



Avicultural Society of New South Wales Inc. (ASNSW)

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

Orange-breasted Waxbill (*Amandava subflava*)

Presented by Paul Henry

Description

Size: Approximately 90mm in length and weighs 7.5gm (the smallest seed eating [estrilid](#)). The photo below shows its size in comparison to a Gouldian hen so you can see they are quite a small bird.



Adult male: The neck, back and top of the tail feathers are a dark olive to brown colouration. The chest and underparts right through to the tail coverts are orange. There is a red eye stripe running through from the mandible to the back of the head.



Orange-breasted waxbills (cock birds)

Adult hen: Generally duller all over, the orange underneath becomes more of a beige/buff colour. With my poor colour vision I need sunlight to be sure of sexing by colour. The surest way to sex mature birds is that the hen does not have the red eye stripe.



Juvenile: The fledglings are smaller than their parents with stumpy tails. There are some minor colour differences to the hen but overall they are a dull colouration version of the hen until after the first moult.

Distribution

The distribution of the Orange-breasted waxbills is over much of sub-Saharan Africa with the exception of the southwest corner. It's a common bird over its distribution range¹. These birds avoid arid and tropical areas preferring grassy plains or savannah grasslands.

The Orange-breasted waxbill is very common in Australian and European aviaries.

Characteristics and behaviour traits

They are a peaceful and very active bird ideal for a mixed collection. They will however defend their nest vigorously against larger birds. They can be bred as a single pair or in colony of 3 pairs; as long as the housing is sufficiently large. I think that like all birds you breed the most with a single pair but once you move to 3 pairs the annual numbers you breed are not 3 x what you would breed from a single pair.

Their maximum life span is about 7-8 years but best breeding results occur from birds 1–5 years of age.

Housing

This bird prefers a densely planted aviary with plenty of vegetation cover. They breed best in large aviaries. I have not heard of them successfully breeding in cabinets. If natural vegetation is not available then dried brush, or bamboo, attached to the walls will provide acceptable cover.

Feeding

When you are feeding Orange-breasted waxbills keep in mind that they are the smaller than a finch so provide as many small seeds as possible. All my finches are kept in mixed collections so a large variety of seeds are fed. I think they show a preference for small seeds like red and yellow [Panicum](#), grains and greens and other small grass seeds including [Niger](#).

French white millet and canary seed are quite large seeds for such a small bird. I have found these two seeds are not their preferred seeds. In my main aviary I have three separate hoppers; French white millet and canary in separate hoppers whilst the third hopper contains a small seed mixture consisting of 50% Red [Panicum](#), 30% greens and grains and 20% [Niger](#). The hopper with the small seed mixture is their preferred hopper. Other grains which are very popular with them are Casuarina seed and small wild grass seeds. When breeding they also like all the half ripe seeding grains such as green panic, [summer grass](#), [rye grass](#) and [couch grass](#) seed.

This year there hasn't been any small seeds available. Red [Panicum](#) has been scarce, there has been some greens and grains around and [Niger](#) is fairly expensive so I have not been able to supply [pannicum](#) and my breeding results have been very poor for the smaller finches such as orange-breasts and ruddy finches. I blame this on insufficient small grass seeds.

During the off-season I restrict the amount of live food and sprouted seed feed to my mixed collection this may deter these finches from breeding in the middle of winter.

Greens include [endives](#), [Lebanese cucumber](#) and other garden greens.

Most finch soft foods will be taken when breeding.

When rearing young they require some live food. They will eat all forms of live food normally fed to finches including white ants², [meal worms](#), [fruit fly](#) and [fly pupae](#). However, they waste much of the meal worms if there are plenty available by only eating the head. The only live food I feed is fly pupae.

Nesting

They will nest in brush, cane baskets or other small receptacles. They use soft grasses like November grass and coconut fibre. I provide emu feathers and small white feathers for all my finches during the breeding season but have never checked to see which ones they use.

