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Cordon Bleu Finches

by
Robert G. Black
Franklin, North Carolina

Of all the finches maintained in aviculture, none is more active, more attractive, and more exasperating than the cordon bleu. Though several species may be referred to as cordon bleus, the bird I refer to is *Uraeginthus bengalus*, also called the red-cheeked cordon bleu. It has a wide native distribution throughout central Africa. Linnaeus originally classified the cordon bleu in 1776 as *Fringilla bengalus*.

Sexing the cordon bleus is quite simple in adult birds. The male will have the bright red cheek-patch that is so characteristic of this species. The hen lacks the cheek-patch, and the blue coloring on the hen is neither as extensive nor as brilliant as it is on the male.

Two other species may carry the name cordon bleu. First, a closely related species is called the blue waxbill or Angolan cordon bleu, *Uraeginthus angolensis*. The male of this species has no red cheek-patch, and the beak is more gray in color. The other species, the blue-capped cordon bleu, *Uraeginthus cyanocephala*, will not be confused with the cordon bleu discussed here, since its blue cap and lack of the red cheek-patches are quite distinctive characteristics. The females require closer examination, as they are similar in coloration.

Cordon bleus will do well in either a cage or aviary, but they're much more likely to attempt to breed under spacious aviary conditions. If cage maintenance is necessary, a large flight cage will be best. This will give the birds room for exercise and mating displays. A planted aviary will be best for housing them, of course, since it will attract a variety of insects that the finches relish.

Nearly all of the cordon bleus



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available now are imported birds. Though they usually settle down in a large cage or aviary fairly rapidly, it may take them some time to begin nesting. Don't expect any nesting activity until September or October. Since these birds come from areas south of the equator, they will begin breeding during our autumn here in the northern hemisphere. If all conditions are right, they will attempt to breed in either a cage or an aviary.

Whether the cordon bleus are kept in a cage or aviary, be sure to offer them a variety of natural branches for perching. Oak branches are excellent, and small trees such as the dogwood and hawthorn provide perches of the best type. If you're in the eastern mountains, mountain laurel is ideal. In the western states, oak, manzanita, and other shrubs will provide good perches. The important thing is to offer branches of varying sizes. This is important, for it gives the birds' feet and legs the exercise that only bouncy, natural branches can offer.

Once the cordon bleus have settled down and reached their breeding season, the male will begin his amusing display to the hen. He takes the longest piece of grass he can find, flies up to the hen with it and proceeds to do a bouncy, little dance complete with singing and fluffed out feathers. This display eventually will impress the hen sufficiently that mating occurs.

Nest building may begin before you see this display, but it's usually a prelude to the nesting activity. The cordon bleus will accept a variety of covered nesting receptacles. However, they prefer to build their own nest in a thick bush or a clump of drooping grass. These birds build a covered nest, and they prefer



Cordon bleu finches are among the most active and attractive birds in aviculture. Hen above, male below.



An Editorial Regarding The New York Ban On The Sale Of Wild Caught Birds

by H. Richard Mattice, delegate; Sheldon Dingle, editor

Fortunately, the United States provides a climate of free speech wherein many opinions on a given issue can be presented. In this editorial we shall make our opinions known regarding an issue that concerns American aviculture. The issue, of course, is New York's ban on the sale of wild caught birds. It behooves you to study carefully the various opinions on the subject, determine the most accurate facts, and make up your own mind regarding how you personally feel about the concept.

We shall present four points. First, in this magazine there is an opinion survey that should not be taken lightly. We feel it is sinister and designed to do harm to unknowing, innocent aviculturists. Second, we want to point out who is behind the New York law and how it came about. Third, we want to explain the difference between emotional protectionism and true, reasonable conservation. Fourth, we shall open the door to dialogue and communication between two factions of bird lovers who seem to differ regarding what is truly best for the birds of the world.

First: In this issue of *Watchbird* on page 45 you will find a full page ad paid for by B.I.R.D.S. (Bird Information, Research and Defense Society), a recently formed committee whose aim is to stop all traffic in wild-caught birds. The A.F.A. accepted the ad in good faith so BIRDS might state its case and generate a good, healthy dialogue. The ad, it was felt, would be educational and informative.

Indeed it was. Just consider some of the things we learned from it.

