

CROSS-BREEDING IN CLOSELY RELATED SPECIES?

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On 2 April 1988 a male Melba Finch *Pytelia melba* was netted at Nchalo, Malaŵi (16°16S, 34°55E). It was, in all respects, of normal colouration apart from reddish-orange tinged lesser, median and greater wing coverts, slightly yellow-edged outer webs to the primaries and some olive barring on the underside, particularly on the flanks, thighs and lower belly. These characters are all reminiscent of the Goldenbacked *Pytelia P. afra*, although in that species the area of reddish-orange on the wing coverts is greater, the primaries are edged reddish and the whole underside is barred olive on cream. The attenuation of Primary 9 was extreme, whereas in all other Melba Finches handled at Nchalo the attenuation was described as being from slight to moderate; the few Goldenbacked *Pytelias* handled here (c. 10) all had P9 extremely attenuated, but I do not know if this is characteristic of the species.

The first Goldenbacked *Pytelia* was caught in the garden in February 1981. In 1982 five birds were caught, in March, June and November, and in 1985 one was caught in March. Since then the species has not become more common, with only one or two being seen or caught in any year. The Melba Finch is extremely common in the garden and surrounding thickets.

It is known that interspecific breeding can occur when two closely related species are living in close contact and that under those circumstances it is more likely to occur if one species is present in very small numbers (see Editorial comment. *Safring News* 12: 15 1983). A second species pair may also have cross-bred in the trapping area, where a small area of moist woodland/thicket is surrounded by dry thicket and garden (the whole being surrounded by a vast area of marsh or cane fields).

In August 1979 the first Bluebilled Firefinch *Lagonosticta rubricata* was caught. Numbers have built up gradually, but the species is still very uncommon, whereas Jameson's Firefinch *L. rhodopareia* is very common indeed. In August 1983 a male bird with pink-washed back and an attenuated P9 was caught. Since then two others have been caught (dates unobtainable until I have finished retyping my records) as well as, in September 1983, a brown-backed bird with no attenuation of P9. Since Jameson's Firefinch has a pink-washed back and no attenuation and the Bluebilled Firefinch is brown-backed with P9 attenuated, it was a trifle difficult to decide to which species the aberrant birds belonged.

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