

Looking for...

# the Purpurkronfink

*Rhodospingus purpureus*

by Stash Buckley  
and  
Carol Anne Calvin  
Magnolia, New Jersey

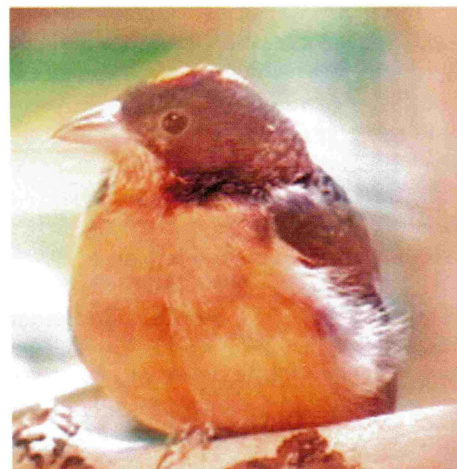
The crested finches of South America have always been popular. Most people are familiar with the Black-crested Finch *Lophospingus pusillus*, more commonly known as the Pygmy Cardinal, and the Red-crested Finch *Coryphospingus cucullatus*. The genus *Rhodospingus*, however, has always been very rare in American aviculture. Those who are aware of it know only of the *Rhodospingus* Finch *Rhodospingus cruentus* as this is the only species of the genus we can find reported in English language avicultural literature. Undoubtedly, *Rhodospingus purpureus* has not made an entry into American aviculture until now. When discussing this bird we always refer to it as the Purpurkronfink, as there is no American common name for it and the English translation of the German name is "Purple-crowned Finch" which is very misleading as the bird does not have a purple crest, but rather a red one. The only place we have ever heard this bird mentioned was in the German ornithological journal, *Gefiederte Welt*, in articles in the January and February 1991 issues entitled "Der Purpurkronfink" by Otto Urlepp.

Several years ago, a friend of ours was discussing importation of the "other kind" of Red-crested finch. We had no idea what he was talking about until we read of them in *Gefiederte Welt*. He was indeed lucky enough to find four unsexed juveniles domestically bred in Germany. These later proved to be one cock and three hens. Our friend kept these birds in an outside aviary all summer and in the fall wanted to part with them along with many of his softbills, as he was thinning out his collection in preparation for a move to Costa Rica where he planned to open a bird park. We hesitate to mention his name here as, of the writing of this article, we were unable to reach him to get his permission. We consider him to be the premier soft-

bill breeder in this country and would have liked to have given him the credit for having imported these birds.

We would like to thank Sigie Meyer for translating the *Gefiederte Welt* article for us. He reports that on his most recent trip to Europe he was unable to track down any Purpurkronfink, only rumors of their continued existence in European aviaries. We would also like to thank Levin Tilghman for his very complete written translation of the first of the two German articles.

There is a good photo of the better-known species of *Rhodospingus*, *Rhodospingus cruentus*, in *Simon & Schuster's Guide to Pet Birds* by Matthew M. Vriends. The *purpureus* differs from this bird in having a scarlet-red breast and more of a velvety black on upper parts. The hen *purpureus* is more of a saffron yellow, not the gray and brown of the *cruentus* hen. In fact, the photo of the



Cock Purpurkronfink *Rhodospingus purpureus*. The scarlet-red breast has faded since he is kept indoors. The red crest is not erected in this pose.



Hen Purpurkronfink *Rhodospingus purpureus*. Her larger body size and proportionately longer, pointed beak illustrate the dramatic dimorphism which occurs in some species.

Photos by S. Buckley & C.A. Calvin

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hen *purpureus* published in the *Gefiederte Welt* article was, up to that date, the only known published photograph of a hen. It is obvious that the *purpureus* is the more attractive and desirable of the two species — the cock Purpurkron being the size of a stocky Violet-eared Waxbill *Uraeginthus granatina*, with the hen slightly larger than the cock.

We know there is at least one pair in Great Britain, but the only documented breedings of which we are aware occurred in Germany.

This is a very aggressive species, and probably ranks as the most aggressive species with which we have ever worked. We remember the time we had a breeding pair of Cuban Melodious Finches *Tiaris canora* which we consider to be very aggressive. The cock Cuban merely chased off a free-flying Masked Grassfinch *Poephila personata* who landed on his cage. However, more recently, when a free-flying Black-capped Waxbill *Estrilda nonnula* landed on the cage of the nest-building Purpurkronfink, the cock not only chased the offender away with actions, but also with "words" — a loud, menacing squawk. This occurred repeatedly

until the Black-caps learned not to land on their cage. We work mostly with estrildid finches and, of this group, even the one with the most aggressive reputation — the Black-bellied Crimson Finch *Neochmia phaeton phaeton* — we found to be far less aggressive than either the Cuban Melodious or the Purpurkronfink, having had no real problems with this sort of aggressive behavior.

The Purpurkron cock is not only aggressive towards other species of birds, but also towards his own kind. We almost lost a hen when we had two hens in the cage with the cock to see which he preferred. The three got along well for several weeks. The cock, unlike estrildid finch cocks, showed no warning chasing of either hen. Then, suddenly, one day while we were out of the room, the cock decided to attack one of them. We heard the hen's distress calls and the cock's aggressive attack cries and came running. We found the victim severely shaken, in shock, and bleeding about the head, huddled in a corner on the flight floor. Fortunately, when removed immediately to a separate cage out of sight of the cock, the hen recovered and was her old self after several days. We

saw no further aggression between the cock and the "chosen" hen. This experience parallels the German author's observation of finding a hen unexpectedly and unaccountably dead. Perhaps he was not so lucky as we and did not hear the hen's distress calls.

In spite of their ferocity in protecting their nest, they are really very shy birds, especially the hen. She is difficult to see, as not only is she more drab, but she is much more shy than the cock, dashing for cover whenever we enter the birdroom. In fact, when trying to find her in the "underbrush" of the flight, the first thing seen is her big, dark eyes, consistent with a bird who spends much time in thick cover. What is most surprising is this shy bird's preference for building nests in open areas, using very visible white nesting material, which advertises their presence. We learned of this preference for white nesting material in the article in *Gefiederte Welt* and were amazed at the sudden spurt in nest-building activity when we provided some torn white cotton balls on the floor of the Purpurkrons' 4ft. x 3ft. x 2ft. heavily planted cage. The cock placed this in an open Canary style nest which we had positioned high on the front side of their cage.

The real problem in breeding these birds seems to lie with the hen, due to the reluctance of such a shy bird to breed in captivity. In the wild, these birds have a very small range in western Ecuador and Peru, where the breeding season is triggered by the coming of the rains. They tend to have very small clutches — one to three eggs — but compensate for this by recycling very quickly and continuously while the rains are present. This is illustrated by the fact that the Purpurkron has one of the shortest breeding cycles — incubation lasting 12 days, with the chicks fledging at only eight or nine days of age. The eggs are reported as being a grayish-white, conical in shape, and speckled on the blunt end.

The dietary requirements of this bird are quite simple: a basic finch diet supplemented with various fruits and vegetables and, of course, livefood. We have found these birds to be very sturdy, and they would make a terrific visual presentation in birdrooms if the species could be established.

We would like to know if there are any other Purpurkrons in the U.S., and would appreciate anyone having these birds contacting us through Dale Thompson, editor-in-chief of the *AFB Watchbird*. ➔

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