



## *The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)*

*(Founding in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)*

### **An Approach to Aviculture (Part I)**

**By Mike Fidler**

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*These notes are based upon an address at our August meeting. Mike is a past chairman of the Australian Finch Society in Britain. His speciality is Gouldian finches and parrot finches.*

I have kept [Gouldian finches](#) for approximately 22 years. I am more a fanatic than a bird keeper. My hobby is Australian finches. About 15 years ago someone in Britain decided that all parrot finches came from Australia and so I have studied them as well. I know a fair amount about what we call Australian finches and relatively little about any others.

Initially I would like to describe some of the mutations of the Gouldian we are working on back in Britain. The cobalt has a dark blue on the breast and the turquoise at the back of the head has also disappeared in favour of [melanism](#). There is an Australian dilute-backed. The difference between this and the one we have in Britain is that it seems to have lost the ability to create the green pigment along its back only. It seems to be a partial or regional mutation. An interesting mutation I have seen here in Australia is a dilute-backed [Emblema picta](#). The back is a creamy, rosy-white. I hope that this particular mutation will occur elsewhere in the world as well.

The Manila parrot finch is the only parrot finch we have imported into the UK and not been able to breed. To my knowledge no-one in the world has been able to breed these. It comes from the Philippines and was advertised in the [Cage and Aviary Birds Magazine](#) as a [Green-faced parrot finch](#). Initially I thought it was a misprint. They were brought into the country by a private importer.

The yellow pied [Red-faced parrot finch](#) is another mutation we have. We have a few of the rarest parrot finch in captivity, the bird lives between 2000 and 5000 feet above sea level on one island off the Philippines on [Mount Kitanglad](#). I was fortunate enough to have been the first person in Britain to have bred these. They are relatively easy to breed. They lay three eggs and usually one is fertile.

The yellow mutation of the [Star finch](#) is here as well.

The white-bellied mutation of the [Blood finch](#) is doing very well in the UK. I think its ancestors came from New Guinea rather than Cape York. It is smaller than the black-bellied and it is not very aggressive. I have young adults in 2' square by 4' deep cages with about 10 birds to the cage and they behave perfectly. I initially imported three pairs and by the time they came through quarantine I ended up with two hens and a cock. I mated the cock with one of the hens and we got 24 young from that one. This of course was using foster parents. Then I separated the cock for a couple of weeks and mated him to the second hen, to get some different blood, and they produced 18 young then he got sick of the whole exercise and hammered hell out of her. So we had to separate them and give them a rest. Since then there has been more imports and they are well established.

I have three pairs of [Peter's Twin-spots](#) from which I have bred 20 youngsters this year. They nest on the floor and are highly insectivorous for the first seven days from hatching.

I also have [Saffron finches](#) but find they are terribly vicious. They breed like mice and are continually fighting so that their numbers continually drop. As fast as the young hit the ground another one will kill them.

At the moment I am in the throes of rebuilding a new aviary complex, since I moved recently. I hope to have it ready for viewing by next June when the next aviary tour comes over from Australia.

I also have cinnamon [Diamond Firetails](#), where the black has been replaced by a cinnamon or fawn.

All my breeding cages are standardised. All the nest boxes are in the same position and attached in the same manner. This saves time fiddling around when I have to do anything to them. Water and soft food are in separate dishes. There is a tray in the floor which allows for easier cleaning.

I have a trellis which is used to grow a creeper. I find this allows for a more natural humidity for the parrot finches, as they require a much higher humidity than most other birds.

I am very keen on fostering and have banks of [Bengalese](#) cages for this purpose. I have about 400 pairs of fostering Bengalese these days. The nest box I use is standardised. It has a half front. I use this for absolutely everything. For the Peter's Twin-spots, which nest on the floor, I just turn the nest box on its side. It is 6" high and 5" square. I use budgie feeders at the front of the cage. I use seed hoppers for the larger cages.

The perches have a slot that fits into the front of the cage from the outside. Just give it a twist and it locks into position. It can also be taken out from the outside. We never put our hands inside a cage.

We use a standard bath which hangs on the outside of the cage. Finger drawers are used to hold the supplements. I use a large hypodermic syringe to feed the nestlings. The main nesting material I use is coconut fibre.

Each day all the utensils I need to care for the birds are pushed around the bird room on a large trolley. My main aim is to be as efficient as possible and to save time and effort.

To give you some idea of the way we use our cages, I would like to go over it with you. A Bengalese fostering cage is smaller than the normal breeding cage we use. It measures 18" x 15" high x 12" deep. We like to keep them no bigger than that because we like to keep the Bengalese within hearing distance of the chicks. This triggers the feeding behaviour. Therefore the cage is not an accident. It is about right for what the cage needs to be. The front of the cage has a little gate to insert the budgie feeders. The one at the top is used for soft food, or should it be a bird which is a natural ground feeder then the soft food is at the bottom. The other feeder is used to hold grit.

