

Masked Finch

FAMILY: *Estrildidae*

GENUS: *Poephila*

SPECIES: *personata*

OTHER NAMES: Masked Grass Finch, White-eared Finch, White-eared Grass Finch.

Description:

Head and back is a pale brown. Breast and throat cream-brown. White rump, belly and undertail coverts. Tail is black and there are black patches on the flanks. The forehead, lores, face and chin is black and the mandibles yellow. Legs reddish. Females resemble males but like the Long-tailed and Black-throated finches, the throat patch is reduced. Immature birds are dull versions of adults but with black mandibles and partly grey facemask.

The masked Finch may be found in very large mixed flocks of other finches (such as Long-tailed and Black-throated finches) numbering from hundreds to thousands. These are highly social and gregarious birds and are most often encountered in small flocks during the breeding season. Pairs form permanent bonds and remain in close association even in the flock.

Length: 130-140mm.

Subspecies:

A sub-species *Poephila personata leucotis* or White-eared Masked Grass Finch is found on Cape York Peninsula. It differs from *P. personata* in that it has white ear coverts and white patches on the flanks.

Status:

In the wild - secure **In aviculture** -

Distribution:

Across tropical Australia from the Kimberley to Cape York Peninsula.

Habitat:

Open tropical woodland and grassland.

Diet:

Wide variety of seeds, but during the breeding season insects feature highly.

Breeding:

Generally March-June. Breeding is timed to coincide with the summer monsoon.

The nest is usually located in a bush or shrub at about 1m above ground. The nest is flask shaped 140mm long x 120mm high x 110mm wide with a short entrance tunnel. It is constructed from dead grass and lined with plant fibre and feathers.

The female selects the nest site, but both sexes build. Both the parents incubate the eggs and rear the young.

In captivity masked Finches prefer to nest in bundles of grass rather than boxes, although both are known to be acceptable. Because they like to nest close to the ground, it would be advantageous to provide suitably small bushes (or some sort of artificial substitute) for nesting.

Courtship Display:

Males position themselves beside the female and performs a bobbing dance with the body held erect and feathers ruffed. They may hold a length of grass or some other token in the mandibles during this process. Cockbirds also usually crow during courtship. Females receptive to copulation will quiver the tail to signal readiness.

Sexual Maturity:

Maturity is attained at about 9 months, but these birds are most productive after their second year.

Clutch:

4-7 pure white eggs (17mm x 12mm). Incubation period: 12-14 days. The young usually fledge at around 21 days. Fledged birds should not be removed from the parents until at least 4 weeks after fledging.

Mutations and Hybrids:

This species is known to have produced fertile hybrids with the Long-tailed and Black-throated Finches. It is also known to have hybridised with the Zebra, Double-barred and Plum-headed finches and the Chestnut-breasted Mannikin.

The only known colour mutation is the fawn. White individuals have also been recorded but these are believed to be an acquired colour.

Suitable Aviaries and Compatible Birds

For breeding purposes masked Finches will be quite happy in suspended cages or breeding cabinets. These should have at least the following dimensions: 700mm(long) x 400mm x 400mm. These birds are at their best in larger planted aviaries. Such an aviary should provide plenty of shelter and should probably have a roof over at least half its area. Masked finches will readily share an aviary with most other finches (eg. zebra, painted, parrot, etc etc), quail, doves and even neophema parrots