1. BIRDS is a committee formed specifically to coordinate the wild bird legislative drive that aims to ban the sale of wild birds anywhere in

the U.S.A.

2. Some of the organizations supporting BIRDS' actions have been historically hostile to the keeping of *any* wildlife in captivity — indeed, to the point of preferring to see the California condor “die with dignity” rather than be captive-bred.
3. BIRDS is motivated by emotion rather than reason which is the only innocent explanation for its blatant misuse of facts and figures. (Bird habitats are rarely — if ever — destroyed by hunters. No poultry flock since 1972 has gotten Newcastle Disease from an exotic bird).
4. BIRDS does not understand true conservation and is basing its conservation efforts on outmoded and unworkable theory that field biologists and other professionals have long since discarded.
5. BIRDS wants your simple yes/no answers to four very complex questions that are written in ambiguous and loaded language. There must be a careful definition of terms before one can answer the questions. For example, what really constitutes conservation? How is captive breeding encouraged by restricting the importation of wild birds?
6. BIRDS wants your personal relationship to the pet industry (breeder, dealer, etc.) to be put to what use we can't imagine.
7. BIRDS wants your personal address and phone number — again, for what use we have no idea.

All things considered, we have come to the opinion that the BIRDS opinion survey found in this magazine is a document riddled with false and misleading information, and that it contains com-

plex, loaded questions slanted in such a way as to be unanswerable with a simple yes or no. We have decided that it would be a mistake to fill out the survey for many reasons including our feeling that *any* data provided to BIRDS may be used contrary to our expectations. Also, it is just not done to tear a page out of the *Watchbird*.

Rather than fill out the survey, we are going to write short personal notes to BIRDS expressing our opposition to hasty laws formed with no public input and no valid reason.

Second: For many years various organizations have tried in vain to get restrictive animal laws passed. Now in the period of a few months a highly restrictive law is conceived and passed. How? Why? In our opinion, the moving force behind the New York law banning the sale of wild caught birds is Mr. Whitney North Seymour, Jr., a New York lawyer — the same fellow who with his family founded BIRDS. Because Mr. Seymour obviously has some sort of power we feel it would be helpful to learn what we can about his personality and his motivation.

Seymour's 25-year-old daughter bought a spectacled Amazon parrot from a local pet shop and the bird died. Seymour was obviously shaken by the experience. He began a crusade, a holy war, if you will, to assuage the pain he felt seeing the wild-caught parrot die. Now, in effect, Seymour seems to feel that no one in New York should be allowed to have a wild-caught bird lest it, too, die.

At Seymour's urging (he is the son of a powerful New York democrat), Senate Bill 59472 and Assembly Bill A22589 were introduced and speeded through the New York legislature. Apparently, astute political activists with family connections and heavy funding knew how to guide the bills through the legislature with no public or industry input. The idea is frightening.

To learn more about our esteemed Mr. Seymour one can analyze his letter of 15 November 1984 to Mr. Gary Lilienthal, A.F.A.'s counsel. Seymour says, “The American Federation of Aviculture is a non-profit organization and it should not engage in lobbying, particularly when the effect of the lobby is to protect and advance commercial profit-making interests.” We'll leave it to the lawyers to figure out what is and what isn't lobbying but we wonder what a wealthy New York lawyer has against profit-making commerce. We feel that free enterprise and the possibility of making a profit is the American way.

(Continued on next page)

What alternative does Mr. Seymour suggest?

Seymour also wrote that, "the position taken in your legislative memo was in direct contravention to the stated purposes of the American Federation of Aviculture, which is . . ." and he then misquoted the A.F.A.'s statement of purpose printed in each magazine on the Member Club page. Seymour is a newcomer to the bird world — he owns two parrots we've been told, one alive and one dead — yet he has no qualms about telling A.F.A.'s legal counsel what the A.F.A. stands for.

In the same letter Seymour wrote, "Instead of mounting a negative attack on such obviously well-intended legislation, you should be acting affirmatively to encourage it . . ." Again Mr. Seymour tells the A.F.A. what it should do. He adds, "By your actions in siding with commercial importers and wholesalers of imported birds, *and against the interests of captive breeders*, [italics mine] you are destroying your own credibility . . ." Seymour now is an expert regarding the interests of captive breeders. In truth, the New York law will in all probability prove a total disaster to captive breeders. Refer to Jennings's article on page 22 of this magazine.

