

Tasmanian Finch Import Farce.

Given the ever increasing number of “fictitious” accounts of the aviary bird import situation into Tasmania we thought the time was right to set the record straight. Our thanks to Lloyd for his patience over reporting this matter but the longer this issue goes on the more ridiculous it is becoming. So what the heck here it is!!!

Perhaps the time line of this situation would help the reader with the facts of the matter – if it reads like a comedy or I sound a tad sarcastic I make no apologies as we couldn’t make this up it is so weird – truth is again stranger than fiction!!!

The onset - while at a speaking engagement at the Shoalhaven Avicultural Society in NSW I was awaiting a permit for some Blue-caps that we were importing to improve our bloodlines. As the time for arrival drew close and the birds were ready to roll I contacted the Tasmanian Wildlife Department whilst in the mainland to ask where my import permit had gotten to.

I was told that Blue-caps were “banned” from import into Tasmania!! Speechless (that’s a novelty I hear many say!!) I asked why and was told that because they had been imported in such low numbers over the past 2 years they needed to go before an “import assessment panel” for “discussion” before they could be allowed into the state!!!!

Blue-caps and Tasmania should be two mutually unacceptable words to use in a single sentence by sane people yet we are told that the “experts” (their words not ours I hasten to add!!!!) would need to discuss them before they would be allowed into Tasmania.

Never mind the conditions that Tasmanian aviculturists have to replicate just to keep them alive down here!!

So a key component of the panel’s interest in a species is based on it’s frequency of import. Given that the initial price of a species and an ability to correctly house and provide them with the highest level of avian husbandry is of paramount importance when bringing finches here you can see that many of us are unfairly treated by the application of such inane, childlike parameters.

Simple logic would dictate that if a species is worth \$20 then it will be imported in far greater numbers than one worth \$2000!!

Further application of that same logic should, if this exercise is REALLY about protecting the environment, that the huge numbers of \$20 finches pose a far greater threat than 2-3 \$2000 finches!!! Yet they concentrate on the rarely imported handful which might mean something (not sure what in reality!) if anyone we’ve contacted knew anything at all about any of the finch species involved!!

I also hasten to add that the composition of this assessment panel is more secret than the witness protection program! We are told there is “an aviculturist of note” on this panel – who this might be is anyone’s guess but we strongly dispute the “of note” bit given the dumb feedback we have been subjected to!!! Obviously one that at the very least has little knowledge of Tasmanian conditions we suspect!

Perhaps we may gain an insight into this panel’s composition through the freedom of information act if this goes on much longer!!

Thus we were bluntly introduced to the Tas. Wildlife’s new biosecurity legislation!! It appears that this new hard line is as a direct consequence of the federal monies being made available for biosecurity legislation throughout Australia. Hopefully after our submissions to these federal bodies they will use the Tasmanian example as how NOT to try and implement such important legislation in other states!! Be afraid over there, be very afraid!!

From this point we then learned that ALL finches would need to undergo the import assessment panels “rigorous” scrutiny before entering the state. Needless to say a number of people considered this to a tad unreasonable given no prior warning of any of this legislation.

Next we were sent the “official” letter which outlined the process and the list of the first 2 finches to be banned from import.

First of these was the African fire finch, *Lagonosticta rubricata*, (yes, that's the one we haven't seen in Australia now for how many decades??!!!!!!) and the African silverbill!!

Now the interesting thing is that the African silverbill was banned because of the use of the Climatch program (according to a Wildlife source) which basically plots any species with its "preferred climatic range" in order to see how a species might spread if released outside its natural range. Now the Silverbill has been deliberately released in Hawaii and Costa Rica which has an average yearly temperature of around 27 degrees Celsius (yes, summer and winter – we think "tropical" might be the true word!!)

Of course this means that it is tailor made for escape in Tasmania!!!!!! I told you this "process" defied any application of logic what-so-ever!!!

Factor in that the African silverbill stocks are at their lowest genetic strength ever and that there has been no new/wild type blood in them since 1945 and you can see what a potential environmental disaster they pose for Tasmania – yes that is sarcasm!!

