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Diamond Firetails

By Jim Sharman

The Diamond Firetail is an attractive little bird which has suffered with other names of which one was the Diamond Sparrow. This name does not suit this bird as it cannot be compared with the well known pest and is a grass finch.

The Diamond Firetail is an attractive finch, predominately black and white with a light grey back and a fiery red rump. It's native habitat is inland from the coast of southern Queensland through New South Wales on the western side of the Great Dividing Range through into Victoria and into South Australia. As these birds forage on the ground for seeds their habitat is open woodlands and bush close to a ready supply of water. Apart from drinking the water Diamonds like to bath in it so it is important that their water is clean and fresh although bore water is used and replenished daily in my aviaries.

Sexing the Diamond Firetail is very difficult except in the breeding period, when the male's beak is dark plum, while the hen's is red. During the off season Diamonds are very similar (Diamonds are monomorphic) however some differences are present. Clarry Williams, a life member of the Avicultural Society of W.A., compares the size of the white spots on the flanks of the bird. Cocks have larger and fewer than hens. Also, the rump on the cock is brighter and redder than hens.

When displaying for the girls, the male Diamond will obtain the longest piece of grass, which is usually cooch grass, and bob up and down on the perch while holding his beak onto his chest and ruffling his head and neck feathers. All this happens while holding the perch with both feet.

Diamonds can be housed in aviaries in single pairs with other finches or in a colony of several pairs. At the moment, I have one pair with Painted Firetails and blackhearts while a colony of several pairs exist in an aviary 3.3 metres long, 2 metres wide and 2.1 metres high. As this is the first year with the single pair in the mixed aviary no comparison of the two methods can be made. The colony aviary has a fully covered roof, earth floor and faces North. Last year fourteen young fledged in this aviary however it is considered to be overcrowded with bickering occurring and upsetting some nests.

Aviaries for Diamonds should provide adequate shelter from the elements as these birds go to roost early in nests of grass and branches. The nesting and roosting sites are the same as they don't have an alternative. The nest sites are made up of cylindrical wire barrels filled with branches, meadow hay and whatever the birds use such as emu feathers and are a mess.

The birds are fed with a breeder's finch mix all year round with seeded grasses provided when available. A mixture of soaked seed, silverbeet, bok choy and apple is fed daily and contrary to some, a limited amount of meal worms is given at times along with a daily serve

of fly larvae. Egg and biscuit mixed with a supplement is provided continuously along with a grit mixture.

Nest inspection is not done nor recommended, hence the quantity of eggs and incubation period can only be found using Russell Kingston's book on finches and various articles he has written in *Birdkeeper*.

Problems keeping the Diamond are mainly their housing as experience has shown that as these birds will breed most year round and youngsters which leave home in winter have trouble surviving. In addition as these birds will forage on the earthen floor the inevitable parasites may exist.

Acquiring these attractive little birds can create problems due to the similarities between the sexes. It is suggested that by purchasing three or four from various dealers will help and create genetic diversity. However this problem was overcome in my situation by offering my wife Hazel diamonds for Christmas. Imagine her surprise when I presented her with 3 Diamond Firetails.

In conclusion this bird is a hardy and attractive addition to the aviary and mixes well in a mixed collection.