

Photo by Nancy Mindlin

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A male Queen Whydah displays by hovering before a hen. Though the average hover display is not even one minute long, the display is repeated on and off all day for the weeks or even months of the breeding season.

great pains to get her to me! My gratitude to Mr. Anthony Giunta and Mr. Levin Tilghman for their participation in that same effort. I also thank Levin Tilghman for his generous research expertise. Without your help, Levin, I would never have gotten my hands on the elusive and valuable reading material that has helped me so much.



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ESTRILDID FINCHES IN AVICULTURE...

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Magnolia, NJ



The Java Rice Bird

The Java Rice Bird is one of the largest of the Estrildid finches rivaled, perhaps, only by the seedcrackers (*Pyrenestes*) and bluebills (*Spermophaga*) in size. Its big, chunky body and its comparative ease in housing and propagation make it one of the most popular finches for beginners. In fact, this is the first finch I (Stash) kept as a child growing up in Glasgow, Scotland. My mother referred to them as "those stupid Javas," a result of their seeming lack of intelligence and responsiveness—the complete opposite of the seedcrackers and bluebills which we consider to be among the most intelligent of the estrildid finches.

The fact that the Javas were readily available in pet shops 40 years ago attests to the fact that this birds has domesticated for quite some time. Wild-caught individuals are very difficult to get now, reflecting on the lack of desire on the part of the trappers to obtain them. They are classified as mannikins (*Lonchura*) but this is still open to debate.

As the name implies, they are native to the islands of Java and Bali in Indonesia but have been introduced on many of the surrounding islands.

In aviculture, the Java Rice Bird has proven itself to be sturdy, reliable, and

long-lived, leading to its being declared illegal in many of the milder U.S. states where it is considered a crop pest.

Housing for this species is comparatively straightforward. A cage size of 3ft. x 2ft. x 2ft. is considered sufficient for a breeding pair, although we have had good results in an 18in cube commercial cage.

These birds should be supplied with a mix of larger seeds than would be suitable for the average finch. A mixture of 1/3 parakeet, 1/3 canary, and 1/3 finch mix should be appropriate for these birds, owing to their massive beak size. Javas seem to enjoy their cuttlefish bone a great deal so make

sure they have a large one available. It is certainly preferable to have them chew on the cuttle fish bone rather than on one's finger as they love to do during their necessary periodic nail trimmings.

As with all birds, fresh water should be available at all times.

Sexing these birds is straightforward. If possible, observe the individuals in a small colony and select the pair with the most radical differences. Cocks will have a broader, more massive, redder-tinged beak and will also tend to have a redder eye ring. Hens have narrower beaks and only a pale pink tinge to beak and eye ring.

Vocalizations tend to be a mixture of growling noises, certainly not what one would consider melodic. Although we have not observed these birds allopreening, their plumage usually looks immaculate, with every feather smoothly in place adding to the classic attractiveness of this distinctively marked gray, black, and white bird.

Cocks perform a mating ritual in which they incline their heads downward at a 45° angle, hop up and down on the perch, and grown towards the



These birds were successfully bred in an 18-inch cube cage. Note the size of the wooden nest box and its placement outside the cage.

Photo by Buckley and Buckley

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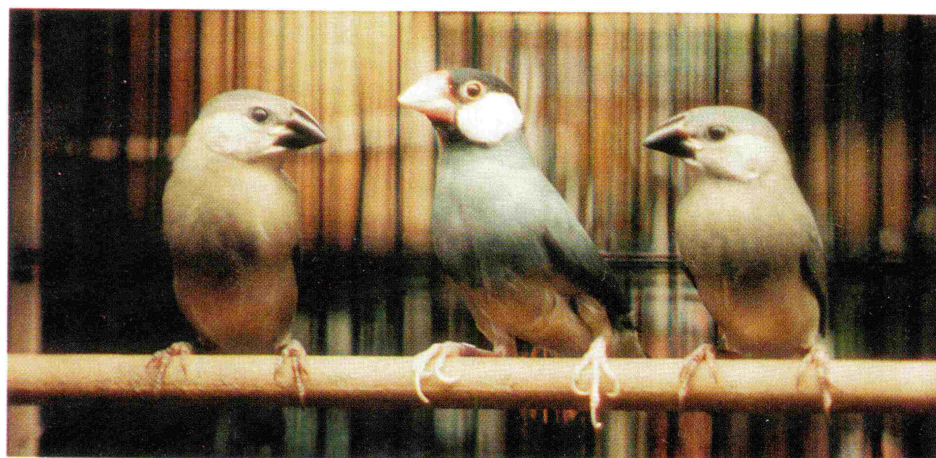
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Java Rice Bird adult surrounded by two juveniles. Note the difference in beak and plumage colors.

female. This mating growl grows into a rather bizarre, lengthy string of clucking noises which gradually become faster and louder as the "song" progresses. These vocalizations are described at length in Derik Goodwin's classic work *Estrildid Finches of the World* where it is noted that these growling sounds have also been observed in hostile situations.

Once a pair has been selected, they should be housed by themselves as this can be a belligerent species which does not work and play well with others. In fact, we once observed a Java dangling a Gouldian (*Chloebia gouldiae*) by the foot—a horrifying experience which did not seem to impress the Gouldian at all but which prompted us to immediately remove the Gouldian from the Java's cage.

This was an example of how we were mislead in our earliest finch-keeping days to believe one could mix finches together with impunity. *It does not work*—then or now.

Since we consider the Javas to be cavity breeders, we recommend a large wooden Budgie box to contain the Java's large eggs in large clutches.

We once had a very prolific pair which successfully bred in an 18in. x 18in. x 18in. commercial cage. The nest box was mounted outside the cage so as to not take up room inside.

Like most finches, the Java is opportunistic regarding nesting material and will accept 4-inch burlap strings, dried grass, hay, etc. This pair produced, incubated, and hatched six fertile eggs, going on to raise all the chicks to independence. These large eggs, chicks and adults could not have been

accommodated in the usual wicker finch nest basket.

Strangely enough, our Javas would not accept eggfood, mealworms, etc., as a protein source in their regular diet. It was only when the eggs hatched that they greedily accepted mealworms to feed their developing chicks. Once the chicks were weaned, the parents stopped eating mealworms. Contrary to the belief of some Scots, maybe Javas are not so stupid after all.

After weaning, juveniles should be separated from their parents to avoid "border disputes."

The juveniles take an incredibly long time to color up. They retain their predominately brown juvenile plumage for months until they slowly begin their adult molt into their characteristic gray color.

As with most birds with a substantial history in aviculture, several mutations have been developed. Among these are a white, a pied, a cinnamon, and a fawn. There are, no doubt, other mutations with which we are unfamiliar. We find it interesting that in Australia the normal coloration is called a blue.

Happily, we are able to end this discussion of the Java Rice Bird on a positive note. This bird is well established in aviculture world wide. It is not subject to the predictable downward spiral due to failed breeding attempts to which the African Estrildids are subject. Being attractive, robust, easily maintained, readily bred, and relatively inexpensive, the Java Rice Bird will without doubt continue to be a beginner's favorite which has rightfully become an avicultural staple. 🐦

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