



Estrildid Finches
in Aviculture...

Breeding Blue-breasted Parrot Finch

And Identifying Parrot Finch "Junk"

by Stash & Carol Anne Buckley, Magnolia, NJ

This is the second article dealing with the Blue-breasted Parrot Finch, the first being "The Blue-breasted Parrot Finch" which appeared in the January/February 1994 issue of the *AFA Watchbird*. A lot has developed since then, and we feel this information is important to Parrot Finch enthusiasts.

We first bred our Blue-breasted in April of 1993 with the clutch of two (there were only two eggs laid) hatching on April 11 and being successfully parent reared. Unlike the European approach, we found that our Blue-breasted breed well as a colony in a free-flying situation in our 12 x 24 ft. tropical indoor bird room. These birds do not behave as a true colony bird as in the case of the Pin-tailed Nonpareil *Erythrura prasina*, but rather as a loose collection of individuals, apparently encouraged by each other's presence.

The problem with the Blue-breasted is that they tend to become obese in captivity. The Europeans overcome this by giving them small amounts of seed per day, housing them in small cages for breeding, and keeping the sexes separate in large flights when not breeding. We believe there must be a better way. Due to its very active nature (the most active of all the Parrot Finches), with its great love of flying, if kept in a large enclosure this bird will easily burn off the excess fat. When compared with the other non-established Parrot Finches, such as the Bamboo *Erythrura hyperythra* and the Pin-tailed, this bird does, indeed, lend itself to ease of propagation and establishment in aviculture. With a simple diet of seed, Romaine lettuce, cucumber, oranges, calcium in the form of crushed, baked eggshells, eggfood and millet spray, the Blue-breasted (also

known as the Forbes Parrot Finch) will very easily and readily raise its own young. An additional note: the Blue-breasted prefer juice oranges over the pulpier varieties and seeded cucumbers over the seedless kinds.

We strongly recommend that you use organically grown, untreated produce. We don't mean to cause alarm but we recently read an article where irradiated food is suspected of causing chromosome damage in India. The laws in this country are such that food may irradiated without informing the public. This, indeed, prolongs the shelf life as the food is not so readily attacked by bacteria, fungus, bugs, etc., but leaves the food hard and tasteless. After all, if insects and bacteria don't want to eat the food, there must be a reason.

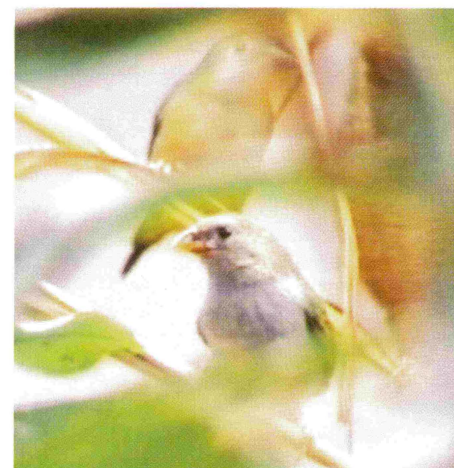
In our free-flying situation these birds invariably nest in the rafters of the bird room ceiling. Unlike other estrildid finches, when juveniles fledge (at approximately three weeks of age) they come out fully feathered and with good flying ability. Fledglings of one day will fly from one end of the bird room to the other, landing securely on a perch. When catching a snooze, they will roost on the highest branches.

The nest is typically estrildid—a globular structure with a side entrance, either free-standing or built within a large wicker finch basket. Like other estrildids, these birds are opportunistic, using the burlap strands we provide for nesting material and "snitching" the straw bedding we provide for our caged birds.

Blue-breasted pairs make very good parents, surprisingly tolerant of people's comings and goings. Often, we do not even realize that another pair is nesting, it only becoming evident

when more fledglings are seen flying around the room. The chicks are fed on the diet stated above, with the addition of an occasional mealworm which they really don't relish but which are supplied for the Crimsonwings (*Cryptospinza* spp.) which are also free-flying.

From a standpoint of behavior, we feel the development of the Blue-breasted is rather primitive and boring. Breeding displays consist of little more than the cock's head bobbing up and down while uttering a rather metallic trill. Pairs that feel that they are secure and out of sight will produce an electric buzz which fluctuates up and down in volume. Unfortunately, whenever we tried to determine who was producing the buzz, the display ended. There are reports of pairs feeding each other, which would make them the second estrildid to do so, the first being the Peale's Parrot Finch *Erythrura pealii* but, unfortunately, we cannot confirm this. When Blue-breasted are



Juvenile Blue-breasted Parrot Finch. Note the blue breast. This only occurs in pureblood Blue-breasted. The horn colored bill will turn black as the bird matures.



These Red-headed/Blue-faced Parrot Finch hybrids are being sold in the U.S. as Mindanao Parrot Finches. Compare the red on this bird, which goes completely around the face, to the print in the Feb/Mar 1992 *Watchbird* article titled "Parrot Finches in American Aviculture."