This is an opportune time to talk about birds' preferential feeding point. Some birds naturally feed low down, others feed high up. If you are trying to feed a soft food for something that they can have as a natural choice, as opposed to needing it to survive, it needs to be put into a position that the bird will naturally feed from.

Water and seed are also placed in feeders at the front of the cage. I am a little bit apprehensive about seed going into budgie feeders as I think they may clog, but I am assured by a Bengalese breeder friend of mine that this will not happen, so I am giving it a try.

The cage is designed so that it will collapse for ease of transport. Another feature is the tray that fits underneath. Beneath this rests a wire tray. The tray slides in and stands proud by 1/2". The floor covering is paper. Ordinary newspaper is what I use. I cut a wad of paper about 1/4" thick. This is all placed in and the young lady that comes in to clean for me, to clean 400 Bengalese cages, takes a wheelbarrow and by grasping the tray as it stands proud is easily able to pull it out and remove only the top layer of paper. The whole process is quite quick. So cleaning these cages is not a big job.

When we are rearing some of the birds, Emblemias for example, as soon as the young fledge they start picking rubbish from around the sides of the paper. Although we clean it out at least once a day, they are

still able to pick up contaminated seed and droppings, etc. We found that this caused us to lose quite a few birds. So when they have fledged we place the wire tray on top and all the rubbish falls through and the birds cannot pick at it. Normally the wire tray sits beneath the paper tray and is not in use.

It is very easy to do nest box inspections. All I do is slide the box out and can easily see what is going on. I would just like to emphasise how the system is designed so that all the work and interference is done from the outside. We never put our hands inside at all.

The only other feature of significance is the door. It is designed so that gravity makes it close as soon as I let it go. It swings from the inside. This is important if you have a lot of birds to feed. If you want to give them green food, all you do is take your bucket and walk down the line tapping it through the door which immediately swings closed. You don't have to stop and open and close each door individually. This is quite a time saver and is a good example of the principles of management that I feel is so important in considering any aviary design, particularly if you are going into intensive cabinet breeding. I have put a lot of thought into how I can do any of the tasks I need to do for my birds. I want to be able to do them as quickly as possible. The point of the exercise being that if you spend more time feeding and cleaning your birds, there is less time available to spend watching them and doing the things that give you pleasure.

Speaking to your President, he said one of the biggest problems he has is in teaching you to be clean. Australians seem to have made a fetish of keeping birds dirty. The theory goes something like this. Keep them dirty and if they survive they must be resistant to all the filth. If I keep them clean and someone comes and buys them from me and keeps them dirty they will die. What I like about Australians is your fighting spirit. You are going to turn back 3000 years of evolution in 3 weeks flat. I am proud of you. I can only say to you this: Everybody I know of who is a serious bird keeper, in anywhere else that I have been to, and I have been to a fair number of places, they all try to keep their birds clean.

Another point that is obvious to me is that a lot of you seem to consider your birds are penguins. You seem so convinced that for 365 days of the year you have beautiful, warm weather that birds love. It doesn't get cold in Australia, anywhere. It doesn't get windy. It doesn't get below freezing. In any case if it does you know better and will breed birds to survive these conditions. The number of your bird establishments that I have seen that are just wide open to any weather that comes along, horrifies me. What I have seen is quite a large number of successful people. What they all did was protect the birds against the weather.

My tip to you is this. If you want to become serious aviculturists then you must control your climate. Unless you pray every night, the only way I know of controlling it is to enclose your birds. I am not necessarily saying that you should put them into a bird house and cabinets, but you can protect your aviaries a lot better than most of you are doing. Last time I was here, I had the same impression, but I was a little unsure. Since I was a foreigner, the last thing I wanted to do was criticise too much. I managed to convert about six people to modify their methods and doing it partially my way - to keep the birds in a building where there was more control of the environment. All of them have been infinitely more successful than what they had been in the past. They had increased their production of birds by at least tenfold.

Then I visited such people as Brian O'Gorman and I was delighted to find that he and others have implemented most of the changes I have been recommending. He was specialising in a very small number of species and his aviaries were just boxes with a very protected front. His aviaries were very much like mine. They were very, very protected - including species like the [Beautiful Firetail](#), which comes from one of the coldest parts of your country. The top was covered in, the sides were covered in, the back was covered in and the only thing that was left open was the wire on the front. Even that was protected against any draught and winds. He is a person I respect very much. I learnt a hell of a lot from him.

He wasn't the only one. John Buchan was half converted when he came to England. He divided the back end of his garage up and put his Gouldians in there. He bred more Gouldians this year than he has ever done. He was about to give up until he spoke to me.

I don't wish to cause any offense whatever; because I think you are very knowledgeable people. For aviary breeding I think you lead the world, but there are two aspects I would care to alter dramatically. One is to please keep your birds clean. You will have a lot less disease. Remember in the wild you have approximately one bird per square mile com to one bird per square foot in your aviary. The other is, please keep your birds warm.

*[Continued in Part II \(Avicultural Review September 1985 Vol. 7 No 9\)](#)*

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