In the Jan/Feb 1996 Watchbird, Nancy Bent’s excellent article on fledgling cages (page 20) is illustrated with two photos. Bent was erroneously credited as the photographer. The photos were actually taken by Mike Greer, the official zoo photographer, who spent hours waiting for just the right shots. Good shots, Mike, and apologies for the error.

Estrildid Finches in Aviculture...

The Purple Grenadier
Uraeginthus ianthinogaster

by Stash and Carol Anne Buckley
Magnolia, New Jersey

Of the three types of Uraeginthus, the Purple Grenadier is the second which we will be discussing in this column. The first type which we covered was the Red-cheeked Cordonbleu Uraeginthus bengalus, AFA Watchbird, Vol. XXII, No. 4 - July/August 1995, which was an example of the Cordonbleu waxbill portion of this genus, the others of course being the Blue-capped Uraeginthus cyanoccephala and the Blue-breasted Uraeginthus angolensis Cordonbleus. Without a doubt, Purple Grenadiers are more difficult to propagate than Cordonbleus, but not quite as difficult as Violet-ears Uraeginthus granatina, the remaining member of this group. Grenadiers are the most intelligent of the genus and indeed one of the most intelligent of all estrildids. For this reason, they are among our favorites. They become very attuned to the keeper’s feeding schedule, plastering themselves on the side of their cage while you distribute live food to other birds and letting you

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Acquire true Grenadier behavior patterns. This is not a species for beginners. In fact, we can find no country in the world where this species is on its way to becoming established in aviculture. Along with the heartaches of keeping this species, we believe you will find true joy in its delights.

This is a large-bodied bird and best housed in a good-sized flight. We recommend a minimum of 4 ft. long x 2 ft. wide x 3 ft. high. Being an African dry grassland species, you would expect that this bird would do better in a dry envi-
how large), will act as a catalyst to trigger an aggressive reaction in any Grenadier cage within earshot where a bonded, nest-building cock will try to get to the offender to drive him off. In frustration, he will take out his aggression on his hen. This can and often does lead to her death. For this reason, Grenadiers are best housed one pair per room. This may sound a bit extreme, but we feel it is necessary if one is going to generation breed these birds and not conti-nually start at point zero. In fact, when we first started working with this species we thought we could keep our first two pairs in separate cages next to each other with a bath towel hung between them so they couldn’t see each other. This was not good enough. The cocks soon discovered, or made a small hole in the towel which they enlarged so they could see each other and then tried to attack each other through the hardware cloth of their...
Our friend, Levin Tilghman, who is beginning to work with this species, is finding their territoriality overwhelming and is already planning to separate his pairs to different rooms. Fortunately, in a captive state and maybe in the wild, Purple Grenadiers will mate for life. It is interesting to note that if one arbitrarily puts a cock and hen together, within a month they will either be preening each other to strengthen pair bonds or ignoring each other, with perhaps a small dash of aggression, particularly around the livefood dish. It appears these birds are far more selective about their mates than the average estrildid species. The cock's song is quite intricate and is actually more soft-billed-like. Although the Violet-ear's song is very similar, it is much softer and does not have much carrying power. The song of the Purple Grenadier is a beautiful whistle of flute-like notes, interspersed with clicks which, curiously enough, is reminiscent of the pre-mouthing song of the Crimson Seedcracker Pyrenestes sanguineus. The hen Grenadier also sings, but her song is not as flamboyant as the cock's.

Don't hesitate to mist these birds, for as in most finches, it is a powerful breeding stimulus. With the addition of more livefood, your birds should prepare to nest-build. Like most estrildids, Grenadiers are opportunists when it comes to nesting materials, so a handful of cut burlap strands and dried grasses should be sufficient. We cannot recollect any of our Grenadiers ever building a free-standing nest, but consistently chose a large wicker finch basket in which to build. Sometimes a cock will sit in the nest for days on end seemingly incubating eggs. However, upon examination the nest proved to be empty. We do not fully understand this behavior, but it seems to be a testing period, proving to the hen that the site is free from predators. When cock and hen both start sitting, then you can presume that the hen has laid.

