

Breeding the Kulikoro Firefinch

(*Lagonosticta virata*)

by Carol Anne Calvin and Stash Buckley
Magnolia, New Jersey



Kulikoro cock, adult.



Kulikoro hen, adult.

Hand reared fledgling Kulikoros.



This is one of those rare birds which is seldom imported. In shipments of firefinches from West Africa, hundreds of birds must be hand-sorted with the hope of locating one or two individuals. The long term goal, of course, is to assemble a small breeding colony.

This bird superficially resembles the Dark Firefinch (*Lagonosticta rubricata*), but can be easily identified by the second primary feather which, in the Kulikoro is not emarginated on the inner web. Also, the Kulikoro tends to have a more glowing red, and the sexes are less visually dimorphic. To give a size reference, this bird is approximately twice the size of the most familiar species, the Senegal, or Red-billed, Firefinch (*Lagonosticta senegal*).

We have two sexed pairs, each pair kept in their own individual flight, four feet long by two feet wide by three feet high. These are generously furnished with tussocks of dried grass and natural branch perches. Each flight has a shop fixture con-

taining two four-foot Vita-lite tubes placed directly on top.

These birds are kept in our "grassland" room at approximately 80°F, where the air is quite dry. One pair began building after about three months in a tussock of grass, constructing a small rounded nest with a side entrance. Building materials consisted of dried grasses and strands of burlap. In subsequent nestings, a small wicker basket was also accepted. The pair was encouraged to breed by providing them with small, molted mealworms.

About mid-February 1991, three eggs were laid. This was later proven to be their average clutch size. Incubation was the average length for Estrildids — around 12 days — and was performed by both cock and hen. These birds raised their own babies for approximately one week. One chick was found dead in the corner of the flight, its abdomen ripped in quite a violent manner. The remaining two chicks were removed from the nest and placed in an Ani-



This flight cage, four feet long, two feet wide and three feet high, serves as a successful home for one pair of Kulikoro finch. Ample tussocks of dried grass and natural branches are provided.

Photos courtesy of the author

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mal Intensive Care Unit where the temperature was set at 88°F. These were handfed every hour around the clock, with the exception of 12 midnight to 5 A.M. They were fed with a 1 cc mono-ject syringe. Their diet consisted of Roudybush Formula 3 which is made for handfeeding birds. The chicks developed very rapidly and the changes were noticeable from day to day. As with all finches, when the wing feathers had grown enough to sufficiently cover the back, we turned down the temperature one degree per day until we reached 85°F. We also observed, as in other finches, when the pin-feathers on the head had opened, the digestion rate slowed down dramatically. Feeding was reduced to once every hour and a half, with a safe break period occurring between 12 midnight and 6 a.m. It was at about this time that we introduced a young Society Finch with clipped wings into their cage. The Society's job was to teach the Kulikoro chicks how to be birds, but mainly how to feed themselves. Also placed in the Intensive Care Unit was a very shallow water dish, finch seed and millet spray.

These and all subsequent Kulikoro chicks went through a strange partial molt, namely an occasional red feather kept popping up here and there without any pattern. This happened before they were weaned which, in this case, occurred on or about April 2, 1991. We have found that handfed chicks take longer to wean than do either parent-raised or fostered chicks.

The second pair also bred and we experienced similar problems which necessitated the need for handfeeding. These birds had dark skinned chicks which can be successfully raised by Societies. However, as fate would have it, we were working with numerous dark skinned chicks at the time and all of our appropriately conditioned Societies had their nests full. Thus, some handfeeding was inevitable.

Due to the efforts of the World Wildlife Fund, 1996 may be the end of importation of wild-caught birds used in the pet trade. Even though birds can then be acquired by aviculturists for breeding purposes, we all must work diligently with our chosen species if we are able to have these birds in the year 2000 and beyond. ●

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