



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

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

### **The Cuban Finch (*Tiaris canora*)**

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#### **Introduction**

Of the various foreign finches that are available in Australia that have been maintained in this country and are regularly bred, to my mind the colourful Cuban rates as one of the most outstanding.

For many, a description of the Cuban finch will probably not be necessary, but since the purpose of this article is to provide information particularly to newcomers to the fancy, or aviculturists who have not as yet kept and bred the Cuban finch, I will detail a description. The cock, which in a quiet way is an extremely colourful bird, has the forehead, face, chin and throat jet black, with a yellow or gold band extending underneath the beak. The black then extends down onto the breasts; the beak is also jet black, and the back of the bird is a light olive with the rest of the bird being grey. The hen has chocolate around the head instead of black; the gold or yellow is paler. The length of the bird, both cock and hen, is four inches.



Cuban Finch (*Tiaris canora*)

#### **Habitat**

The bird frequents Cuba, Jamaica and other islands in the Caribbean Sea; although from correspondence received within the Avicultural Society of Australia of which I am a member, it would appear that if the correspondent is correct, the bird is dying out in the Cuban area since the Communist regime took over there; however, I cannot vouch for the truth of this.

#### **Housing**

From my experience the Cuban will live just about in any kind of structure at all, although like any aviary inmate one needs to consider what type of aviary is most suitable for each particular bird kept. I have kept the Cuban and also bred this bird in a small cage measuring 6' long, 17" deep by 2' high and the Cubans bred at one end of this cage while a pair of Scarlets were nesting at the other end of the cage. I have bred them in a small aviary that was built as a lean-to between a shed wall and a side fence, and have also bred them in a large planted aviary. The main thing to consider when keeping and breeding Cuban finches is to house one pair in an aviary. Although it may be possible to keep them simply one pair in an aviary, and for the same pairs to breed, it would nevertheless seem from experience, to be more desirable to keep them simply one pair to each pen. Naturally, being a quick moving, inquisitive, active, alert bird, the Cuban is far more attractive if kept in a planted aviary, especially with a variety of other birds of different colours and hues. And therefore, I would strongly recommend that if at all possible you keep this delightful bird in an aviary lined with ti-tree or similar brush and where the bird can fossick over an earthen floor looking for the extra titbits that it so obviously enjoys.

## Nesting

From the point of view of nesting I find that they will vary considerably in habits, even the same pair; and I have had a pair breed in a small planted aviary where on one occasion they nested in the ti-tree in the shelter section; on another occasion they nested in two strawberry punnets that were stuck together with polythene-type glue; and I have had them nest in a shrub in the flight section. So, in other words, they decide where they would like to build their nests, and it does vary considerably. In fact at the time of writing this article I liberated a pair of Cubans into an aviary and within two days they started building a nest in two strawberry punnets stuck together with an entrance hole cut into one side, and within two days they have built a typical Cuban finch nest - the punnet being packed with all types of nesting material including several long strands of grass hanging out the entrance hole.

The nest of the Cuban is a delightful structure and has, generally speaking, a side entrance with a tunnel down into the nesting chamber. Both birds assist in the building of a nest. They are particularly fond of dried grass for building material, and I find that they have a very strong preference for underfelt for the lining of their nests. In addition, they will take over old nests of other finches and rebuild them suitable to their requirements. Generally they lay between 2-4 eggs which are white with reddish-brown spots over them. I think that only the hens sit on the eggs, but am not sure of this because normally in the smaller aviaries that I have had in the past few years, as soon as I walk outside towards where the aviaries are located, the hen flushes very easily due to the cock giving her a danger signal call. One point I have made over the years of keeping Cubans is not to inspect their nest, because the first pair of Cubans I had left their first round of eggs because I looked in the nest. It is interesting to note that the hen when sitting normally has her tail curved like a miniature boomerang.

In the southern climate of Melbourne I find that my birds breed the year round except in the winter months, when of course it is unwise for them to breed in any case.

## Feeding

The one important point that I would stress to any person considering keeping the Cuban finch is this - that it is not necessary for the bird to have live food such as maggots, white ants or the like to enable them to breed. However, my birds do have access to insects in the form of the [vinegar fly \(\*Drosophila\*\)](#) which come around the containers in which I keep rotting fruit in the aviary. These containers normally have citrus fruits such as oranges and lemons cut up in them, together with any other fruit or scraps from the kitchen such as apple cores. A variety of diet is of course essential to the keeping and well being and breeding of any of our finches, and I would imagine that this would apply equally to the Cuban as any other; and with that in mind, I have fed to my birds a variety of seed such as [panicum](#), [white millet](#), [Japanese millet](#), plain [canary seed](#), and a sprinkling of [niger seed](#). In addition I find that the Cuban is very partial to apple, plain orange cake and pear, not forgetting seeding grasses. My experience is that the Cuban has no particular favourite food, but does enjoy a variety before him at all times, and I also provide in each aviary a small compost heap which is made up of rotting fruit, scraps from the kitchen, horse or cow manure, and has liberal quantities of seed added to it. This is then watered regularly, and a small amount is turned over daily and I find all birds, the finches, neophemas, quail and doves that I keep in each aviary are very fond of fossicking through the compost heap.

## Young birds

The Cubans normally take twelve days to hatch their eggs and the young fly from the nest at twenty-one days. I find that when the young birds are independent, which is normally around three to four weeks, it is wise to separate them from the adult pair because quite often, one or both of the parents take a disliking to their youngsters, and inevitably a cock bird can pick at young cocks even before they begin to show their adult plumage, and if this is the case he tends to chase them incessantly and it is therefore wise to move the young ones as soon as possible. When they emerge from the nest the young look like immature miniature hens in colour, but it isn't many weeks before the cocks begin to show a few black feathers around the chin area. I have also sold birds to other members, and had birds that I bred that have gone to nest when three to four months old, not that I would recommend this as a wise thing, but mention this simply to point out to people who may be keeping or contemplating keeping Cubans, that this can happen.

## General

The Cuban finch is a fast moving bird and therefore you must be cautious when entering or leaving your aviary, as they can and will quite readily escape through the doorway. In fact I had two or three young ones escape from the cage referred to earlier which was adjacent to some needle-pine bush and I could hear the birds but could not find them because of the camouflage, and when you think about it that in their natural habitat they frequent pine-type trees you can see why their colouration is what it is. They are a bird that is on the go from dawn to dusk. The Cuban is the effervescent inmate of any aviary - he is forever on the move. He is furthermore forever twittering and, although he tries to, he is unable to sing. I would suggest a fine hose spray be directed over the aviary flight from time to time, particularly in the warmer weather as the Cuban delights in bathing in a fine mist spray.

In summary of the birds as an aviary inmate, I would like to make the following points. Of the available birds that are not native to this country the Cuban is probably one of the easiest birds to breed and is certainly one of the lower priced foreign finches that exist in this country. He is a colourful bird, active, inquisitive, is an excellent mixer with other birds in an aviary, is full of character, breeds quite well, is easy to feed, can become quite tame and is extremely hardy. The Cuban therefore could be said to be the ideal finch for both the beginner and the experienced fancier, and I am quite sure that you, like me, will find that the Cuban is a fascinating bird.

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