Another ironic paragraph in Seymour's letter to Lilienthal states, "Your actions in opposing this legislation were not authorized by the general membership of A.F.A., after informed discussion of the issues . . ." Where was the informed discussion of the issues while the legislation was being considered? Seymour and his political cronies swept the bills through the legislature in great secrecy, almost under cover of night as it were, yet he has the poor manners to chastise the A.F.A. leadership for taking a stand without exhausting studies, surveys, and discussions. Come now, Mr. Seymour, fair is fair.

Seymour's letter of November 15, 1984 lends itself very nicely to further dissection, none of which will improve Seymour's humor, but this editorial lacks space.

Other Seymour statements also reveal, somewhat, the nature of the fellow. For example, when the daughter's parrot became defunct Seymour was, "distressed by the heart-break, agony, and pains of conscience connected with the loss of the beautiful creature for whom we all felt responsible . . ." Such sensitivity is remarkable, a true virtue. We hope his tender heart will be equally touched by the anguish,

agony, and distress his New York law will cause thousands of his fellow humans who live and work in New York when their aviaries and pet shops go down the tubes.

Third: But we shan't get into personalities. Rather, we'd like to consider several aspects of conservation. Mr. Seymour and cohorts are under the mistaken opinion that their law banning the sale of wild-caught birds is a conservation effort. It is not. Wild birds that need conserving are very seldom caught for the pet trade. Bird trappers and traders operate like any other good businessmen — they catch the most birds with the least effort. The most birds, obviously, are those that are common and can be caught *en masse*. The birds that are rare and endangered are extremely difficult to find even in small numbers much less to trap by the thousands. Also, the rare and endangered birds are *already* banned from commerce by State laws, National laws, and International agreements. The New York law affects them not at all. Indeed, many of the wild-caught birds commonly imported for the pet trade are actually *pest* species in their own country. In fact, I think one imported species that Mr. Seymour wants to conserve — the monk parakeet — has been declared a pest bird even in the state of New York.

There is much more to conservation than merely banning traffic. Indeed, up-to-date researchers and field biologists have come to the conclusion that many wild animals will thrive better in the wild if they are treated as renewable resources. In other words, if the jungle Indians can make money by harvesting the surplus parrots in their area they will tend to care for the nest sites and preserve the breeders. No one wants to kill the goose which lays the golden eggs.

Robert Ridgeley, a noted wildlife researcher has written, "Blanket prohibitions on the export of a country's fauna is not the answer and invites breaking the law. Much more preferable are selective prohibitions . . . there is no reason why, after study, the capture of certain species cannot be placed on some sort of sustained yield basis."

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is on record saying that, "commercial exportation, both of wildlife and natural resources, is acceptable, but only if it avoids extinction, exhaustion and the irreversible destruction of habitat. Sustaining yield is the key. Encouraging poorer countries to discover the economic potential

of their wildlife . . . is seen as a more effective way of securing any animal's future than preaching ideals."

The most up-to-date, professional conservation literature goes on and on in this vein. Many third world countries are beginning to understand "the economic potential of their wildlife" and are actually making conservation headway for the first time. In future issues of *Watchbird* this subject will be expanded and fully documented — some of you are not very knowledgeable regarding conservation and we should like to expose you to the most modern, progressive, successful methods of conservation lest you be taken in by BIRDS' narrow, unworkable, out-moded efforts. It is very easy to blow BIRDS' cover as a conservationist organization.

Fourth: All well-intentioned people should be able to discuss intelligently the issues at hand. We feel that the A.F.A. as an organization and the A.F.A. members as individuals are concerned about birds both wild and captive. We feel that avian conservation is of utmost importance. We feel that birds in parlors and aviaries should thrive under the most excellent conditions. The A.F.A. has even endorsed the concept of a National Cage and Aviary Bird Improvement Plan. The A.F.A. has funded field research as well as laboratory research for the betterment of all birds, wild and captive. No one, I am sure, can reasonably doubt the A.F.A.'s good intentions and actions regarding birds.

BIRDS, too, perhaps, is well intentioned regarding birds. If so, we should like to see an open dialogue between the two organizations. We should like to call all facts and figures out in the open. We should like to call on all pertinent specialists and professionals regarding birds both wild and captive. We should like to see *all* interested parties involved in discussion of the issues. We should like to have input from scientists, conservationists, aviculturists, members of the pet industry, and all well intentioned "concerned citizens."

