

BEGINNER'S BIT STAR FINCH

For many years now this very delightful finch has been the popular choice of aviculturists, both the experienced and the beginner.

Breeding of these birds has been achieved by many aviculturists, and in some instances some good results have been obtained by beginners. However, although they are an ideal finch in many respects, they can be temperamental in regard to breeding habits. A pair may nest and rear their young without the slightest hitch, and in the very next attempt carry on until just after they have hatched the eggs, or to varying stages of their leaving the nest, and in some instances even to several days after they have left the nest.



Whilst this is at times a little discouraging, it fails to affect in any way the popularity they have attained.



These finches, which inhabit the northern areas of Australia, and of which there are definitely two subspecies, are to be found in areas extending from Queensland through the Northern Territory to northern Western Australia. A bird that frequents the grasslands, feeding on the seeds of the grasses which abound in these areas, they are to be found in pairs or in flocks. That they are to be found in areas extending from Queensland to Western Australia does not imply that they extend over the whole of this area; generally they are to be found in areas suitable to them between these two points.

Possibly of the two subspecies, the Western Australian form is known to the majority of aviculturists, and this is the more brightly coloured of the two. Although this is the case, this in no way detracts from the qualities of the Queensland form of this species. In fact, the latter form at one time was considered a better breeder, and quite frequently they were mixed with the Western Australian subspecies, producing progeny only slightly better than the Queensland form, and certainly reducing the quality of the Western Australian

form. At one time this was freely practiced, and consequently a great number of birds were available not true to type.

Definitely among the brighter-coloured Australian finches, they are quite conspicuous among a mixed collection. Dealing with the brighter of the two, the Western Australian form, sexing is much easier, the male featuring scarlet on the head, chin, throat and ear coverts, dotted closely with spots on the cheeks. The chest is a creamy-yellow, the lower abdomen and under-tail coverts are golden yellow, and the flanks are dotted heavily with white spots. Wings and back are olive green, and the rump rufous colour, this extending into the tail feathers, which are marked with light bars very close to the rump. The beak is red, and the legs and feet yellow. The female is duller in colour, lacks the bright head colouring, and also the scarlet under the chin. Instead, they feature white spots very prominently. Other markings are similar; in fact some hens feature the spots across the chest and on the flanks most conspicuously. Bars on the tail feathers are also missing.

As mentioned earlier, the Queensland form of this species is much duller. The absence of the head colouring on the males is most conspicuous; in fact the male hardly comes up to the hen of the Western Australian form. Sexing of the Queensland form is a little more difficult, particularly where instances have occurred of the two forms breeding together, which could lead to the selection of a brightly-coloured hen for a male of the duller subspecies. However, as these birds display when mating, the mistake can be detected and rectified.

Once these birds have settled down to aviary conditions they are very hardy, and compare most favourably with the hardiest of our Australian finches. Their behaviour towards other finches is ideal, and provided aviary space will permit, several pairs can be housed in the one aviary. On the other hand, it is quite possible to obtain excellent results with only one pair included with a collection of mixed finches.

Their behaviour is of a docile nature, and provided the birds they are sharing with are of a similar nature there should not at any time be any cause for concern when they are nesting.

Various types of aviaries are suitable for their requirements, provided they give them shelter and protection against inclement weather, and excessive heat. Housing in small box-type cages should be avoided. Generally, the shelter and flight type is most suitable, and if possible a few shrubs and a clump of Mitchell grass should be grown in the flight. Brush suitably placed in the shelter will also serve to induce them to use this, but in most instances they prefer to nest in a shrub, with some pairs very keen to utilise clumps of tall growing grass. Nest

boxes or logs are of little interest to them, and it is doubtful whether they could be induced to use either. Selection of sites vary in height, some birds preferring a site as low as a metre from the ground, and others will build in the highest position possible.

When nesting is contemplated the male will display considerably. Carrying a long piece of 'grass in his beak he will fly the full length of the aviary, and eventually this will attract the hen, and having done so the male will alight on the perch alongside the hen still holding the grass, take up a posing position and with neck stretched and head held erect will continue to call to his mate. This may be done many times during the day, and days to follow, until finally a nest site has been selected.

Occasionally this procedure may be prolonged, and should this be the case the hen will commence laying before the nest has been completed, material being added to this as laying continues. However, in most instances the nest is usually well advanced by the time the hen is ready to lay, with perhaps a little inner lining and few feathers to be added. When completed the nest is a neat dome-shaped structure with a side entrance. Material used usually consists of dry grass, a little coarse for the outer construction, and eventually lined with finer material. Both birds participate in the construction of the nest.

Clutches of eggs laid vary, and it is quite possible for some birds to lay up to six eggs, but generally clutches consist of four and five eggs. It is not unusual for these birds to nest three times in one season, and occasionally odd pairs will go beyond this quota, but if possible this should be avoided; if allowed to continue indefinitely little will be gained as the hens will lay themselves barren in a very short time.

The male and female share in the incubation and during the early stages are particularly light sitters, leaving the nest on the least provocation. However, they do improve a little after four or five days of incubation, but it is wise to avoid disturbing them because if this is done too often they eventually leave the nest altogether. Fertility in most instances is reasonable, generally above fifty per cent, with an occasional nest producing the possible.

The incubation period is twelve days, and following incubation the young remain in the nest for three weeks, when usually they are developed sufficiently to fly. On leaving the nest the parents feed them for another three weeks, by which they become fully independent. During the months of longer daylight hours it is quite possible to have them leave a day or so sooner, fully fledged and able to fly. Once having left the nest they rarely return to it at night; instead they are usually taken to a camping site by the parents in either a shrub

or in the dry brush. After becoming independent, that is completely independent, the young birds should be removed to a holding cage to eliminate any interference should the parent birds again decide to nest. This usually can be carried out safely about five weeks after leaving the nest.

Feeding of this species is not a difficult problem, and the usual seed mixture supplied to finches will meet their requirements. When feeding young live food will be relished, and preference is usually shown for white ants, although a few mealworms will also be relished. Seeding grasses serve to keep up their spirits, and these will be appreciated at all times. In fact it is quite possible to rear young when this type of food is abundant without resorting to the supply of live food.

Young birds on leaving the nest are a dull olive colour, with black beaks, and brown legs and feet. Depending on the period of the season they are bred, they moult accordingly, and usually take up to four to five months to attain their adult plumage. Left for another four to five months they will be matured sufficiently to be paired up. Under no circumstances should they be mated earlier; little will be gained with immature birds. Fortunately, very rarely will they come into breeding condition until ten or eleven months old, which most assuredly prevents all attempts to breed with immature birds.

It is quite possible to have pairs that fail to make any attempt to nest until they are nearly two years old, very often attributable to the fact that being man-made pairs they are not suited to each other, and inclined to be temperamental. The tendency to prolong nesting activities increases, and in some instances is not overcome until changes in pairings are made. Once they do settle down, and results are noteworthy, no attempt should be made to split the birds that are continuing to give the best results, unless of course it is considered wise to terminate a prolonged breeding season.

Finally, as there are two forms of this species (and as mentioned earlier if these are housed together and allowed to breed they slightly improve the colouring of the one and greatly reduce that of the other, giving an intermediate form which has little to commend it) any mixed pairings should be avoided, and each form housed separately at all times. Remember a great amount of work can be undone in a short time, but to put this right again involves a terrific amount of work, which in some instances may take years, and still no guarantee that complete success will be achieved.

Above article taken from : *The Avicultural Writings of Eric Baxter*