

SOCIETY PROJECT PRESERVING BIRDS IN AVICULTURE FOR THE FUTURE

The Society has recently decided to promote a number of species that are particularly low in numbers in aviculture. The species are the Masked Finch, Crimson Finch, Rock Parrot and the Hooded Parrot. At the last meeting Adrian Knagg, Finch Species Co-ordinator, provided an outline of the Masked Finch. It was also pleasing to hear that a number of members are taking up the challenge of breeding these birds so that there is a future for them in aviculture.

To assist members in understanding the needs of these birds a number of article reprints are being prepared. The first is for the Masked Finch. If you have any questions please contact either the Species Coordinator Adrian Knaggs or the Society Secretary Tony Melbourne. When you learn something about this species please share it with the Editors of the Journal or Newsletter and they will help to provide this information to others, so that we can all better look after these birds.

THE WHITE-EARED MASKED GRASSFINCH

**By David Heap
Numurkah, Victoria**

Introduction

The White-eared Masked Grassfinch (*Poephila personata leucotis*) is a lesser known member of the *Poephila* genus. In comparison to the nominate race of the Masked Finch (*P. p. personata*) it is a rarity in aviculture. The White-eared Masked was discovered by John Gilbert in 1845 and described by Gould in 1846.

Description

Adult - Forehead, lores and a narrow line of feathers bordering the

mandibles form a black facial mask. Small area below the chin, black. Tail and a patch on the flanks are black. General colouration above, deep reddish-chestnut. Cheek patches, throat, belly, rump, undertail coverts and an area immediately forward of the black flank markings are white. Chest and upper throat are a pale brown suffused with pink. Eyes are red, mandibles yellow and legs coral red.

Juvenile - a “dirty” version of the adult with the white cheek patches less distinct. The facial mask and “bib” smaller and lacking the depth of colour. Bill initially black changing to horn within weeks of leaving the nest.

Distribution

The range of the white-eared masked encaptures the Cape York Peninsula. The boundary of the range approximates a line drawn from Normanton to Georgetown, Chillagoe and the east coast.



Habitat

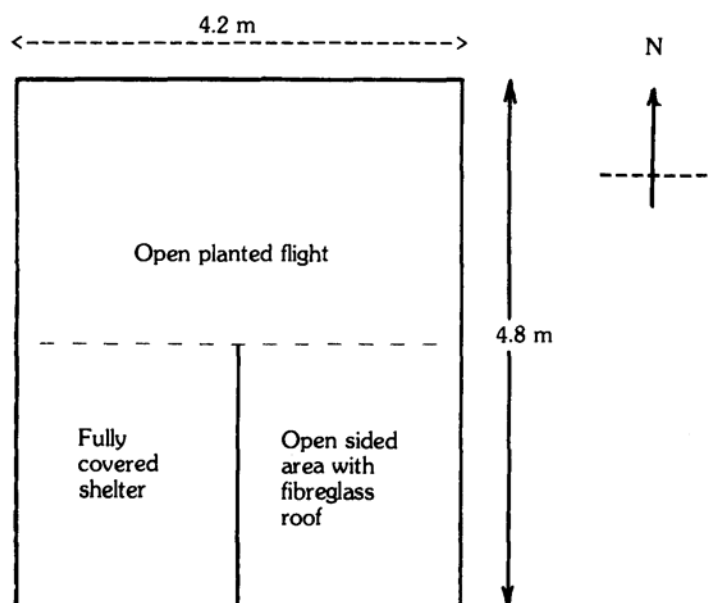
The White-eared Masked inhabits dry lightly wooded savannah and open grassland areas throughout its range.

Behaviour

White-eared Masked Grassfinches are a semi-colonial species which prosper when several pairs are housed together. Colony members gather socially several times daily. Within my aviary the birds congregate in an area of natural perches which receive a maximum of sunlight during winter.

Housing

My current colony of seven pairs of White-eared Masked are housed in an aviary 4.8m long by 4.2m wide by 2.4m in height. The open flight and fibreglass roofed areas are heavily planted with



a number of trees and trellised creepers including cross leaf honey myrtle (*Melaleuca decussata*), bracelet honey myrtle (*M. armillaris*), maiden hair creeper (*Muehlenbeckia spp.*) and jasmine creeper (*Jasminum polyanthum*). Ground cover consists of dwarf pampus grass, clumps of wild phalaris and bull rushes collected from local irrigation paddocks.

The interior walls of the shelter are lined with brush to a height of 1.5 metres. A section 1.8m by 0.7m at the front of the shelter opens on to the flight; the remainder is corrugated fibreglass sheeting which allows sufficient light to enter the interior of the shelter.

