Chaffinch

(ASNSW Meeting - March 2014)

Life Member Jack Stunnell interviewed by Sarah Moncrieff

Chaffinch is a name applied to some birds in the genus Fringilla and may refer to: Common Chaffinch (Fringilla coelebs); La Palma Chaffinch (F. c. palmae); Madeiran Chaffinch (F. c. maderensis); Blue Chaffinch (Fringilla teydea). (From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.)

Jack I answered the vital question last month. Graeme said what is your favourite bird? I thought about it and said, “probably the Chaffinch,” so he said, "good, you can talk on it next month." So that was a trap!

Sarah Yes!

So Jack what got you involved with these birds?

Jack I thought they were a very stylish bird with a beautiful burst of song which is incessant right through the breeding season. I have noticed in most English movies that are set in the countryside there is a recording of the song of the Chaffinch in the background.

I just thought they were a very stylish and good looking bird and there weren't many of them around so I thought here's a challenge. So a secured a pair and they went quite happily to nest.

Then the hen escaped out of the door that I hadn't shut properly. When she came back to the aviary she had a moth in her beak. So I thought that is a clue, because she had young ones in the nest. She kept coming back onto the top of the aviary which was about 20ft x 20ft square, which is about 6m x 6m and 3m high. She kept on going right on the top so I cut a whole in the top. She dropped down in and so I went and laced it up again.

From then on I set up a moth trap which was a blacklight fluorescent in a 6 inch tube with an elbow bend in it and a box at the bottom with a gauze bottom so that the air could go through. The blacklight fluorescent on the front with a little fan inside so that when the moths came to the light the fan would suck them inside. It was only in operation for two or three nights and every time I switched it on there was a big frog sitting hoping to get a free feed of moths. I thought that the wildlife is very, very smart!
Sarah: Yes, they sure are.

**How do you determine the males from the females?**

Jack: It is quite marked. The cock bird is a much more vivid colour than the hen bird.

Sarah: What we called the sexy colours!

Jack: Yes. They are very brightly coloured in the breeding season.

They become very active in the breeding season. They chase the hen around a fair bit quite often forcing her to the ground.

Sarah: How many Chaffinches did you have housed in the same aviary together?

Jack: I only kept one pair to an aviary but they worked out okay with other birds.

They built a beautiful little nest which they decorated on the outside. I supplied T-tree brush which they used to nest in mostly and they'd put bits of it on the outside of the nest and they used cobwebs in the nest. It really was a very beautiful little nest. It was a masterpiece.

Sarah: Did they line the nest with feathers?

Jack: No, generally very, very fine grass or little fine roots. If there was hair about they’d put that in and cobwebs. They kept it scrupulously clean. If you looked inside their nest there wasn't a single dropping in there anywhere.

Sarah: What is their natural habitat? Where are they found?

Jack: England and the western side of Europe; and right across the top of Africa I believe. They have got quite a range.

Sarah: Are they hard to keep?

Jack: No I didn't find them hard to keep. Very insectivorous when they have young ones. They were quite happy with white ants for the first few days but after that they would want something bigger to poke into the young ones' beaks.

Sarah: Like mealworms?

Jack: Mealworms, yes. They love moths. I finished up with thousands of silkworms to get the moths. Lovely big fat silkworm moths. They can't even fly so they thrived on those.

Sarah: Did you have any health problems with them?

Jack: No, not really. They seemed to be a very strong healthy bird. No problems at all. I very fit little bird.

Of course in New Zealand they are flying around all over the place over there. They have been introduced over there and I saw a couple of nests there and they had got lots of little bits of lichen on the outside of the nest. We were fortunate that we saw them there. We were on a bus trip and when they pulled in for lunch I would say drop me off on the left hand side of the road so I could walk out of town and go into the paddocks and look at all the birds. I would see the bus coming and waving for me to come and I would be off looking at all the birds. I saw lots of Chaffinches.
Sarah: What season is breeding season for them and how many do they have in a clutch?

Jack: Generally three to four eggs. Most likely three eggs and occasionally four. Quite often they'd only rare two. She would sit with them but the smallest one could be kicked out. They would double clutch if it wasn't too hot. If it got to hot they would pack up.

Sarah: So was it around winter time that they would breed over here?

Jack: No, springtime they would go to nest. Early spring they would go to nest particularly after rain.

Sarah: Where do they spend most of their time? Are they a ground bird or do they stay up on the perches?

Jack: They are a very active bird; they were here, there and everywhere. Lots of movement. I thought they were a very interesting bird. I loved them and they had a pretty little song.

Sarah: We have a question from up the back.

Question: How do they go in a mixed species exhibit?

Jack: We'll I had St Helenas in with them, I had Cordons, Red Heads, I had Double Bars, I had Cardinals...

Sarah: So they all got on pretty well.

Jack: Yes I had breeders in all the same aviaries.

Sarah: Come breeding season did you separate them or would you have some pairs and some mixes?

Jack: No I didn't separate them. They all happily went to nest in different parts of the aviary. As I said before it was 20ft square. I didn't find them aggressive towards other species.

Sarah: They didn't get picked on by anyone?

Jack: No. It's a while ago now. It's about 20 years. I got too old to look after birds and I didn't have anyone to look after them for me.

Question: What kind of maintenance diets did you have for them?

Jack: I just used to give them seed; a bit of millet.

Sarah: Oh really, just seed?

Jack: Yes, but I would give them a lot of green food. I would cut them a lot of bush millet and any seeding grass, summer grass...

When I was out in the car I always had a big flour bag and a knife with me. I saw a beautiful patch of summer grass on somebody's strip outside their fence. So I got out the car and I was slashing away at that and this bloke came along and looked at me. I said "Gee its hard work cutting the grass with a little knife like this but it was all they would let me have." He looked at me and he thought that I was an idiot. He wasn't far wrong of course.

Sarah: Coming into the breeding season you said that you would change their diet when you saw that they had young, were there any triggers that you found with their diet?

Jack: Well, I gave them white ants all the year round.
Sarah   So they had treats all the time.

Jack    Yes. They had a desire for the right food. They seemed to be fully insectivorous for the first few days.

Sarah   Was it the male or the hen that incubated the eggs?

Jack    I think from what I remember it was mostly the hen that did the incubating, but as I said it has been a while now.

Question With your breeding did you ever come across any interesting hybrid colours or self bred colours?

Jack    No they were all norms, I never saw any mutations. I believe they will hybridise with canaries, I've read accounts of them hybridising with canaries and canaries will rear them quite happily too, but I like them to rear their own.

Sarah   Has anyone else got anything they would like to ask? Or is there anything else you would like to add Jack?

Jack    Their song was the thing that got me too, they would sing all the day long.

Sarah   Thank you Jack.

If you enjoyed reading about Jack's experiences in keeping Chaffinches you might like to see the interview in its entirety on YouTube.com. There is a very brief minute at the beginning of the video that goes a bit dark, but we didn't want to cut anything out so have left it in unedited.

We hope you will enjoy watching and listening to Jack, who is now retired from bird keeping, as he shares his experiences in keeping Chaffinches.