Breeding

In Africa in their natural environment the birds breed at the end of the wet season; at the beginning of the dry season. I think they have been domesticated for a long time in Australia and they are considered free breeders in Australian aviaries. My personal experience is that they start breeding in autumn in about March and breed through to October. We have quite a hot summer so as soon as it cools down they will start breeding then. I don't feed them live food in the middle of winter because I have found that egg binding can be a problem and feeding them live food stimulates birds to breed; but they probably prefer to breed then. Gouldians like to breed about the same time (when the daylight begins to shorten). I keep the Orange-breasted and Gouldians together in the same aviary.

Birds are fully coloured at 6 months of age but it is always best to let them mature before pairing up. It is not advisable to attempt to breed from hens less than 9-12 months of age.

I have only had my pairs rear 1 or 2 clutches per year perhaps because I restrict live food in winter but can see no reason why additional clutches would not be possible if conditions are right.

Young birds will lay between 4-6 eggs per clutch with 3-4 young leaving the nest after 21 days. The young return to the nest at night for about the first week. They are self sufficient about 3 weeks after leaving the nest but will not cause any problems if left with the parents until they finish the juvenile moult.

Health

I have not found them prone to any health problems but I do worm annually before the breeding season. They should be provided with a variety of perching branches so as to wear their toenails down. After saying that, my bird show a preference to roost on lattice squares placed high at the end of the aviary. The Orange-breasted waxbill is hardy and requires no special health requirements.”

Further comment

Donald Findlater

¹There has been a couple of recent articles in "Just Finches and Softbills" and the Queensland finch magazine reporting that the numbers of Orange-breasted waxbills in the wild have fallen quite suddenly and dramatically. The [Rare Finch Conservation Group](#) is looking into what some of the causes for this might be.

I agree with what you were saying earlier about live food. I have some Orange-breasted waxbills and they spend all day hunting around for little insects and other things, so if you have a got a Vinegar fly trap they will benefit from that. They can't eat big mealworms. You have either got to get the mini mealworms, or maggots or some fruit fly. It is my opinion that they won't raise young with out some livefood.

I find if I don't feed enough live food the young birds seem to have some white feathers which may be a sign that they aren't getting the right nutrition that they need but they moult out back to their normal colour. However when they fledge they will fledge with white primaries.

Another thing that is worth mentioning is that some people don't keep Orange-breasted waxbills because the cock birds call at night. So when your other birds have gone to roost your Orange-breasteds will start cheeping and they will cheep through to about 8:00 or 9:00 o'clock at night. Some people think that attracts cats and other things to your aviary. They are also first up cheeping in the morning.

I can probably hear them because I built my aviary right outside my kitchen window where I can see them.

Question

What would the point of that strategy be?

Donald Findlater

Someone said it was like a roosting call that they have in the wild that attracts the other birds to come to roost in a particular tree like some kind of homing call.

Another interesting thing is that there is no way you can inspect their nest. They are such a tiny bird and the entrance to their nest and the tunnel is so small; it is wound and bound so tight. It is very difficult to pull it apart if they build in T-Tree. I often use a wicker basket but even then if you pull it out through the entrance of the basket it will still be intact. It just doesn't fall apart.

The other thing that I have found is that if one of the young perishes they will hang it to the front entrance to the nest. That appears to be some sort of predator signal that everything in the nest has died. They will bring out this tiny baby that has died and it will be intertwined in the entrance of the nest. It is thought that if a predator like a snake or a lizard comes along it will see the dead chick and think it's a voided nest.

Graeme Phipps

Maybe if a predator gets the scent of a dead bird it wouldn't be able to get the scent of a living bird. It's quite interesting.

Don, could you please keep us informed about the Rare Finch Conservation Group because it is always of worry when birds that are common in captivity and then the next thing you know they are not at all common in the wild. The [Java Sparrow](#) is an example of this.

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