Nesting

Breeding commences late March / early April and continues until the last young fledge in early December. The latest I have had young leave the nest was the 26th of December. Breeding ceases during the hotter months of January and February. Most pairs within the colony rear a clutch in autumn and spring with a few pairs rearing young in the cold winter months. The majority of nests constructed by my birds have been in the open areas of the aviary within 1.2 metres of the ground. The exterior of the nest is built using a combination of coarse and fine dry grasses. The breeding chamber is heavily lined with fine grass and feathers which make observation of the interior difficult. On dismantling a nest fine chips of charcoal and powdered charcoal can be found interwoven into the lower areas of the structure. Preferred nesting sites are amongst the dense cover of the grasses and clumps of rushes. Should these sites become unavailable at the peak of the breeding season, pairs will use the low branches of the trees and creepers. Roosting nests are maintained by adult and juvenile members of the colony throughout the year and are of coarser construction and lack the lining and compactness of the breeding nests. As of yet I have not experienced any of the aviary bred White-eareds utilising man-made nesting receptacles for either breeding or roosting. Incubation lasts for approximately 14- 15 days with the young fledging after 21- 22 days. The young are initially very quiet in the nest but in the last four to five days are quite vocal when being fed. Clutch size varies from four to six eggs with four young being fledged on average. Egg dimensions taken from a sample of eight eggs produced by four pairs varied in length from 15.3mm minimum to 17.5mm maximum by 11.8mm minimum to 12.8mm maximum.

Feeding

Diet consists of pannicum, white millet and plain canary seed and these are available in separate containers at all times. A standard canary mix treated with vetemul is provided once a week. Also provided separately are crushed charcoal, fine shellgrit, cuttlebone and a cattle mineral block. Soaked seed and livefood are provided daily. Live food has been provided in the form of white ants and as a combination of mealworms supplemented with a softbill mix and "Doug Bailey's insectivorous" cake. White ants to date have proved the more popular choice. Water is provided daily in a large earthenware dish. A netting screen is suspended approximately 25mm below the surface of the water to prevent the drowning of newly fledged young taking an inadvertent bath.

Conclusion

The fact that numbers of captive White-eared Masked Finches have been allowed to fall to such a critical point over the last decade is criminal. Hopefully irresponsible and careless acts such as breeding these birds with "normal" Masked Finches will no longer occur.

The White-eared Masked Grassfinch is a hardy and free breeding avian species capable of withstanding cold winter conditions when provided with dry protected accommodation. This attractive member of the *Poephila* genus is worthy of consideration in any finch collection.

References

Immelmann K., Australian Finches.
Goodwin D., Estrildid Finches of the World.

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The Masked Finch

**By Mark O'Connor
Mt. Gambler, S.A.**

Masked Finches are in my opinion one of the best Australian finches to

keep. They are a pretty bird with contrasting colours which attract your attention. Their behaviour is unique and you could watch them for hours.

Other Names:

Masked Grass Finch

Description:

Male - 125mm. Chestnut-Brown upperparts which vary in darkness between individual birds and tends to become lighter down towards the tail. The belly down to the tail is white. The face is black from beak to ear forming a mask including chin. The rump is white and the tail black. The beak is yellow and the feet orange.

Female - Extremely similar to male, smaller mask. overall smaller, trouser stripe not as wide.

Immatures - Same as adults except the feet and tails are black and the tail is shorter.

Compatibility:

Masked Finches can be housed with most finches except for Long-tails and Black-throats because of the likelihood of the two hybridising. They can also cross with Zebras, Double-bars, Plum-heads and Chestnuts although these hybrids are far less common.

They are probably a better bird for the mixed collection than the Long-tails or the Black-throats as they don't interfere with others' nests. Mine are housed in a mixed collection consisting of Masked, Black-rumped Doublebars, Emblemias, Oriental Green Finches, Rufous-backed Mannikins, Superb Blue Wrens, Pictorellas, Yellow-hooded Siskins, Fire Finches and Spinifex Pigeons. I have also kept them in aviaries which contained Yellow-rumps, White-bellied Munias, Jacarinis, Plum-heads, Blue-faced Parrot Finches and Auroras.

The aviary they are housed in is 5.6m wide by 5.5m deep by 2m high. They are a bird which feels more secure in a colony of at least three pairs. They stick together in an aviary and feed and drink with other members of the colony. A few times a day they will have social gatherings and carry on using their many calls. My birds are housed in a nine pair colony and they enjoy this.

I used to house them in a smaller aviary (1.2m wide by 4.5m long by 2m high) where they were housed as a three pair colony with a pair of Pictorellas. They didn't tend to like this because I think they need a lot of room and don't like too much interference by us. They bred in that aviary but I think they prefer the one they are in now.