Oh, and for good measure did I add that the two deliberate releases were of wild stock Silverbills into a climatic zone that parallels their own home range? Just checking!!

Perhaps you can now appreciate our concerns for many of the rarer exotics we keep here and enjoy success with when a finch as innocuous as the Silverbill is singled out and banned!!

If the Silverbill was banned using Climatch data then what hope have we for any species that has been deliberately released into any area outside that of its home range?

Never mind also that places like Hawaii and New Zealand have so few predatory birds and animals that releases are far more likely to succeed than an environment like Australia brimming with all manner of predatory birds and animals – both native and introduced!!

Such was the indignation that this "assessment panel" stirred up we then found out that Wildlife had decided to declare a monitorium on importing finches until September when all aviary finch species would be discussed and banned or passed for entry. Any new species to Tasmania cannot not be imported until the panel has scrutinised them and passed them for entry.

So for those that keep telling me that you cannot import finches into Tasmania then as of the 20th of August (the time of writing!!) this is untrue. After that date who could profess to have any idea!!

Now all of this may seem a little odd when the history of finches in aviculture in Tasmania is considered. Let's see.....since the first were kept in the late 1800's there have been none established in the wild, there are no grassland to provide a ready food source for these 'potential escapees' and a complete lack of terrestrial termites for African waxbill-like species. Add in the huge plethora of shrikes, wattlebirds, hawks & owls, Noisy miners and the worst feral cat population in Australia and you might wonder what all the fuss is about! Oh, and did I add the bit that our weather here is a tad "unpredictable" when compared to the mainland and that our aviaries are a "little different" than mainland ones!!!

We did suggest the "powers that be" should avail themselves of an invitation to actually visit our aviaries to see first hand that any fears regarding finches were baseless – needless to say that option has, to date, been declined!!

Two finch species – namely the European Green and Goldfinch – have been established in Tasmania. These were released by acclimation societies working with WILD BLOODLINES straight from their bush and liberated in large number into our bush. Most finch keepers here that I know try and keep their finches in rather than let them out – and certainly not by the hundreds!!!

Mind you there is one group of bird keepers here that do release theirs into the environment – and I believe they have established more feral populations than most finches and have a huge reputation as a disease carrier – double standards – never!!

Now we did point out to the minister that if it is OK to have this monitorium reinstated then that surely says that the entire process is flawed. Perhaps there is an imminent environmental phenomenon heading our way known only to the government that is about to make out hitherto finch-less environment an optimal match for many of the finch species we keep? No? Well, if it is OK to return to

'business as usual' regarding importing finches until the panel can fit in a meeting to its busy schedule is there any need at all to even bother with assessing them at all given this demonstrated high level of concern!!!!!!!!!!

A good question we thought which, as yet, no-one seems eager to answer!! A potential pest is always going to be a pest is it not? Or could it be that the entire episode needs a long overdue injection of sense and sanity. Tasmania's biodiversity has never been compromised by imported finches what pointers are there in play that even suggest they ever will be given the historical evidence?

One of the key arguments uttered ad-indefinitum in this overhaul of the system is that there is no control over the species being imported into Tasmania or of the species involved.

In truth in order to import finches into Tasmania one has always had to request an import permit which lists the number of finches and their scientific names. These permits are free and can be obtained even by email these days and the people that supply them are terrific and eager to assist in any way. So this means that for every finch that has been imported into Tasmania there is a corresponding import permit somewhere 'in the system'.

Also given the large numbers of some species that have been imported over the years one would have to surmise that the chance of them ever establishing in the wild would be negligible – dare I say zero - yet they still must undergo this assessment process.....and if the species themselves are the concern then surely they simply need to employ someone with expertise in that area?

Now I'd like to return to the panel meeting dates if I may – every 3 months – or so we were told!!

We were told there would be one in June of this year so I applied for a permit to import a pair of Red-crested finches – a new species to Tasmania – so was told to submit a request with supporting documentation and basically hold my breath!!