Clutch size appears to be small, averaging 3 to 4 eggs. Hatchlings have a very dark purple skin with bright blue gape tubercles and exhibit an exaggerated back and forth head-swing begging motion. This begging posture makes this species very difficult to handfeed and, indeed, many Society finches find it difficult to accept this bird's chicks. If you wish to foster this species, we would advise using a young pair of Societies which has only raised one clutch of their own - to prove their nurturing abilities - the second clutch being the Purple Grenadier eggs. If they fail the first time, try them again immediately upon recycling, for they will be more likely to accept them the second time around. We would advise that you start with good Society stock. Try to obtain some of the dark chocolate "selfs" recently imported from Europe, bred expressly for their fostering abilities. Although the juvenile Purple Grenadiers are very insectivorous, they are easily reared on a good standard eggfood recipe supplied to the Societies.

If you plan on parent-rearing, this is a tricky procedure at best. We have successfully parent-reared these birds on mealworms and eggfood as the only sources of protein. Obtain mini-mealworms (about ¼ to ½ in. in length) and choose only the newly molted ones (which will appear white) to offer to the parents. These should be introduced to the birds before the eggs hatch, so they will become accustomed to them. We feel that our birds accepted these white mealworms, perceiving them as some sort of strange termite - a food that they are undoubtedly very familiar with in their homeland. It would also be wise to offer them other livefood such as waxworms and white-worms in separate dishes. If you're fortunate enough to have a constant supply of termites and brave enough to bring them into your house, then by all means try them. We do not ration mealworms when chicks are present, and offer the parents hundreds every few hours, from lights-on (about 7 AM) until lights-out (about 10 PM). Upon fledging, we would advise you to take great care when servicing these birds. This is the only estrildid finch that ever attacked us in defending its young. Levin Tilghman has also noticed this hostility while one of his pairs was nest-building. Obviously, they are too small to inflict injury upon an arm reaching for a dish, but the experience can be quite startling.

Juvenile Purple Grenadiers may be left with their parents until weaning, but you must remove them before they begin the adult molt. Failure to do so may cause the cock to kill a perceived rival - his own son or sons. Juveniles begin their molt around the head, so it becomes an easy matter to sex them. Clutch-mates may be safely kept together on their own until the breeding urge hits. If these juveniles are fed on eggfood as a protein source, they will be more inclined to raise their own chicks without livefood, thereby beginning the domestication process. However, there is very little chance of having their aggressive behavior being bred out, so still be careful to observe proper guidelines when introducing domestic for breeding.

There is a theory that temperature may affect the sexes of the developing embryos - more females being produced at warmer temperatures, more males at cooler temperatures. In our experience with the Purple Grenadiers, this appears to be true. When we kept our birdroom very warm (thermostatically controlled to not drop below 86°F, even at night), we produced only hen offspring - at least seven in a row, no cocks. When we lowered the birdroom temperature to about 80°F, we started to get a mixture of cocks and hens. It would be interesting to know if others have experienced this phenomenon.

In our opinion, the Purple Grenadier is the most desirable of all the Uraeginthus species. Many people prefer the Violet-ears, but we found them to be lethargic, lacking in intelligence and interest in comparison with the Grenadiers. Although the Violet-ears are, without doubt, very attractive, we believe the less formal but every bit as colorful markings of the Purple Grenadiers to be somehow more natural and vibrant. Physical beauty, personality, intelligence - the Purple Grenadier has much to offer the serious aviculturist. There are no known mutations of this species, either in captivity or in the wild. Not too many years ago this bird wholesaled for $125 a pair, but now goes for $250. Doubtless, the price will continue to escalate until the end of importation.

We know of a few breeders making a serious effort to establish the Purple Grenadier. However, it will take more than a few individuals to establish a species. For those of you who feel up to the challenge, we urge you to take up this delightful bird and add to the limited number of people who are trying to establish domestic strains before it is too late. The disappearance of the Purple Grenadier in aviculture would indeed be a regrettable loss.