

Pioneers in colour

Zebra finch breeders in the UK have finally become innovators in the development of new and exciting colour combinations. Let's move on to the next stage, urges **LARRY MANN**

ZEBRA FINCHES

THOSE of us who are immersed in the exhibiting of zebra finches tend to forget that there is a second stream of breeders who prefer not to commit to showing.

These breeders concentrate on breeding birds that may or may not be exhibition types but instead are good birds bred for the chosen goals of the breeder. They may be in the standard colours or, increasingly, in the new mutations. This is due to the bigger market for interesting colours for aviaries, which we become aware of when we find out normal greys and fawns are difficult to pass on to the pet market. Anything colourful, especially with white in the plumage, is sought after, as we can see at the big bird sales where they are snapped up.



Black-chested pioneers: this Peter Harrison pair, photographed at the breeder's premises in the famous shoot by Mick Freakley, took best in show at the ZFS show at Exeter 2010 and best zebra finch at the National the same year. They were the first pair of this mutation ever to win a top-level show in the UK

Cock zebra finches are, after all, the most colourful and diverse of any finch and make excellent "male only" collections for those who do not want the bother of breeding.

When it comes to the so-called triple combination mutations there are two lines. One is the light-coloured (such as the phaeos and fawn black-breasted) and the other is the dark type (such as the blackcheek and blackface).

My speciality is the phaeo, which is short for isabel black breasted. This I combine with the orange-breasted to produce a very colourful cock and a beautiful honey-colour hen. I also have isabel phaeos which retain the standard markings, although all the black is turned to orange feathering. I use fawn black-breasted stock, also to maintain size, and these are crossed with fawns and creams. The resultant chicks will be visual fawns, but if split will show the

black-breasted heritage somewhere in the plumage. (Interestingly, this is the only mutation that shows this feature. In all others you require good breeding records because fawns and normals (dominant) will be totally visual only.) These recognisable splits can be put back to phaeos, etc, as all recessive mutations notoriously lose size if bred together continually.

Breeding the darker range can be helped by the fact that the blackface is a dominant mutation and so can be used to keep size in, for example, blackcheek. Random pairings are fine for pet breeders, but serious breeders have to keep very good records of their pairings and offspring over many years. This is particularly important when trying to breed triple or quadruple mutations. These can be used, for instance, to produce an almost black bird such as blackface black-breasted blackcheek.



New directions: cock (front) blackface black-breasted greycheek, and hen blackcheek black-breasted normal grey. Bred and photographed by Trevor Mayes



Orange-breasted phaeo: this distinctive pair was bred by Larry Photo: Larry Mann



Normal cock zebra finch (left): 'cock zebras are, after all, the most colourful and diverse of any finch', as Larry reminds us. **Right:** a cock normal blackcheek. This is one colour that can be used in the darker line of triple combinations, as Larry describes Both photos: Dave Brown

Alternatively, there is the blackface orange-breasted black-breasted phaeo, which produces an almost wholly orange bird. (All these refer, of course, to cock birds; the hens are always plainer.)

Two breeders who specialise in producing these more complicated combinations are Trevor Mayes and David Garnham from East Anglia. Trevor in particular has been very successful in combining mutations. He keeps superb records to identify the genetic breakdown and characteristics of birds that even an expert can't see in the birds' visual image.

Trevor has a medium-sized set-up, including a bank of 16 high-quality plastic breeding cages. These are easy to clean and maintain, which he does to a very high standard. To achieve such undoubtedly difficult combination mutations in such a set-up is very commendable: I know of breeders with a hundred cages who don't produce such results. His enthusiasm for these mutations has established a very desirable strain of birds which (as I have found when trying to purchase stock from him!) is very much in demand.

Fashion ebbs and flows regarding popularity of zebra mutations, but after many years of struggling to get the newer mutations accepted, I find the large number of birds now available

across the country very heartening. On the Continent, I have seen a change the other way as the bigger British type standard mutations are in demand and it appears that efforts to breed the combinations are diminishing. There are classes allocated to non-standard mutations in Zebra Finch Society shows and I hope in the future these mostly unused opportunities will be filled.

At one time, especially at the Alexandra Palace Nationals, the ZFS were able to display a cage of a pair from all mutations to educate and inspire keeping zebras. Now the society has agreed to hold special classes of rare-mutation zebbies at the National Exhibition, Stafford, this October. (For more information, see News, page 2.)

● *Larry Mann adds: If you have good photos of birds you would like me to try and identify for you of such mutations, please send them by email to me via the editor of Cage & Aviary Birds.*

The ZFS can also provide information, and colour posters are available from them or from dealers, produced by Dutch feed suppliers.

www.zebrafinchsociety.org.uk gives full details of how you can join and receive a new member's pack. All questions about breeding and keeping this most charming of finches can be answered via the website from experts in this field.

Working hand in hand

DAVID WAUGH concludes his article from last week explaining why African predators, including the lion, matter to committed parrot conservationists



PARROTS

IN THE Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA) project, there are two regions of initial interest for the conservation of lions within their habitat. The first region has been in south-east Angola, specifically the Mavinga and Luengue-Luiana

National Parks, which are 84,400 km² (20.9 million acres) and surrounding areas in Cuando Cubango Province.

In Angola, protracted political conflicts in the recent past led to the decimation of wildlife, and there is a lack of knowledge of the wildlife species that still exist in the country, including lions and parrots. In general, the KAZA region is renowned for its assemblage of large mammal species (at least 195 species of mammals have been recorded), including the charismatic African elephant, buffalo, giraffe, and both black and white rhinos.

To determine the current distribution of lions, leopards, cheetahs, African wild dogs and spotted hyenas, and their herbivore prey species, as well as estimate their respective population sizes, the project team has been counting identifiable

footprints and other tracks along transects. The researchers have found a strong relationship between large carnivore population densities and the frequency of tracks along transects. The project is also using camera traps to keep an inventory of wildlife, targeting areas with concentrations of wildlife, such as salt pans, saltlicks, and key

rivers, which are mapped in the process.

The first results of the survey of 1,222 km (760 miles) of transects show that for every lion there are almost five cheetahs, and more than eight African wild dogs, 22 leopards and 45 spotted hyenas. The frequency of "capture" of these predators by camera traps shows a similar pattern, although cheetahs appear less frequently.

The camera traps reflect the

“ In Angola, recent protracted conflicts have led to a decimation of the wildlife



Installing a camera trap to keep an inventory of wildlife Photo: Panthera



KAZA project workers undertaking the interesting work of surveying for lion tracks

"mammal-centric" nature of the project, and although to date there are 5,978 captures of images of birds, they are not identified to species.

Without doubt, lions are scarce in this region, and certainly absent in the parts of the survey area where signs of people and livestock were most frequent. By contrast, most other carnivore species and elephants are more widely distributed, as is Meyer's parrot (*Poicephalus meyeri*). The brown-necked parrot (*P. fuscicollis*) scarcely makes an appearance in this region.

The project is continuing, with the hope of finding higher concentrations of

lions, and another phase of the project is now operational in Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe to monitor the movements in the population of about 500 lions by attaching satellite transmitters to some key pride members. About 580km² (14,300 acres) are being monitored to detect traps and other illegal forms of hunting. One expected result will be the identification of priority habitat in Hwange, where Meyer's and brown-necked parrots are both likely to be found.

Dr David Waugh is a former curator and current correspondent of Loro Parque Fundación.