

## BREEDING THE LEMON-BREASTED CANARY *Serinus citrinipectus* AND NOTES ON SOME OTHER *Serinus* SPECIES

by Tony Jolliffe

### General notes

The pair of Lemon-breasted Canaries were bought in 1998 in Belgium on impulse because I thought them beautiful. I also purchased enough of the food they were eating to last a month. I knew nothing more about them at that stage.

Nesting occurred and eggs were produced late in 1998. However, the shells were very thin and porous and all proved to be infertile. Because the female was showing signs of stress the pair was separated and reintroduced early in 1999. The first nest produced similar results to those in 1998 but the second nest produced three young. All were reared and proved to be three females. The same pair has hatched and reared two young in 2000.

### Housing and food

The pair are housed in a standard canary double-breeder which measures 120cm x 30cm x 45cm (approx. 39<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>in x 12in x 17<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>in). The standard diet was mixed small millets with wild food when available. This has since been replaced with a good British bird mix which seems to have advantages. Food taken during rearing includes the standard seed mix both dry and soaked for 24 hours, chickweed *Stellaria* spp., seeding grasses (Cock's Foot *Dactylis glomerata*, Rye-grass *Lolium perenne*, Annual and Rough-stalked Meadow-grasses *Poa annua* and *P. trivialis*), Redshank *Polygonum persicaria*, Pale Persicaria *P. lapathifolium*, Groundsel *Senecio vulgaris*, Rat's-tail Plantain and Mouse-ear Plantain *Plantago* spp.

### Nesting

The pair nested in an all-wire basket with a felt lining. The eggs were pure white. Incubation is thought to have taken 13-14 days. Upon hatching the chicks had blackish brown skin and copious white down. The gape was brilliant red. During the first few days the male seemed to feed the female which then fed the chicks. Feeding was shared after about three days. Development of the chicks was roughly five to seven days more advanced at each stage compared to that of the domestic canary. The adults were particularly devoted and protective parents. The female would attack the hand rather than leave the nest.



## General information and observations

The birds are very territorial, and the male will sing at the slightest sound. Opening the door of the birdroom or dropping something will start him singing. Oddly enough although his singing continued throughout incubation it stopped the day the chicks hatched and did not start again until the chicks fledged. Another interesting observation is that on several occasions just after the chicks fledged, both parents were seen driving them down, and on two occasions grabbed them and threw them down when they were fluttering against the wire. Although it worried the hell out of me, no damage was done to the recently fledged young in what appeared to be an instinctive process aimed at getting them to safety.

Once, just as the young were starting to feed, one begged for food but got no response from the male. The young bird immediately adopted a 'head down shoulders up' aggression posture and was then fed.

Because the colour of the chick's gape, the skin and the eggs differed from those observed in southern Africa where the gape was recorded as being bright yellow, the skin pale pinkish with sparse whitish down and the eggs white, lightly streaked with brown (Brickell, 1997; The Avicultural Research Unit, 1997), I have been reluctant to introduce new birds until this matter is resolved. Instead, I decided to try to mate the male with several females as one can with domestic canaries. I put the male in with the female which had started nesting as I have done hundreds of times with domestic canaries and have never seen such panic in a bird. I had to remove the male before the female injured herself.

Later I put a male Tibetan Siskin *S. thibetanus* in with the same female to see if the result would be the same and there was no problem at all. Because the female Tibetan Siskin had died and I was short of space I left him there. They have now gone to nest and it is fascinating to watch the male, which is more fastidious than the female, cleaning out the nest whenever she leaves it.

I later managed to obtain another pair of Lemon-breasted Canaries in Belgium which at the time of writing (August 8th), are hatching out their third nest. The first was lost, along with other newly hatched young, as a result of an infestation of mite the likes of which I have never experienced before in all my 50 odd years of bird keeping. It has taken until now and just about every chemical known to get rid of them and get the birds back into a decent condition. I hope it is a case of third time lucky, as this pair is supposed to have come from northern Mozambique, as opposed to my original pair which is believed to have come from southern Mozambique. I am very keen to study them.

I bred the White-bellied Canary *S. dorsostriatus* last year but I imagine that this species has been bred often enough for you not to require details.



I have bred domestic canaries most of my life starting from when I was 10 years old and even as a child their range of shapes and sizes fascinated me. As I grew older I began to wonder more about how they evolved and question the accepted belief as to their origin. A series of articles written by a Dutchman who has translated most of the seventeenth and eighteenth century canary books encouraged me in my view that not all type canaries evolved from *S. canaria* - the wild Canary.

My attention first turned to the Red-fronted Siskin *S. pusillus*. Later I turned my attention to the Cape Canary *S. canicollis* on account of its size, posture and origin. In the seventeenth century the port of Gent was Dutch and the trade between there and southern Africa was already well developed making it likely this species would have been available to canary breeders of Gent at that time.