Video prints by S. and C. A. Buckley



Free-standing nest of the Blue-breasted Parrot Finch. Note the angled brace of a ceiling beam upon which the nest was built. This species builds a tube entrance in a free-standing nest which is absent in a wicker basket.

feeding on oranges, they will exert dominance over the others for the orange by a fencing ritual similar to that of the breeding display of the Bamboo Parrot Finch, but not as defined. Dr. Luis Baptista tells us that this behavior has been observed by others as the classic aggressive posture. However, we tend to doubt this, as we have only very rarely observed this posturing and cannot recall ever noticing it before. When a hen enters a nest occupied by the cock, the cock will produce a very sweet, descending trill. This is a very soft vocalization and apparently meant to be audible only to the hen. Unfortunately, these birds never seem to calm down or to recognize their keeper. When compared to other nervous birds such as Pintails, whose fledged juveniles can be persuaded to perch on one's finger, the Blue-breasted seem to remain wild, fleeing from their keeper if he approaches and apparently wanting nothing to do with him. It is a shame that such a strikingly beautiful bird should remain elusive in a large aviary.

Now we must get into the question of "junk." Junk is a strong word to describe a bird, but when one has paid \$ 2000 for a pair of Blue-breasted, as indeed a fellow aviculturist had, and they prove to be outcrosses, we believe the word does apply. Not too long ago we received photographs of adults and juveniles for confirmation of purity for qualification for a U.S. first breeding. Unfortunately, the adults were obviously wrong in color and proportion and the juveniles were light

forest-green, practically identical to that of the Blue-faced Parrot Finch *Erythrura tricolor*. It is our strong conviction that over 75% of the so-called "Blue-breasted" Parrot Finches in this country are "junk"—not purebloods. We have repeatedly asked to publish the photos we were sent so that other people can learn from them, but have always been denied. We have learned from an overseas breeder that these outcrosses originally came in from Denmark and Belgium, but now we have confirmed that they are coming in from other European countries as well.

How is one to recognize them? To our knowledge, there have been only three photographs of Blue-breasted published in this country: the two video prints of cock and hen accompanying our article (the one in the January/February 1994 *Watchbird*) and the Günter Enderle's excellent photograph in the Nekton calendar. Granted, video prints have their limitations, but if you compare those prints to the Enderle shot, you can see the bird has a head structure unlike any other Parrot Finch. Notice the short, blunt red tail. The red of the tail is *very* red, indeed, and if the tails of your birds are orange or orangish-red, the birds are hybrids. We have not noticed any orange or orange-red tail in any confirmed purebred stock.

Also, the more recently trapped birds are coming from smaller islands and are smaller in size than the original wild caught stock, giving way to island variation but not subspecific recognition. Therefore, since the original birds were smaller than the Blue-faced Parrot Finch, if yours appear to be the same size as Blue-faced, they are hybrids. The length of the tail to body size must also be shorter in the purebloods.

Interestingly, the fledglings of the purebreds have blue breasts—a fact we've confirmed with British breeders. If your fledglings have blue-green breasts, this is a carry over from the original hybridization with the Blue-faced. An interesting fact here: the Blue-faced Parrot Finch—as it occurs in American aviculture is not known in the wild. The bird we have here is the hodge-podge result of a careless or unknowing mingling of wild caught birds of various subspecies which have been allowed to interbreed.

The first Blue-breasted in captivity was reputedly owned by Günter

Enderle of Germany. Although Enderle is a terrific human being and was kind enough to invite us to his facilities when we were touring Germany, it still eludes us why he give the Blue-breasted a different scientific name than the *Erythrura tricolor* traditionally assigned to it.

Why is it that hybrids are flooding the American market? The answer is, quite simply, for the money. Unscrupulous European breeders dump "junk" on the American market because they know naive American breeders are hungry for this rare and beautiful bird. We know of only two mutations: a pale blue bird that popped up in Holland, and a slightly pied individual that was bred in England by Mike Fidler.

Now we move on to the question of the Mindanao Parrot Finch *Erythrura coloria*. The only known importation in recent history is one by a Swiss doctor who managed to get them because his wife is from Mindanao. He will sell

Additional Information

In the Buckley article "Fostering With Societies" on page 26 of the March/April 1996 issue of *Watchbird*, the above video print had an abbreviated caption. The expanded caption reads "Society feeding a Western Blue-billed chick *Spermophaga haematina*. This estrildid finch is rare in aviculture and is also one of the largest. It is our belief that any estrildid finch can be successfully fostered by Societies."



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only his domestics, preferring to keep his wild-caughts which are highly sought after throughout the world. We received some of these domestics through Reg Riedel. They were stunning birds. The cock's crescent ear patch is very vivid and well defined, the hen's smaller and paler. The cock's green plumage is also brighter than the hen's and both birds sing. The Cock's song is a gargly trill while the hen's trill is shorter.

