed, but rather as an introduction that I wish that I had received, and as such I trust that you find that it assists you.

The Red faced Parrot Finch

Latin name: *Erythrura psittacea*

Sub species: nil

Size: 115 mm

Weight: 15 grams

Origin: New Caledonia

Habitat: Open country, bordering forested areas, and at any altitude where the habitat is suitable.

Climate Base: In it's original habitat being on the same latitude as Townsville, ideally when first introduced to Australia it was more suited to areas north of Sydney but over time has adapted well to southern Australia and seems to thrive providing normal prudent precautions are taken to prevent cold winds and draughts.

Aviary Requirements: Frankly I don't think it really matters, whilst ideally they may prefer a large well planted aviary, with plenty of flight space, this should not be seen as a detriment to the new breeder with limited space availability, my original aviary was 9ft.long x 7ft wide x 8ft high and was more than adequate to cope with up to 3 pair, provision should be made at the outset to be able to install slotted tracking on the front of the aviary to slide in either perspex, or polycarb sheets during the winter months, to keep out the winds, and help in some small part to keep heat in. In talking to some breeders they have mentioned to me that in the earlier days, cooler climate breeders were plagued with the same problems with the red faced, as that faced by Gouldian breeders. Over time the breed has adapted well to cooler climates. And in my own case, being virtually on the shoreline of the coast, temperatures in the aviary get down to levels that are not comfortable for me, let alone birds, but they seem to thrive and prosper providing normal, sensible precautions, are taken to prevent direct wind contact. Prospective breeders therefore should not be intimidated however be aware that when purchasing birds, I'm more inclined to purchase from a breeder, that does not use artificial heating sources, the chances of them "hardening" to outside un-heated situations would appear to be greatly improved, and you minimize potential losses. They do however like some cover within aviary, which can be achieved by planting bushes suitable to your area, or alternatively putting up appropriate brush, which even when dry seems to provide cover adequate for their needs having said all that, give them food, water, and nesting material, and I think they would breed, and thrive in an outside "dunny" if within your aviary you have the facility to grow a seeding grass, then you are guaranteeing yourself a happy flock of parrot finches.

Colouration: As if aviculture is not challenging enough, this species is "monomorphic". In other words both sexes look the same and whilst this may lead to some consternation early in the career of the new breeder, but with time and practice, and more importantly by observation, you will be able to differentiate between the sexes, (see separate note). The body colour of the bird is green it is a green however hard to describe, light to be described as olive, I've heard it described as grass green, but for those reading this who are also gardeners, I'm more inclined to liken the green to the new foliage on a daisy bush, a really lovely usually uniform colour, the head, brow, and a predominant part of the chest area, is a beautiful crimson scarlet, this scarlet area is also carried to rump area of the bird, but instead of being the vivid crimson, tends to be more of a vermilion colour fledgling birds, tend to be of a dull olive colour. In the nest the youngsters have the most startling iridescent blue "gape" (corners of beak) no doubt there to help parent birds locate the gaping mouths of chicks, when entering the darkened nest, from the natural light of the aviary.

Visual sexing: Not easy, persevere, the fledgling young you have no hope, so don't try, everyone you speak to, or every book you read will, give you a different interpretation on how to carry out this task:

- (1) The male has a trill call, (good luck with your observations)
- (2) The male tends to be slightly larger than the female
- (3) The female tends to have a slightly rounder head
- (4) The colour of the female may be slightly duller than the male (this method is iffy depending on the time of the year) as the colour density will be dictated by the birds own condition and a host of other variables.
- (5) The secret seems to be in the eye (yours and the birds) the black line of colour that extents through the eye plumage, seems to extend back further towards the neck of the male than it does in the female
- (6) If all else fails, surgical sexing, but do yourself a favour, ask someone who knows more than you.

Breeding in captivity: Red-faces seem happy to accept any form of nesting accommodation, from a standard "Gouldian" or "budgerigar" nesting box, to a wicker or cane elongated tube, in the wild they will choose cracks in walls, holes in fences, deserted homes offer a multitude of nooks and crannies from where they will set up home.

The hen in my experience seems to be the predominant nest builder and does so with enormous vigour, moving vast quantities of nesting materials quickly and efficiently. Mine seem to show a preference for well-dried pampas grass, which is both soft and pliable, soft well-dried grass, or teased strands of hessian, cut to manageable lengths. The nest at best could be described as "squeezezy" with such an abundance of material being crammed in, you could be excused for wondering if there room for occasionally both parents, as well as newly hatched chicks.

