



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

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

### The White-eared Grass Finch *Poephila personata leucotis* (Gould)

(AVIDATA: Journal of The ASNSW Vol. 1 No. 3 - All rights reserved - Winter 1974)

By Cam McMyrtrie

The "White-ear" is in my opinion the most beautiful of the Australian finches and as such possibly the most beautiful finch in the world. A fairly good illustration of this member of the true grass finches ([painted by Neville Cayley](#)) can be seen opposite page 114 in "[Australian Finches](#)", [Immelmann 1965](#), and a very good description of the nominate form *P.p personata* appears on page 95 of this same book. It would be just as well to quote this description here:

**ADULT MALE:** General colour above, including wings, light cinnamon-brown, slightly greyer on the primaries and lower back; rump and upper tail-coverts white, tail-feathers black; forehead, lores, anterior portion of cheeks, and a large triangular-shaped spot on chin and upper throat black; side of head and under-surface of body pinkish-brown; large black patch on lower flanks; centre of abdomen, thighs, and under tail-coverts white; bill yellow; legs and feet coral-red; eyes dark brown. Total length about 5 inches.

**ADULT FEMALE:** Similar in plumage to adult male but slightly smaller. As in all species of *Poephila* sexing is difficult. Bill of male tends to be slightly darker and his face-mask is sometimes rather larger than the female. Head of male, as in most passerine birds, is slightly bigger, but there is no certain distinctive mark, and a big overlap of male and female characters occurs. In the wild, where a pair keeps together all the year. It is easy to decide which bird is the male; but in captivity, especially with a large number of unpaired birds, decision is sometimes impossible.

The White-eared form *leucotis* is as follows:

**ADULT MALE:** "In this race the sides of the head are white, the white extending around the top of the breast adjacent to the black throat. A patch of white also occurs on the lower flanks, immediately anterior to the black area. The dorsal surface has a decidedly reddish wash through the brown." (Keast). So as can be seen, the White-eared grass finch is very similar to the nominate form, the [Masked Finch](#), in appearance, and the following notes can apply to this form as well.

I find the visual sexing of these birds almost impossible and can pick mine only by their leg rings, though I have studied them over and over when they have been side by side. I have read that cocks have a broader black stripe at the top of the thigh; a larger chin bib; more black between the eyes; generally larger face mask, heavier beak; richer body colour, etc. etc. etc. Possibly as with other members of the *Poephila* genus a definite cock and a definite hen might be chosen from a large number of birds, but there would be a lot of "intermediates" not able to be sexed with any certainty. My advice would be to buy at least four birds, and then the probability is three-to-one against having all the one sex. The difficult part may be in finding someone who wants to sell four of these birds, as they are rather hard to come by.

My birds began nesting activity in April 1972 on the earth in a hanging fern basket. This nest was taken over by [Orange-breasts](#). The White-ears then abandoned all attempts.

In September 1972 they began construction of a second nest. This time [Auroras](#) (Red-winged Pytilia) looked like evicting them so I transferred the White-ears to a cage containing only a few [pictorellas](#) and [Yellow-rumps](#). This gives an idea of the meek nature of this finch when a bird as small as the Orange-breast can bully it. The White-ears were transferred at approximately 3.00pm and on the following morning at 7.00 o'clock when I went to feed the birds they had all but completed a nest under a white ant's nest in a hanging wire basket. This behaviour is completely out of character with the slow nest building described by Immelmann.

I did not check the nest for a month because of the birds' nervous dispositions and during that period both birds took turns at incubating. They were very easily flushed but returned to the nest quite quickly after I had left the cage. On checking I discovered four clear eggs. No further attempts were made that year.

Early in 1973 (hoping for another April attempt) I took a white ant's nest, sawed it into halves, hollowed out quite a large cavity and stapled the two halves together with wire. This rather bulky "nest receptacle" was hung in the shelter where I judged there would be less interference. I chose the termites nest because of the White-ears' previous efforts and the fact that Immelmann makes mention of these birds using [kingfisher](#) nest holes in termite mounds. No attempts were made in April, May or June, but in July I noticed that the cock was chasing a third White-ear away from the hen - not really aggressively consistently. Also there was a lot of tail quivering by both birds. Not long after that straw was seen protruding from the hollowed termites nests.

I allowed sixteen days from when I thought eggs had been laid and then made a quick inspection as I did not want the birds sitting for a month on infertile eggs again. I discovered four eggs, all fertile and all at the point of hatching. I had either misjudged the time when the eggs were laid, or incubation commenced with the last egg. I beat a very hasty retreat.

I kept well clear and after twenty-one days two youngsters left the nest at 3.00pm and had returned to it by 4.30pm. The following morning four youngsters were on the perches. They were good strong fliers, but like all young birds they had no control over direction. They, unlike their parents, had no fear of me and I could approach within inches of them. When urged by their parents to fly, as often as not they would land on my hand or shoulders and this would really cause the parents to panic and perform.

Some two days later the old cock began to build a second nest in [ti-tree brush](#) about two feet from the ground. I thought that this would be a camping nest only, but after a week he had a fully lined nest built. Two eggs were duly laid but the old birds did not brood properly, probably because of the interference of the four youngsters who would sleep in the original nest during the night and use the new nest during the heat of the day. They were of course too young to remove at this stage.

I removed the old nest and examined it. There was very little grass used; just a rough shell to line the cavity. Feathers, teased out raw cotton and small pieces of charcoal, made up the under floor to a depth of about one inch. The actual nesting chamber was beautifully made of carpet underfelt. No charcoal was in this compartment and the eggs when I inspected were clean and not discoloured. The charcoal is used, in my opinion, to form a platform for the nest in a way something similar to the [Painted finch](#). It may also be to absorb nest moisture, though it was in this case far removed from the nest chamber.

Normal seed mixture was supplied with white ants twice daily and seeding [Guinea grass](#) daily. White ants were greedily taken, particularly during the first fortnight after hatching.

These birds, as are other members of the grass finch family, extremely susceptible to intestinal worms. They should be treated for these parasites regularly on the first day of each month. I would avoid this treatment when young are in the nest as I have had [Black-throats](#) eject quite large youngsters from the nest because of the change in diet.

White-eared grass finches are fastidious about their appearance and are forever preening themselves and each other, and an interesting fact I noticed was that the youngsters were bathing three days out of the nest. These finches have a very nervous disposition and will panic when being caught or even when they feel cut off in a corner and they will dash madly against wire and seem to reach exhaustion point very quickly.

I will conclude by saying that properly housed and treated, the White-eared masked grass finch is ideal as an aviary inmate and will amply reward any little extras that should be provided for his welfare.

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