I wouldn't recommend them being housed as a single pair because of the fact that they are hard to sex and that they prefer to be housed with other Masked Finches.

Habits:

The Masked Finch likes to stay close to others of its kind. They have social gatherings at certain times and feed and drink together. If a Hawk is hanging around the aviary or has flown over, the Masked Finches will stay dead still or hide under grasses or logs. If something new is put in the aviary the whole colony will fly over and check it out. Even if you put a new bird which they haven't seen before they will hop around near it and look at it curiously.

The Masked Finches like eating charcoal. They will eat a bit in the 'off' season but in breeding season they will eat much more and also put it in their nests. The Masked Finch has a lot of calls and if you listen to them you can hear the difference.

Housing:

My Masked Finches are housed in an aviary which is 5.6m wide by 5.5m deep by 2m high. The aviary isn't heavily planted as I have tried for a look similar to a desert. It has many grasses in it; some tall some smaller. There are a few Tea Trees scattered around and a couple of native shrubs. I have put a lot of rocks and hollow logs along the floor of the aviary, which the birds seem to like to sit on and pick around. The sheltered area is at the back of the aviary and is 2.1m deep by 5.6m wide. Half the front of the sheltered area has a row of fibreglass which protects them and keeps the sheltered area and the seed dry. The inside walls are filled with Tea Tree, Melaleuca and various other brush that we find around the place.

I have also kept them in a smaller aviary (1.2m wide by 4.5m deep by 2m

high) but they didn't seem to enjoy being there. The Masked Finch enjoys open areas around the aviary to forage for food in the form of seed and insects. They meet on the ground at certain times so it would be preferable to leave areas for this to happen. They enjoy a hand full of seed thrown down on the floor.

Diet:

My Masked Finches are fed a variety of foods. They are fed the normal commercial finch mix, canary seed, canary tonic, niger, red panicum, casuarina seed, crushed sunflower and they may eat some larger seeds as there is pigeon and small parrot mixes on the ground for the Spinifex. They are fed egg and biscuit mix, Calcium Grit, cuttlefish, shell grit, charcoal (which is vitally important especially when breeding) and occasionally crushed baked eggshells. I have noticed them taking large amounts of livermol which is a brown powdery substance bought from the Avicultural Society. They especially hopped into this during breeding times.

I feed a variety of livefood including termites (they eat a lot of these during breeding), mealworms, maggots and vinegar fly. They particularly enjoy the termites out of that group. As well as livefood during breeding, you must also feed greenfood at least every two days but preferably every day. They enjoy seeding heads found around the place and milk thistle. This year I had a clump of panicum and other seed heads growing in the flight of the aviary. Every day the birds would feed on this. They are also fed soaked seed every day during breeding with some silverbeet or broccoli or sudex. Masked Finches don't seem overly keen on fruit but they will take small amounts of apple, orange or guava.

Breeding:

My birds usually breed from spring through summer. I have seen the Masked Finch during courtship. He stands up with a piece of grass, usually a dry seeding head, and bobs up and down when next to the female, she then ducks down and shakes her tail. The female quivering her tail is meant to mean that she has been impressed with the male's dance and will mate. Mating takes place after a song from the male.

The nest is a small one with a short entrance tunnel leading into the structure. The nest is usually made from swamp grass with bits of belt grass

and some coarser grasses. The inside of the nest is lined with feathers (they like Emu feathers) after which they will eat a lot of charcoal and immediately drink a lot of water. They will then deposit this into their nest and also pick up extra little pieces and just put them in the nest. This is thought to camouflage the eggs and help get rid of odours. Up to six eggs can be laid and both parents incubate the eggs for up to approx. 15 days. The young are pink and blind, and after approx. 23 days will fledge as a bird which resembles the adult bird but with a black beak, black legs, a shorter tail and they are slightly duller. They will begin to lose their black beak after about three weeks of fledging. Eight weeks later they will look the same as the adults. I haven't found the Masked Finch to be a prolific breeder although you do get a lot of young from each nest (at least four).

General comments:

The Masked Finch has always been a favourite of mine. Although it took me a few years to obtain a decent number of these birds it was well worth the wait as they are an active bird which always has a clean, neat appearance. You will be hard pressed to find a scruffy looking Masked Finch. They have a very strange behaviour with their gatherings, various calls and other mannerisms. Although not overly popular I find them to be one of the most attractive of the Australian species and unlike the Black-throat and in some cases the Long-tail, they won't interfere whatsoever with other birds and/or their nests. Their striking yellow beak with black mask stands out in any collection. I hope after reading this article more people will get involved in the keeping and breeding of this beautiful bird.

Reprinted from '*BirdKeeping in Australia*' October, 1996