The height of positioning the nest in the aviary, I can only speak from my own experience is between 1.5 to 1.8 metres, but again that's not to say having found a nest box they like at a lower level, that they won't accept that, and happily set up home in it. Between four and six eggs seem to constitute the lay, both parents sharing the incubation, which they do with tremendous dedication, and whilst it is not uncommon to see both of them in the open aviary, their timing in returning to the nest is impeccable.

Red faces are highly tolerant to nest inspection, but having said that I still suggest that you treat this tolerance as a privilege, and don't abuse it. As a result of your nest inspection should you find a chick or chicks with a skin colour that is darker than you would normally expect, this may indicate de-

hydration, it may suggest that you need to check your breeding diet, and may call for additional green feed, or live-food, such as mealworms or maggots. Contrary to what I have read from other breeders of the pair ceasing to brood at ten days, I have not found this to be.

Getting a good pair to start with, which is always a bit of a lottery, but if you have, that is the avicultural equivalent of winning the lottery, all of the desirable characteristics in this pair have a higher than average chance of being passed on to their progeny. For the first week, the newly fledged remain at about 90% dependent on the parents for feeding, but within that first week it will be observed, that despite the cajoling of the young, the parents go to inordinate lengths to introduce the young to the feed station, and almost guide them in the feeding procedure it is within this first week that the fledgling commences to take on the distinctive colour of the breed, whilst the juvenile colour remains pretty much the same, the tail commences to redden, and the chest feathers become a dull bronze, not unlike the chest colour of a swallow at approx. 4 weeks the fledgling young get their first hint of red appearing in the chest area, usually in the upper extremities of the chest. You may read in other articles that the fledgling young, having left the nest do not return to it don't believe it cooler climate breeders can vouch for the fact, that not only do they return to the nest, but they may well return to a new nest in which they were not hatched, characteristic of the breed the parents may have well set up a new nest, and be sitting on a new brood, prior to the fledging of the last. Now realistically you may believe you have a problem, particularly in light of the fact, that you should not move the original fledged young out under 4 weeks, somehow the parent birds solve the problem themselves and it is not uncommon to see the nuisance young gently evicted by a parent, (nature seems to take care of itself) and as this only seems to occur in the first week of fledging, you should not be unduly concerned, believe me it will take care of itself, I had one group of fledglings, who took great delight in checking on their siblings every day, poking their heads into the nest, confusing the hell out of the chicks, who thinking it was their parents cried out consistently to be fed.

Don't be too anxious to put your marker rings on the fledglings, 4 weeks is adequate. On the subject of marker rings, and this can happen to anyone, you have a great pair of birds that you have either purchased or bred, that have no marker rings for on reason or another, how do you keep track of them, and how do you record them for later use, don't panic as usual there is an answer, and it does not only apply to red faces, ask your wife for a lipstick that is not kiss proof, apply this lipstick around the entrance to the nest, the coming and going of the parent birds will obviously leave traces on the bird that you wish to identify, the rest of the job of ringing the birds, is the up to

you, (but you don't have to kiss them) breeding diet the following diet has been successful for me, the individual breeder will have variations that will work for them, and that's fine, "don't be afraid to change or modify". The breeding diet should be introduced a couple of weeks prior to the introduction of your chosen nesting boxes.

Soaked seed: 7 parts plain canary seed, 1 part red panikin1 part yellow pannikin, 1 part canola.

When analysing the remains of the seed at the end of the day, by far the most popular seed taken was canary. Also consumed was commercial egg and biscuit mix 80% dry. I have not found the addition of hard boiled egg necessary, which is not to say that it shouldn't be added if you desire. Meal worms, whilst offered, may initially be rejected and, even whilst feeding the pre-fledged young, I found that mine showed a distinct preference for sprouted seed, and seed heads, particularly "Johnson grass", getting stuck into the stalk first, extracting either a juice or pulp, but either way being on the floor almost before the grass lands on the aviary floor. The fledgling young, on the other hand, take live food such as mealworms with tremendous gusto. They will take literally any size worm and, if too big to take in one hit, will suck the pulp out of the worm. Green-food on the other hand, takes them about two weeks to come to grips with but, having discovered it, like live-food. Their appetite is fairly insatiable.