Unfortunately, we tend to doubt one's open, honest, good intentions when family connections, money, and secrecy are employed to slip a dubious law onto the books. We sincerely hope that we are all reasonable, well-intentioned bird lovers who can work together for the ultimate good of all — human and avian alike.

The last thing the birds of the world need is an unreasonable, emotional, holy war or crusade. Let's hope for better dialogue in the future. •

long grasses as building materials. They may also accept a commercial finch nestbox, a covered wicker nest, or the abandoned nest of another bird. In my experience, they will accept a thick clump of grass as a nesting site in preference to any other location. They hide their nest so skillfully that you may not know they're nesting until you flush the hen from the grass one day. An ornamental grass found in nurseries called fountain grass, *Pennisetum ruppelii*, is ideal for them.

This nesting preference is a main reason why an aviary is preferable for cordon bleus. Also, keep in mind that they don't need a jungle. These finches are birds of the scrub and grasslands of Africa, so they'll do best with lots of grass, a few thick bushes such as boxwood or dwarf holly, and perhaps one larger, open tree for perching. This affords them plenty of hiding places and nesting sites. If they're going to attempt to breed, the cordon bleus will do so most readily in such a planted aviary.

Once the nest is completed, the hen will lay a clutch averaging four or five tiny, white eggs. Both sexes share incubation during the day with the hen sitting at night. The incubation period is quite short, only about eleven days.

During the incubation period, the birds will leave the nest at the slightest approach or provocation. The exception always proves the rule, of course, and I had one pair that nested in a covered wicker nest in a flight cage. This pair would not leave the nest until my hand was actually in the cage.

When the young hatch, they are a mass of long, dark fuzz with a tiny mouth and beak. Though I've never attempted to hand-feed them, their tiny size coupled with such a small beak would make hand-feeding, at best, a monumental, exasperating chore.

At this point in the breeding cycle, the biggest danger is that there will be a short-circuit in the breeding urge, and the cordon bleus will refuse to feed the babies and will throw them out of the nest. This is all too common in imported finches, unfortunately. The cause is obscure, but is likely to be related to the natural insect foods available in the cordon bleu's native haunts. Imported birds were raised in the wild, of course, and many had already bred under their native conditions. When the foods they are accustomed to, particularly the termites that abound in Africa, are not available, instinct signals a famine, and the birds instinctively end the breeding cycle at this point.

The best way to circumvent this type

of disaster is to make use of foster parents. If you don't foster the cordon bleu eggs, you're unlikely to raise any young ones. A pair that ejects their newly-hatched young is unlikely to do any better in subsequent nesting attempts. Once your first generation are raised under local feeding and conditions, in most cases they will breed successfully on their own once they're mature. The best foster parents for the cordon bleus will be zebra finches, since the young are very similar to newly-hatched zebra finches. You can also use society finches, but few pairs of these will accept and feed the baby cordon bleus.

Since the waxbills seem to have difficulty digesting whole seeds until they fledge, it may be necessary to condition the foster parent birds to eat a diet of softer foods before you foster the cordon bleus to them. I've always found this to be successful, but other very successful breeders have informed me of fostering with the normal high-protein diet without removing the seeds from the diet. Everyone's conditions and experiences differ, of course, so if one method doesn't work for you, try another. When you achieve a method that does work for you, stick to it.

The young cordon bleus will develop rapidly in the care of their own parents or under foster parents. The babies will begin feathering out at two weeks of age and usually leave the nest before they are three weeks of age. After one week out of the nest, they are able to feed themselves reasonably well, but their natural parents will continue feeding them for another week or so. Both of their natural parents will feed them in the nest and for some time after they fledge.

Sexing the young is possible as soon as they have completely feathered out and before the red cheek-patch appears in the young males. The blue coloring will be less extensive on the immature hens than on the young males. Though the cheek-patch does not appear until immature males go through their first molt, a few feathers removed from the ear coverts before the first molt begins will regrow in blue in immature hens, but in red in the young males. Since young males resemble adult hens so closely, an imported young bird purchased as a hen might later molt out to be a male. Young birds will have gray beaks, however, and the coloring changes gradually to the pink and flesh color of the adults.

