The shaftail originates from the northeastern part of Australia where they come in two varieties, a yellow billed (Poephila acuticauda) and the red billed variety (Poephila acuticauda beckii).

A description of this bird is virtually unnecessary since it has become one of the best established finch species in captivity. One point the author would like to stress at the very beginning of this article is that crossbreeding the two subspecies should be avoided at all times.

The yellow-billed variety should have a yellow, not orange, beak and the overall coloring of its body does not show a reddish tint like in the red-billed variety.

The red-billed variety should have a very dark, deep red bill and a reddish tint in its feathering. In many countries in Europe an orange beak (light or dark) is penalized at shows and a bird showing such a beak never wins in competition no matter how good the bird is.

The yellow-billed variety lives in the most western part of north Australia while the red-billed variety is established in the northeastern part of Australia. Their territories do overlap in the wild and they do crossbreed in the wild, again this is a no-no in captivity.

**Sexing**

Sexual dimorphism is not present in these birds although certain characteristics can usually be attributed to the different sexes.

a) The bib — the female usually has a smaller and narrower bib; the male usually a larger and especially at the base on its chest it is broader.

b) An overall more intense coloring of the male bird can be seen in both the red and yellow-billed variety. In the red-billed variety a darker reddish tone is visible in its feathering. Also the red-billed variety shows a darker grey skullcap in the male than in the female.

In the pure yellow-billed variety a more intense coloring in the feathering of the male is also visible, whereas the skullcap shows a dark, more brownish grey coloring. When you have interbred these different sub-species the above mentioned tones get mixed and therefore are not quite as distinguishable.

c) Longer tailfeathers are also usually characteristic of males.

d) The male is usually a more robust bird.

All of the above, however, are not absolutely sure ways to sex these birds. These are only indications to help you in choosing birds. The only sure way to sex these birds is the singing of the males. Not even two nesting birds are a sure sign since two males or two females will build nests and act like a mated pair.

**Nesting**

This bird is very well established and nests quite easily. It does well in aviaries.
Two shaftails — one showing the wild coloring, the other is a white or Ino shaftail.

Photos by H.J. de Vos, Utrecht, The Netherlands

Fawn shaftail showing promising red beak.

Three shaftails — one brown, one color and one fawn.

One brown-white or bleak beaked shaftail.

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and in breeding cages. Breeding cages, however, offer more controlled breeding environments. Shaftails take to all finch-type nestboxes and ample nesting material should be provided. A half open wooden finch-type nestbox seems to be preferred.

Their clutch usually consists of five to six eggs and the hatching takes 12 to 13 days. The young leave the nests at 21 to 22 days and are weaned by the parents two to three weeks after leaving the nest. Many breeders remove the nest box when the young leave the nest to insure that parents dedicate their complete attention to the young ones instead of going to nest shortly thereafter again.

The rearing of the young sometimes can bring problems. Parental instincts in shaftails, as in other Australian finches, leave much to be desired at times.

Ever since the export ban of Australia in 1960 these birds were mass produced in Europe and Japan under society finches.

This mass production has its pros and cons. The obvious pros are that because of this mass production these birds are now well-established, readily and inexpensively available to all. The cons are that the quality of these finches (size, red vs. yellow bill) against the quantity was neglected and, of course, parental instincts and behavior patterns were lost.

In Europe it is now very much in style with breeders to try to raise their finches in the most natural fashion. One way to bring natural parenting instincts back into these birds is to have them try to raise their own young. They usually let them try with society finch young and the first three or four clutches before they regain the desired behavior. However cruel it may sound, society finch babies are more expendable than shaftail babies.

Shaftails also seem to regain their parental instincts much faster if they are allowed to breed in aviaries and not breeding cages.

Because of the great numbers of shaftails that are bred in captivity some mutations were bound to surface. Some of these mutations are the following:

1) The Isabel of Fawn. A good, deep red beak is hard to find in this color variety. Make sure not to buy birds that have greyish overtones in their wings. Genetics: recessive.

2) The brown shaftail. Also called a dark fawn, comes in both red and yellow beak. Genetics: recessive.

3) The white or Ino shaftail. This latest mutation is quite beautiful. It is rumored to have originated out of a cross of a white parson (who was a true mutation) and a regular shaftail. Good red and yellow beaks are hard to find in this color variety. Make sure when you buy yours it has the two distinctive long tail feathers of a shaftail so that parson blood has been eliminated. Do not breed white on white birds, this will only result in many infertile eggs or very weak young. Breed white against splits to ensure better fertility and better specimens. Genetics: sex-linked.

In captivity for the last couple of years we've also had another beak color. This is called the white or bleak beak. The beak is simply horn color. This type is bred a lot into yellow beaks (orange tinted) to produce better yellow beaks.

All in all a shaftail is a very nice and easily kept bird even for the beginning hobbyist.