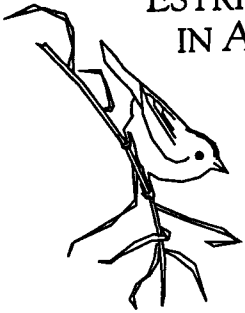


ESTRILDID FINCHES IN AVICULTURE...

Stash and Carol Anne Buckley
Magnolia, NJ



Breeding the Black-capped Waxbill

We have kept many rare and unusual finches, but must admit the Black-capped Waxbill (*Estrilda nonnula*) of Africa is our favorite. Looking much like a Black-capped Chickadee (*Parus atricapillus*), these endearing little birds capture the hearts of everyone who sees them. It is truly a shame that more of these birds have not been imported as there is now very little hope of them being established in aviculture for, even in Europe, they are quite rare.

We have a small group of these birds and they are one of the few species we have worked with that does well in a flock. Pairs set up in breeding cages don't seem to do as well and, in fact, it is quite sad when the free-flying individuals alight on the top of their cages and seem to wonder why they can't come out and join the rest of the flock.

Our first five birds, apparently three cocks and two hens, were given to us by a friend who had had them three years with no luck breeding them.

We set the birds free in a large flight 5 ft. long x 3 ft. wide x 3 ft. high in our tropical birdroom which averages about 78° F with 70 to 80% humidity. The birds seemed content but there was no movement towards breeding. We decided to set them free in the birdroom, which is heavily planted with live trees, and continued our twice daily misting routine.

There seemed to be an immediate change in their behavior—they began posturing with the characteristic flicking wings and tail of stress free birds.

The birds were reluctant to eat live food of any type, but finally accepted white worms and small, molted mealworms, especially when chicks were in the nest.

Seed was a typical mix and they were quite fond of millet sprays.

Strands of hurlap were provided for nesting material and they took advantage of it, later accepting dry grasses when offered. These birds like to nest quite high, generally anywhere from five feet off the ground up to the highest receptacles in the birdroom. Free-standing nests were built in the forks of trees and the birds would also accept large and small wicker baskets.

The nests of this species are particularly interesting in that they like to build a small, downward-facing entrance tunnel and a cock's roosting nest on top. Sometimes they would build the main structure directly beneath the wicker basket which was placed in a grassy tussock. The basket became the cock's roosting nest.

Clutch size averages about five and the hatchlings are among the smallest we have ever seen—flesh colored with black and white gape tubercles. The first birds which were successfully reared were hatched on 12 January 1993. These birds were quiet in the nest and we wondered if they were still alive until, one day about two or three weeks after hatching, we found a not-quite-ready-to-fledge chick on the carpet beneath the nest. We picked him up and put him back in and felt at least one more individual in the nest. It was about two weeks later when two

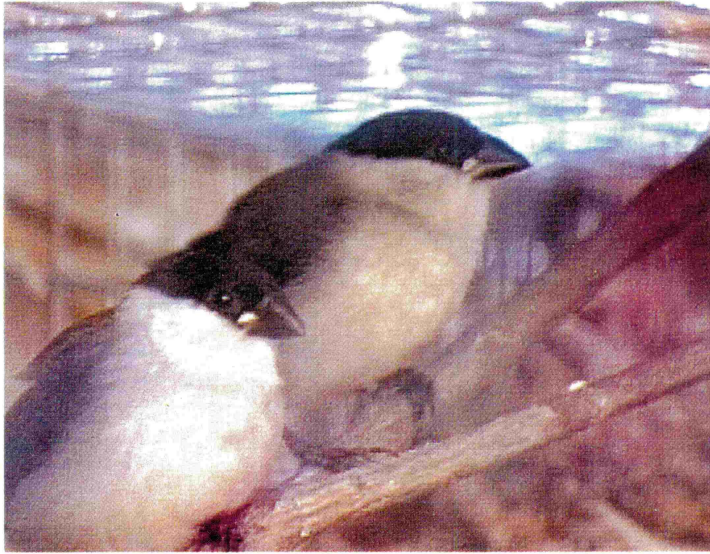
birds finally fledged—a great relief to us—looking very much like the adults but with a black beak. While chick-rearing, the parents consumed a little bit of egg food in addition to the live-food provided.

We had also received a small flock of birds from Germany which, after a period of acclimating in a holding cage, were released into the birdroom. Interestingly, the two flocks kept to themselves, only recently appearing to mingle.

These birds are quite shy in their habits and will relinquish a nest without much resistance. We recently observed a pair give up their nest to an old Red-eared Waxbill hen (one of our first birds) who wanted that nest for her own eggs.

These birds should not be housed with any species which represent competition, for they do not compete well. Black-capped Waxbills are delicate birds and stress should be reduced to a minimum. We try to handle our birds no more than twice a year, and that for the purpose of trimming their nails.

In our experience, this will be a difficult bird to establish for, although they are quite prolific, the eggs of Black-capped Waxbills are so minuscule and fragile that they have broken under our American Society Finches. Even when successfully incubated and hatched, Black-capped chicks are often not fed by our Societies—presumably due to their small size. Even Black-capped Waxbills, themselves are often reluctant to feed their own chicks. Interestingly, we have success-



Two young Black-capped Waxbills. Note the black beaks.



Cock mounting the hen while mandibulating.

Photos by Stash and Carol Anne Buckley



The male Black-capped Waxbill is displaying with nesting material.



The red color at the base of the tail and on the flank add dash to an otherwise black and white bird.



This species makes a very advanced roosting nest above the brooding nest. The brooding chamber is entered through a downward facing tunnel.

fully encouraged Black-capped pairs to raise Society chicks and this might be an avenue to getting them to raise their own young.

The German breeders actually trade Black-capped Waxbill eggs back and forth among themselves to do everything possible to get these birds established—a true mark of avicultural sophistication.

Successful breedings of the Black-capped Waxbill in the U.S. are few and far between. Be cautious of so-called “experts” who have breeding “tricks” or “secrets.” Tricks and secrets are never a substitute for good avicultural techniques and procedures which, when followed, will give you your best chance of breeding success. ➤