Interesting to note, if two hens are kept together they will nest-build and lay eggs, a trait we have not observed among other Parrot Finches. Breeders who were fortunate enough to receive these birds are crossing them with their tired, depleting stock to strengthen the blood. It is our firm belief that any that are offered to the trade, regardless of the cost, are hybrids. No breeder in his right mind would part with such valuable birds to a wholesaler. Wild-caughts are not being exported due to a religious war in Mindanao, and the remaining population is on the brink of extinction.

Generally, the "junk" Mindanaos received in this country have vague, ill-defined ear patches. If the song is a bright trill similar to that of the Blue-faced Parrot Finch, then the bird is probably a hybrid. The Mindanao is often outcrossed with the Blue-faced. In the purebred birds the legs are very long, almost disproportionately so, and appear as if they are attached close to the vent. Interestingly, we have heard reports of Blue-faced being sold which have unusually long legs. Also, the personality of pure birds is a good indication of species purity. These birds are extremely calm and trusting, reminding one of the endearing character of Woodstock in the Charles M. Schultz cartoon, "Peanuts." In the last five years we know of no wholesale importations of purebloods into this country.

Quite a few years ago, we got a midnight call from a dealer who excitedly told us he had Mindanaos. He was asking \$950 for the pair. The problem was, he had never seen Mindanaos before and didn't really know what they were supposed to look like. We sent him a video print to make a positive identification. He declared the birds were Mindanaos and the deal was made. Upon receiving the birds we saw immediately that they were not Mindanaos, but rather, a

hybrid between Red-headed *Erythrura psittacea* and Blue-faced Parrot Finches, a commonly produced cross aimed at generating beautiful birds for the European pet trade and selling for about \$100 a pair.

When we reported this to the dealer, he refused to answer our calls. Eventually, we had to contact the district attorney in the dealer's county and that caused him to refund our money and take back the birds. We later heard that he had them for sale at a bird mart, calling them Katanglad Parrot Finches, another name for the Mindanao. We relate this story to make the point that "Buyer Beware" applies to the bird world as well as to the other businesses.

On the flip side, we bought an unsexable juvenile and a probable hen from a respected dealer who had acquired the birds specifically for us. On receipt of the birds we could see that they were, indeed, very, very close to pure. Undoubtedly, some one had bred hybrids back to pure stock. It was obvious that the dealer, who was not as familiar as we were with purebloods, simply could not recognize these birds as outcrosses. When we explained the situation to him and said we would keep the birds anyway, he immediately protested, said he would destroy our check and would complain to his supplier—and we could keep the birds. This story shows that some people *can* be trusted and remain in business for many years due to their sterling reputations.

Also on the topic of Mindanao "junk", Josef Lindholm, of the Fort Worth Zoo, tells us that many years ago he saw a population of Mindanaos in a zoo in Canada. In retrospect, armed with a new knowledge of hybrids and how to identify them, he declared that the entire population was outcrossed.

Next, we have the question of the Peale's Parrot Finch. Peale's generally have the reputation of being small, washed out and fragile. The pure blood Peale's is a large, stocky bird, larger than the Red-head, with which we suspect it is being hybridized in Europe. Recently an acquaintance got some Peale's from an importer. They were small, indistinct and fragile—very different from the birds he had previously gotten from us. Later, he received a wild-caught cock from a zoo which he said had the same colors, body shape and size as the birds he received

from us.

A new development, which is quite startling, is the importation from Europe of Peale's which have no inclination to breed. These birds (which are being sold by a questionable dealer) have been subjected to hormone treatments to make them larger and therefore more sellable as they more closely resemble the purebred Peale's. Unfortunately, the hormones seem to leave the birds with no sexual desire hence, they do not breed. More "junk." Apparently about 80% of the Peale's being sold in this country are undesirable.

As the more clever and fraudulent breeders are offering hybrids that are closer and closer in appearance to the wild stock, the problem of recognizing outcrosses is becoming very difficult. It takes an educated eye to recognize the difference. The best way to recognize a junk bird is to familiarize yourself with the purebloods. The "fakes" will stand out like sore thumbs. Try to observe the purebloods live, in person, as photographs can often distort and be misleading.

We are pleased to report that the Central Park Zoo, in New York City, is in the process of trying to get wild-caught Blue-breasted Parrot Finches for a large indoor breeding exhibit. This species should be an ideal subject since it is relatively rare in aviculture, and is becoming rarer still in the wild.

Josef Lindholm, in his capacity with the Taxon Advisory Group for estrildid finches, informs us that the Pintail and Bamboo Parrot Finches have been included for study and propagation as well.

And Mike Fidler, with Newcastle University, is planning a research trip to Timor to study the populations of Blue-breasted Parrot Finches in the wild to see what their true status in the wild really is, and to see what steps ought to be taken to preserve them.

The sad state of affairs is that American finch aviculture is in its adolescent stage, being preyed upon by unscrupulous European breeders who exploit ignorance. This will surely cease when Americans educate themselves, rising to a world class level and no longer unknowingly accept other breeder's junk. At this point, the importation of hybrids will cease, no longer finding a market in this country. When this happens, both birds and breeders will benefit. ➤