Problems can occur at any time during the nestling or fledgling stage, but



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they most often occur at the pinfeather stage. At this point in their growth, the body growth and feather growth together require relatively huge amounts of complete protein. If that protein is not available constantly and in adequate quantity, the nestlings will die at this stage. There is no substitute for complete protein in the diet.

Another problem that occurs frequently in nestlings is bacterial contamination of the digestive tract. Human surroundings are always good breeding areas for a variety of microorganisms that are deadly to the birds in any concentration. If you live in an area of chlorinated water, it is unusual to encounter this problem. Those breeders using wells, spring water, or rain water will have this problem occasionally. The most effective, fast, and complete treatment I've found is simply to add one drop of any sodium hypochlorite bleach to each ounce of the birds' drinking water for a day or two. Except in the rare cases of fungal infection or poisoning through mycotoxins, this treatment will cure any intestinal infection in the young cordon bleu nestlings as the parent birds feed them the treated water. When young cordon bleus fledged and near independence become ill, the cause is usually also bacterial contamination of the digestive tract. Treat the water as recommended for intestinal infections in the nestlings. The technical name for these digestive breakdowns is *enteritis*, and the most prominent symptoms are puffiness, listlessness, and diarrhea.

You can maintain cordon bleus in good health temporarily on a diet of mixed seeds, greens, cuttlebone, fruits, and some vegetables. However, such a diet is virtually devoid of cobalamin (Vitamin B12) and Vitamin D3. Maintaining the birds in open sunlight will solve the Vitamin D3 problem, since the cordon bleus can then form their own. Outdoor maintenance will allow the birds to catch insects and eat dirt that will supply the cobalamin they need. The *Streptomyces* bacteria in the soil are the primary cobalamin creators, and commercial supplements of cobalamin are harvested as by-products of the commercial manufacture of streptomycin.

However, the maintenance diet listed is far too low in complete protein for breeding. Cordon bleus in an outdoor aviary with an abundant supply of insects will have sufficient complete protein for breeding, since the dry weight of most insects is over 70% complete protein. This is why our native wild

bird nestlings that are fed almost exclusively on insects grow and develop so fast. As an alternative, you can feed the commercially available insects and worms, such as mealworms, white-worms, fly larvae, and crickets. You can also grow your own aphids, fruit flies, and earthworms, all of which are excellent live foods for the cordon bleus.

For cordon bleus that are completely acclimated to captivity or have been raised in cages and aviaries, the commercial high-protein supplements may be acceptable foods. If you can get the birds to eat them, such commercial preparations as monkey chow, game bird starter, turkey starter, and dog food are excellent protein sources.

Mashed, hard-boiled eggs are an excellent food for all birds, high in complete protein with a good variety of vitamins, fats, and minerals. They're quite inexpensive and easy to prepare. Simply boil an egg for about ten minutes, shell and mash it thoroughly. The resulting mix will be an appetizing, uniform, light yellow color. You can add a slightly heaping teaspoon of any commercial vitamin-mineral supplement in powder form to the egg for better results. A teaspoon of powdered soy protein isolate added to the mix will increase the protein content greatly, in addition. With these powdered additions to the egg, it will not spoil during the day unless it gets wet. The mix will dry out and harden in the feeding dishes if the birds don't consume all of it.

All finches in my experience will eat this mix readily and daily, once they become accustomed to it, and it will supply all of the complete protein necessary for raising the cordon bleus or any other finches. If one egg is too much for your day's feeding, divide the finished mix into daily portions, wrap each portion in any clear freezer wrap, and freeze enough for each day's feeding in a separate package. Thaw one of these each day for use in your day's feeding. Freezing results in very little nutrient destruction, and this method works very well when a friend is caring for your birds during trips and vacations.

Your diet for the cordon bleu is the most important factor for keeping them in good health and inducing them to breed successfully. With adequate feeding and particular attention to an adequate supply of complete protein in the cordon bleu diet, the birds will attempt to breed under all but the worst of conditions. Whether they breed or not, the cordon bleus are always an attractive and colorful addition to any aviary of small birds. ●

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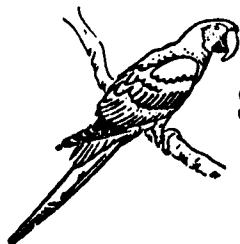
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