About three years ago I went with one of the buying trips to Belgium where I found two Cape Canaries - both immature and very plucked. I brought them back with me and as I have learned more about the Cape or Yellow-crowned Canary and its subspecies, I have realised that it is a very complicated subject and also I have not enjoyed myself so much for years. What started off as a study of the origins of the varieties of domestic canary has become a study of the Cape or Yellow-crowned Canary.

They are by and large, quiet, confiding little birds the beauty of which is too easily missed when they are packed together in dealers' cages. Often immature and dirty, they appear drab and uninteresting but these same birds when clean and fit, and in full adult plumage have an amazing range of colours. I am finding sorting out the differences between the subspecies extremely difficult and suspect one reason for so few captive breeding successes may be because pairs are often made up of males and females of different subspecies.

At the moment I think I have specimens of *S. c. canicollis*, *S. c. grisetergum*, *S. c. flavivertex* and *S. c. sasii*, but only two true pairs. I am far from sure though. Although most do well on my canary regime there are problems with *S. c. sasii*, which shed feathers and become bald very quickly. I feel sure this is a dietary problem and am looking closely at this. I have increased their vitamin and protein intake which looks as if it is helping to improve the situation. They appear to be far more gregarious than the others and I am wondering if the stress of being isolated is also a factor. *S. c. flavivertex* too might have specific requirements. Unfortunately, I have recently lost my male. I had a male for two years and although it was always fit it never really came into breeding condition, lacking perhaps the stimulation of a female.

It is a highland bird, occurring for example on Mt Elgon, Mt Kenya and Mt Kilimanjaro, leading me to also question whether I have got the conditions



quite right for it here in Kent.

Recognition of the problems of obtaining true pairs, especially of species such as the Cape or Yellow-fronted Canary, with a diversity of subspecies, led to the idea of undertaking an African Serins Survey. The aim of this is to discover which species and subspecies are being kept, not just in the UK but worldwide, and through this establishing contacts with other keepers with a view to exchanging information and birds in order to make-up true pairs and establish captive populations while these birds remain relatively freely available.

If you keep African *Serinus* species and wish to participate in the survey, would you write to:- Bryan Reed and Tony Jolliffe, African Serins Survey, 62 Northwood Drive, Sittingbourne, Kent ME10 4QS, England.

## References

Brickell, N. 1997. Further Notes on the Lemon-breasted Canary *Serinus citrinipectus*. *Avicultural Magazine* 103, 1:4-5.

The Avicultural Research Unit. 1997. *African Birds in Field & Aviary: A guide to a mixed collection*. Compact Edition. African Bird Book Publishing, Westville, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

As described above, the Lemon-breasted Canary *Serinus citrinipectus*, has been bred by Tony Jolliffe. This is probably the first successful breeding of this species in Great Britain or Ireland. Anyone who knows of a previous breeding is asked to inform the Hon. Secretary.

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## THE PROBABLE FIRST UK BREEDING OF THE MARABOU

by Malcolm Mycock

The Marabou *Leptoptilos crumeniferus*, a species very common in the wild throughout much of tropical Africa and renowned for its ugly appearance and rather unattractive feeding habits, has proven among the most difficult birds to breed.

Marabous have been exhibited at Blackbrook Zoological Park for approximately nine years, and although they are not the most attractive of birds, visitors find them fascinating. After numerous setbacks and a lot of hard work we hatched and reared Marabous here last year (1999). It was, we believe, the first breeding of this species in the UK and one of only a handful of successes worldwide. Although Marabous have been kept in captivity for a great many years and egg laying is not uncommon, fertile eggs are rare.

We had a partial success with our Marabous three years ago, when they hatched but failed to rear a chick, which was seen and heard but went missing at only three days old having, we presumed, been eaten by one or both of its parents. Last year seven eggs were laid and as we did not want to risk losing them, it was decided to take them from the parents and attempt to hatch and rear the chicks ourselves. The first four eggs were placed under broody hens but this, unfortunately proved unsuccessful. One of the four eggs was fertile but failed to hatch, due it seemed to too much humidity. So, somewhat nervously, we decided to attempt to incubate the other eggs in an incubator set at 37°C (98.6°F) with a relative humidity of 35%-40%.

One morning during my inspection of the eggs in the incubator room, sounds were heard coming from two Marabou eggs. Luckily it was very early in the morning and no one else was present to hear my shouts of excitement and see me jumping around like a lunatic in the hatchery. Both eggs hatched after incubation periods of 32 days and the long and worrying task of rearing the chicks began.

They were fed on a diet of spratts and boned and skinned day-old chicks that were very finely chopped, and with the addition of zoovite vitamin supplement and warm water, offered to the birds in the form of a thick soup in a shallow dish. Neither were fed for the first 24 hours, after which both fed themselves from the start. The amount of food given to each chick per feed was no more than 10% of its body weight. After the second day of feeding themselves, mice pinkies were added to the diet along with a calcium supplement. Both chicks were fed six times a day, the first feed being given at 6.00am and the last at midnight. The diet remained the same as the chicks



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