

Experiences with African Finches

by Lloyd Wright
Madill, Oklahoma

In my 20 years of raising African finches, I have not found the exact formula for success.

There are a few truisms that cannot be ignored and they are that Cordon Bleus (red cheeks) will almost always throw chicks out of the nest when first imported. After the second or third year, greater success is had. I feel they become more trusting of available food to which they have become accustomed and successfully raise their young. The offspring of the hatchings are more reliable but not in



Red-cheeked Cordon Bleus.



St. Helena or Common Waxbills.



Peter's Twinspot (male).

every instance.

African Fires are more reliable in this regard, but do not tolerate interference at breeding time and require more privacy. Infertile eggs are numerous among this species if too crowded as copulation is easily interrupted. They are very good breeders if in the right environment. I have successfully bred them in cages of approximately 3' x 3' x 2' as well as in a large, planted greenhouse. In the cage arrangement they can be housed with other benign species such as Strawberries (Red Avadavat), Bichenos (Owl finches), Lady Goulds, etc., without interference.

Gray and Green Singing Finches are very aggressive with all species as well as their own and should be housed alone for success. I learned this lesson the hard way. At one time I felt that unrelated species would be okay together and I had a pair of Green Singers and Strawberries in a large cage 4' x 5' x 3' and Strawberries had five chicks in the nest. At the same time the Green Singers were in the process of nesting and when the Strawberries fledged the Singer male attacked and killed four of the chicks before I could intervene and I was able to save only one. Needless to say, I removed the Singers and they have successfully raised one clutch and are on three fertile eggs at this moment. The Strawberries went on to raise two clutches of three and five and are in the process of fledging four more. A pair of Cordon Bleus was in the cage and the Strawberry hen selected the cup nest that was in the cage for the Singers. When the chicks hatched, the Bleu male fed the chicks, canary style, and beat the Strawberries to the freshly put down food. Together they finished the job. In the meantime, his hen was in a nearby wicker nest on infertile eggs.

Another species with which I have had success is Gold-breasted Waxbills. These tiniest of all the waxbills are a joy to watch including listening to their delightful little song. They usually set up housekeeping in an abandoned nest of another species. Sometimes they put in fresh material but not always. They clutch three to five small white eggs and I have never known them to throw chicks out. They are intimidated at the feeding station, especially from the Bleus, therefore I provide several feeding

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areas to avoid this.

In the greenhouse, 10' x 16' x 8' there is a large ficus which is the favorite of the St. Helenas. They have built large, bulky, conical nests with some stacked three high. This species is another good breeder but easily intimidated and benefit from the separate feeding station.

The greenhouse is full of many plants such as three bougainvillia loaded with blooms most all season, but especially beautiful in late fall and winter. There are many ferns, clivia, gardenias, tropical hibiscus and baskets of impatiens and variegated air-plane plants. There are many foliage varieties.

In the years I have used this unit, I have learned what does well in it and what does not. The species I do not use in this situation are any of the singers, weavers, Lady Goulds or Societies. The Societies, like the Zebras, are too noisy and will interfere with nesting. The Singers and Weavers are too aggressive as are other species, but I have not had first hand experience with them. I feel the Goulds would be okay if not cage-raised only. They seem to be dis-oriented when in such a large area and will injure themselves. Temperature is kept about 60° with an automatically operated exhaust fan for ventilation in the summer. This unit now houses five pairs of Gold-breasted Waxbills, three pairs of Strawberries, four pairs of African Fires, five pairs of St. Helenas, six pairs of Red-cheeked Cordon Bleus and one pair of Binchenos. There are many unsexed fledglings at this time and I have an auxilliary area that is opened for the birds to fly into and, when closed off, allows catching excess birds to keep this colony under control. Without this facility, catching would be impossible due to the dense foliage.

The feeding program consists of a seed mixture of four parts finch mix, one part straight canary and one part parakeet mix. Meal worms and fly larvae wigglers are thrown three times a day in the breeding season and once a day during the non-breeding season. I use a mixture of hard-cooked eggs with shells crushed to which is added vionate, wheat germ, Skipio's high protein mix and Gerber's High Protein cereal. The cereal is added to give a lighter and less dense mixture making

it easier to dispense. Frozen mixed vegetables are put on top of the seed and the egg mixture on top of that to keep it cool. Nothing is left of the vegetable and egg food mixtures when the next feeding time comes around. In the breeding season, this is done morning and noon. If the nest has four or more chicks, I repeat this at night and it is always gone when I turn out the light around 9:00 p.m. The greenhouse operates on seasonal light only with a 60 watt night light on year around.

My experience with Peter Twin Spots has not been so successful. I have a beautiful male for which I am trying to secure a hen. Sad to say, I have spent over \$1,500.00 trying to establish this species. My first attempt in my greenhouse was semi successful. A nest was made on the ground and eight fertile eggs were laid, but a mouse got in and disrupted the nest. I lost the hen before another nest could be built. I have since gotten rid of the mouse problem and feel I will have success now. The wasted money mentioned was due to receiving imported birds that were very badly handled in quarantine and I lost all of them in a matter of a few days. It is not hard to see why importation is being curtailed. The dreadful way these beautiful birds are handled is a disgrace.

Being retired, as you might have guessed, there is time for all of this activity. I also raise Magna Double Yellow-headed Amazons, Leadbeater Cockatoos and cockatiels. Three summers ago, I put up a large outside aviary covered with a plastic mesh. It is 69' x 54' x 10' high with sides of 1/4" wire cloth. This houses at this time Golden Pheasants, Peacocks, quail, and a few fancy pigeons. In the middle is a 35' pond with Koi and a pair of Mandarin Ducks. I am looking for a small variety of swans.

My first love is and always will be finches. I wish I could have worked with more African species, but I guess availability will be curtailed now, but I am not really upset about this for obvious reasons as stated above.

If I can be of assistance with my limited knowledge, it would be my pleasure. You can reach me at Rt. 2, Box 380A, Madill, OK 73446, phone 405-795-5217. I am not selling any birds at this time nor in the near future. ●