As with all other breeds, fresh water should be available at all times, water having a greater relevance to red faces than most other finches.

Whilst the breed spend a great deal of time on the floor, I find that apart from seeding grass, I prefer to use an elevated feeding platform for their regular feeding. The red faced is a voracious feeder, and spends an enormous amount of time at feeding station, however on the old principal of "energy out equals energy in" taking into account the vivacious nature of the bird and the amount of time that it is always on the move, its feeding habits are not totally surprising. Its characteristics and aviary habits make the "red faced" a true delight to have in a mixed aviary or as a colony breeder. They have a natural inquisitive nature, and seem to have the happy knack of recognizing the breeder immediately, and greeting them at the aviary door (sounds ridiculous but you may well find this is your own experience).

As mentioned earlier, the breed is totally vivacious, totally energetic, always on the move, be it on the ground or on the wing. They have a gentle nature, I have seen a pair of mine intimidated by a couple of cordons. This characteristic makes them an ideal choice for a mixed aviary and an ideal choice for a new breeder.

Water plays an enormous part in the life of a red faced quite apart from sustaining its life, they love jumping in and out of it. Bathing will take place a couple of times a day, summer or winter and I am led to believe by other breeders that should they for any reason neglect this bathing ritual, they begin to look, totally “ratty” one truly delightfully side effect of this bathing habit, is to observe other finches jumping into the water with the red faces and emulate the activity. Usually not with the same finesse.

I can recall with some scepticism, reading in “Russell Kingston’s” excellent volume “a complete manual for the keeping and breeding of finches” the anecdote that he used to describe the breeder in Tasmania, who was required by his red faces to chip the ice off of their water container, in order that they may get their daily bath, now I am not as sceptical, and would believe it to be very true. Next to food, water is possibly one of the most important considerations in the life of a Red-faced Parrot Finch.

The bonding of parents to the fledglings whilst I’m sure is not in itself unique, does make for fascinating observation. In the early days after emergence from the nest, the boisterous rough and tumble of the youngsters as they clamour their parents for food, is done with such incredible gusto, that allowing for their size, they do knock the larger parents off the perch, or have alternatively been seen actually sitting on the parents back. You can be pretty sure that at this point, knowing red faces you may perceive that you have a problem, particularly if you have another brood in the nest. Should you remove the current fledglings, when you see that the live food, that should be destined for the new brood is being devoured at a rate hard to believe by the fledglings, and actually and vigorously competing with the parent for the live food. A characteristic also of the red face, is their almost semi nocturnal nature, they are always last to roost at night, and can be seen still on the food station, or darting around the aviary when you have the house lights on, conversely they are first to stir in the morning, and yes you're right, they are back on the food platform, well before the other aviary inhabitants have stirred.

The pair bonding of the adult birds is very strong, and in the aviary are seldom seen apart, however should either one die a new partner should be introduced as soon as possible, it is always advisable to have more hens in your colony than cock birds, for apart from keeping them honest, it does minimize potential conflict between males, which whilst not deadly, may result in a few feathers missing.

Worming as the bird does spend a lot of time foraging on the floor you should expect that you are going to need to deal with a worm burden, some

school of thought may indicate that parrot finches per say do not respond well to worming. The following works for me, and was given to me by the person from whom I purchased my first pair of birds, and whose opinion I value highly 80 mils of water 1.5 mils of Avitrol Plus 2.0 mils of strawberry topping the strawberry topping seems to make it more palatable without affecting the efficacy of product use your own judgment on how often you dose, but 3 or 4 times a year would seem appropriate, particularly if you are feeding live food. Summary this brief article has tried to stay away from the technical nature of colour mutations, and the myriad other aspects that will attract breeders looking for other challengers, rather I have tried to document incidental and everyday occurrences that I have encountered, in the hope that new breeders, and perhaps breeders of long experience may find of interest and perhaps assistance, if so then it has been worth the time and effort. Whilst perhaps further down the track I may find a species or breed that excites me more, and I guess that is what aviculture is all about, but in the meantime I will continue to gain many hours of enjoyment and delight in the observation of, and the keeping of this delightful little bird, and perhaps suggest to you that if you have both the space and inclination, why don't you consider adding a pair to your collection, I suspect you may enjoy the experience.

Reprinted from the website of the National Finch & Softbill Society:
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