

Waxbills and Their Allies

by Ian Hinze, Manchester, England

Part IV

Breeding

The Box Cage

Breeding one's birds has to be the primary aim of every serious birdkeeper and to accomplish this a pair is best housed alone. Box-cages are excellent in that they can be stacked one on top of the other, so a selected pair of waxbills can have interference-free breeding – or can they? Let us not forget that our just passing the cage can be enough to bring the sitting bird off the nest, so we need to be especially thoughtful when positioning a wicker nesting basket or half open-fronted nest-box. I like to position mine high up in a corner of the cage and surround it with the leaves of a pot-plant.

Pot-plants are so underestimated in waxbill aviculture and yet they can make such a difference to one's breeding success; they also add to the aesthetics of the birdroom. Good garden centers always have small specimens of weeping fig, *Ficus benjamina*, and philodendrons, *P. erubescens* or *P. scandens*, available. These should be placed in front of the nesting receptacle or, particularly for ground nesting species such as quail-finches and *Estrilda* waxbills, on the floor of the cage. Spider plants, *Chlorophytum comosum*, are excellent for this as they resemble clumps of grass. Never put actual turfs of grass on the cage or birdroom floor. I once did and on lifting them up with a view to replacing them with fresh ones I noticed that the area in which they had been positioned had become moist and moldy – extremely hazardous to a bird's health! Lesson learned, I now only place plant-pots in their saucers on the floor, keeping the area nice and dry.

The Free-flying Birdroom

The recommendations outlined here can also be applied to large flights.

I am fortunate in that I have owned four very large birdrooms, three of which I turned into free-flying ones. By far the best of all was the one I constructed in the back garden of my first house in Whitefield. It was a magnificent brick-built affair measuring 17 feet by 10 feet. Incorporated into one end of the birdroom I built an observation room of 8 feet by 4 feet, complete with a large viewing window behind which I sat and studied my charges for many a contented hour. A safety corridor ran

between the doors of the birdroom and my observation room, so that if a bird should actually get past me as I opened the birdroom door it would still be denied access to the outside world.

Half the length of the roof was covered with translucent sheets, so plenty of light could penetrate the birdroom, which was as essential as much for the various plants as it was for the birds. The wooden frames of these sheets proved a bonus as it was to these I attached the nesting baskets. First of all, I gently hammered u-shaped staples into the wood and thereafter merely slotted the hanging wire of the baskets into these. On the wall opposite my observation window and directly underneath the nesting baskets I drilled holes in a long length of narrow planking and the wall itself and affixed the planking with the use of rawl-plugs. Wider holes were then drilled approximately half way into the planking at various intervals and into these I slotted lengths of dowling for perches. I also hung up a length of dowling from the ceiling as a swing and, of course, the large Philodendrons, measuring over

Photo by Ian Hinze



Two Dybowski's Twinspot young in the nest. The birds were bred by the author.

six feet high, provided natural perching and cover. At night the birds loved to roost in them.

My birdroom had mainline electricity and water, so heating, lighting and water for washing utensils and for drinking and bathing was never a problem. I decided to concentrate on keeping Goldbreasts and the red eyed-striped *Estrilda waxbills*, the Common, Black-rumped and Rosy-rumped (the Arabian was never available).

The birds loved my set-up and I was blessed with many nests and plenty of young. All the species got on well together. Over the years I have also experimented with Blue-headed Cordon-bleus, *Uraeginthus cyanocephala*, Red-cheeked Cordon-bleus, *U. bengalus*, and Orange-cheeked Waxbills, *Estrilda melpoda*, all housed with the above species, but gave up as they were too assertive. The Orange-cheeked Waxbills would usurp the more timid Black-rumps, Rosy-rumps and Goldbreasts from their nests and the Cordon-bleus would take over which ever nest they had designs on. This is why when choosing birds for colony breeding their companions have to be selected carefully. The more assertive and less gregarious species are best housed one pair to a cage.

Best Starter Species

Once the birdroom is completely set-up and stocked with plenty of food, and providing one adheres to the suggestions herein, the novice is likely to find that he/she is able to breed quite a number of different species. Nevertheless, my first recommendation would be to start with keeping Goldbreasts. Otherwise, and in spite of the problems one may encounter when housing them as part of a mixed collection, I strongly recommend the Red-cheeked and Blue-headed Cordon-bleus. All three species are excellent birds to keep, easily sexed and possess delightful coloring. What is also of importance, any young produced will always be in demand and are, therefore, easy to sell. This is something that cannot be ignored as unsold stock means overcrowded cages.

Once a pair has been introduced to their quarters they should be disturbed as little as possible. Some settle down immediately, others can take a few days. What is vital at this time is to provide a probiotic with electrolytes in the drinking water to combat any possible outbreak of infection, usually caused by *Escherichia coli* bacteria in the gut, brought on through stress.

Even though our birds may settle down, they may show no intention of breeding. This could be due to a number of factors, such as incompatibility, the wrong time of year, and even age. One must exercise patience as it is not unusual for birds not to breed until at least the second year of being housed in their new quarters. Others may want to breed immediately.

All being well, the male will solicit the female through, usually, carrying a piece of nesting material, singing, dancing, flying to the nesting receptacle, in fact anything to get her attention. Although courtship routines may differ amongst individual waxbills species they are unmistakable. If, however, one of the birds becomes over amorous to the extent that the other partner could suffer serious injury, such as by serious pecking, they must be separated immediately and an attempt tried at a later date. A change of partner may even be required.

