

## **THE ST. HELENA WAXBILL**

This delightful little foreign finch, which for many years has been a popular choice of fanciers, and is now reasonably well established in aviaries, is not a difficult bird to cater for, either during the off season or when breeding. Its habits when housed with a collection of mixed finches are ideal; being most docile they never appear to be interested in any petty squabbles that may be taking place within the range of their quarters. Provided they are supplied a suitable diet when breeding, results very often are excellent. However, a great deal depends on this to bring about the desired results, and fanciers must be well prepared to keep up a supply that will suffice for their requirements. No doubt an occasional pair will be an exception, much the same as with many other species, but generally their needs call for the supply of live food in the form of white ants, and an abundance of seeding grasses, preferably seed heads of panicum, canary and some of the millets. In addition the usual seed diet supplied to all finches will meet their requirements.

Generally fertility is reasonable, but occasionally a pair will produce a full clutch of infertile eggs, a habit that is also customary with the Cordon Bleu, but unfortunately this is only a temporary failing, and very often the following nest will again contain a good quota of fertile eggs. This adversity at times is a little disappointing, particularly when the clutch is a little above the average usually laid.

A bird that is a bush nester, they select sites either in shrubs or in brush, and the height selected varies considerably, very often being a site that is just above ground level. The nest they build differs greatly from that of most finches. The actual nest they occupy when nesting is a dome-shaped structure built of dry grass and coconut fibre, lined with feathers, and immediately on top of this another is built, but not nearly so complete as the lower structure. This is also lined with feathers, and when complete serves as a perfect camouflage to the actual nest.

Although the birds that now exist in local aviaries are aviary bred stock, dating back for many generations, their natural instinct has been retained regardless of the fact that they are rarely molested or subjected to parasitical practices by other birds. However, they appear to be content with their double-decker nest, and even when an inquisitive bird of another species decides to give the upper berth a thorough investigation they rarely show any resentment. The eggs most certainly would be wasted should a parasitic species decide to use it to deposit eggs.

It is most interesting and noticeable also that when a site is selected in a conspicuous position, the decoy nest receives extra attention, and when completed is a perfect camouflage for the actual nest. On the other hand, if the nest is built in a secluded position they appear to relax considerably when constructing this portion of the nest. Other than a partially-finished structure, they rarely complete it sufficiently to give it the appearance of another nest. Another habit they delight in is the collection of small pieces of cuttlefish, lumps of white ant nest, and even young chicks of other species that may have died in the nest and are thrown out. Having collected these they are deposited in their nest, and very often covered with another layer of feathers.

Clutches of eggs vary from five to seven, and incubation usually commences after the second or third egg has been laid. Birds that will sit reasonably well and that will not flush unless unduly disturbed, should this occur they certainly show their resentment until such time as the aviary is vacated and they return to their nest. Incubation takes approximately twelve days, and the birds share in these duties. A further three weeks elapse before the young leave the nest, and, if they remain in the nest for the full period they are usually well developed and will respond to the call of the parent birds and muster either to be fed or camp in a site selected for them. However, occasionally they leave the nest a little premature, or if the brood consists of four or five, chances are that several of the last hatched may be a little backward and find it a little difficult to make a camping site for the night. If this is experienced it is advisable to collect the whole brood as late as permissible in the evening, and transfer them to a small cage where they will be warm for the night, and release them again soon after dawn so that the: parents can attend to them, and this they will carry out diligently once they realise they are back in the aviary. It may be necessary to carry out this procedure for several nights until the young are well able to locate and occupy a camping site.

Approximately three weeks after leaving the nest the young become independent of the parent birds, and after about another three weeks they can be removed to a holding cage to mature.

Reprinted from "**Bird Keeping in Australia**", February 1961