Experienced aviculturists only should ever attempt to cut the flight feathers of a belligerent bird. This temporarily disables the bird without causing it any harm and allows its mate to share the cage without fear of being bullied. Unable to chase after its mate, the clipped bird often settles down and breeding can be successful. The flight feathers grow back to normal after the molt.

Coconut fibers and soft, fine dry grasses are the best nesting materials to offer to the birds, along with a few chicken feathers and 2-3 inch strands of sacking fibre (burlap). When using grasses or hay it is important to sterilize them first. This is best done by pouring boiling water into a bucket and then adding half a capful of household bleach. Grasping hold of



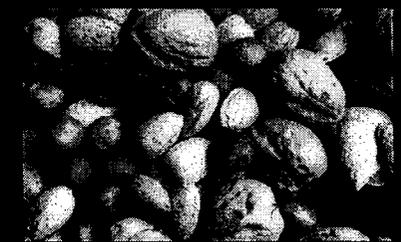
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the grass or hay you intend to use completely immerse it in the water with a stick or wooden spoon for at least 15 minutes. Thereafter, take the grass fibers out and put them in a very warm place to dry, turning and airing them occasionally. Provide the grasses only when they are completely dry. Sterilization should be undertaken because harmful fungal spores may be attached to the grass fibers and these need to be eradicated. In many species it is the male that builds the entire nest, in others the female takes an active part. Both will take turns in incubating the eggs and rearing the young.

Care of the Young

Waxbill nestlings are fed by regurgitation, i.e., the parent bird consumes an amount of food and then flies to the nest. On arriving at the nest it will be met by wide-open mouths begging for food, which stimulates the parent to bring the food back up from its crop and to "pump" it down into the grateful recipients. It is, therefore, essential that the food being regurgitated is adequate for the nestlings' needs.

Hard commercial seed is completely unsatisfactory as baby birds are unable to digest it. The parents instinctively know this, which is why they search out nutritious meals in soft packaging that can be quickly and easily assimilated – livefood! I cannot emphasize enough the importance of providing livefood for waxbills. Indeed, at breeding time they should be looked on, not as seedeaters, but as softbills.

Eggfood and the ripe and half-ripe seeds of some native grasses and plants should also be provided. If these seeds are unavailable, then soaked seed should be offered as a substitute. Eggfood is important because it is a complete food in itself and if one's birds can be encouraged to partake of it, the nestlings' will have a greater chance of surviving as it will be passed onto them in turn.

Once independent, the youngsters of colony nesters that are housed in large flights or a free-flying birdroom may be allowed to stay with their parents. Cage-bred youngsters, on the

other hand, must be separated from them. This serves two purposes: it allows the parents to go to nest again without any interference and, should the youngsters be the offspring of aggressive-type species, it protects the young, and especially the young males, from being mercilessly attacked by, usually, their father once they start to "colour up." Juvenile males of such species must also be separated from each other as fighting is sure to result. Once young birds are independent, that is, being able to fend for themselves, it is vital to continue augmenting the staple diet with a little livefood, wild seeds and greenfood.

Fostering

For whatever reasons, in their quest to increase the number of captive-bred waxbills, a number of breeders have resorted to taking eggs from nests and placing them under Bengalese Finches. This domesticated form of the Chinese race of the White-rumped Munia, *Lonchura striata swinhoei*, (Restall, 1996), a fabulous little bird in its own right, has for many decades been used to rear the young of, usually, more valuable waxbills, grassfinches, and munias.

Most famously of all, perhaps, is its use in the almost factory-farming production of the strikingly colored Gouldian Finch, *Chloebia gouldiae*. Through this common, though not universal, practice of using the Bengalese Finch we now have numerous strains of Gouldian and other estrildid finches that are incapable of successfully accomplishing any rearing of their own.

If we apply the Gouldian Finch experience to the fostering of waxbills, it is my belief that far from producing hardy free-breeding stock, the complete opposite would ensue. The danger of imprinting, for example, is an obvious risk but defective parental behavior is another strong possibility. Goodwin (1982) argues, quite rightly in my opinion, that it would be better to concentrate on trying to perpetuate only those birds which hatch and rear their own young in captivity as freely and successfully as the Bengalese

Finch – an aim unlikely to be achieved if every egg laid (or nestling hatched) by defective parents is fostered out.

With regard to the danger of imprinting, Immelmann (in Sparks, 1969) was able to show that male Zebra Finches, *Poephila guttata*, brought up by Bengalese Finches will always prefer to mix with and court Bengalese Finches rather than other Zebra Finches. At 30 days of age the features of the parent become indelibly imprinted on the young bird's brain and this governs its choice of companions and mate for the rest of its life. In those species in which the parents are sexually dichromatic, the young males may have to learn which of its parental types should be courted. The male Zebra Finch chases away its young when they are between 35 and 40 days old. This hostility on his part, who is more brightly colored than the female, helps instill in the young males the colour difference of the sexes so that when they mature and search for mates themselves they will not waste their energies in courting other males. If young male Zebra Finches are isolated from their parents before they are 35 days old, they will grow up to court both males and females. This clearly shows that imprinting can last for life.

Equally alarming, of one male and four female Blue-headed Cordon-bleus reared by Red-cheeked Cordon-bleus, all except one female were firmly imprinted on the foster species, even though they were reared and kept in a room with adults of both species (Goodwin, 1982). Therefore, the only exception to using foster parents should be when one or both natural parents take ill or die while having young or eggs in the nest. Even then, if at all possible these should be transferred to the nests of conspecific species, and preferably those which have eggs or young at a similar stage of development. 

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