June came and went so in mid July I rang for my permit only to be told that there had been no meeting and that the September one ( supposedly the meeting at which ALL finch imports would be considered) had been cancelled as well!!

At this rate my Red-crested's would be reproductively barren before they ever made it here!!

Upon contacting the minister's advisor we were told that they had reconsidered and that the September meeting would go ahead BUT only to deal with the new species and to reassess the banned Silverbill!!!!

I'd also like to state that I was told by the person implementing this scheme that the Silverbill had been taken off the banned list yet the minister's advisor told me that it was still being considered!!!! The phrase "the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing" seems vividly appropriate to insert here!

I stress that this is only as it relates to finches as I am unsure of what the hookbill jocks have before the panel in September. I also hasten to add that they are even more displeased with this procedure than the majority of finch people!!!!

In a conversation with the person "in charge" of implementing this procedure there were two other points that may interest a number of you.

One was that he proposed to implement a permit system for native wildlife similar to the one in all states of Australia. That is except that ALL native Australian species would need to be accounted for – yes, even those that do not naturally occur in Tasmania!! I can really see a lot of people doing that!! For the record any Tasmanian native species held here in captivity require Wildlife permits which no-one I know here has a problem with.

Secondly he was keen to implement a system where books of "finch photos" would be supplied to authorities at the airport to check against for identification purposes when finches were imported!! Have a couple of problems with that and uppermost is the fact that many birds have eclipse plumage, mutations and juvenile plumage – now if experts have trouble with that what hope a person with a book!!!!

Also when transporting finches I consider I attempt to take every precaution to ensure the birds arrive in the best conditions possible. This means that my boxes are chosen for conditions that are

the best for the birds and NOT for some person to check the contents of! In other words the darker the better which eliminates stress on the birds inside. If his system is to be enforced upon us it would surely mean that the finches would have to be removed from the transport boxes at the airport (in Hobart's case in an open hanger!!) and checked against this photo book? This brings into play a host of legal responsibilities that we'd be keen to have addressed.

For example I once imported a few pairs of Blood finches and the quarantine officer ripped the front from the box in order to take photos of the finches inside. Can you imagine the effect of a digital camera flash in a small bird box!!! End result 2 dead Bloods!!

Suffice it to say we are prepared to present these matters to the RSPCA should this particular "endeavour" attempt to get off the ground!!

We are all familiar with the "no cage is big enough" campaign over native species so we feel confident they will also embrace our concerns over the treatment of non-native species in this manner. We'll keep you updated on progress!!

Strange when the simple solution to this and many problems encountered with the implementation of this legislation is to employ someone that actually KNOWS what they are talking about and the species involved - too much to hope for we know, stupid us!!

Be akin with trusting anyone from Tasmania to actually show you how to breed our own endangered species in our own demanding conditions now wouldn't it – can't have that now can we!!! Hey, didn't a couple of guys from down there breed a few Swift parrots – surely not!!!!!! Sorry, couldn't help myself!!!

Now most aviculturists that I know strive to do the best for the species that they keep and many are also highly mindful of the need to protect Tasmania's biodiversity yet this heavy handed approach to the implementation of this legislation has caused many to rethink any assistance to these government bodies. I know in some of our cases it was the final straw in ceasing to breed the Swift parrot and I know of many others taking a more direct stance in protesting about this legislation!

Given that aviculturists have given plenty over the years to wildlife conservation throughout Australia one would have to question the intelligence behind this Gestapo like approach being implemented by people with little empathy or knowledge of the groups they are setting out to alienate!

So now you know!

Perchance if you are reading this and saying who cares what a bunch of twits are doing in the "land that time forgot" just think that if they bring in such legislation here despite logic telling you that it is bollocks then what could this biosecurity cash mean for your state!! Imagine the fun your own state government lackies could have applying the Climatch program in warmer climes!!

Hopefully sanity will prevail as it did when last we had to tackle this problem in 1982 and 1999 but we suspect not this time so it looks increasingly like a long drawn out struggle!!!!!!

This is backed up by the conflicting information coming from all levels of the food chain within Wildlife here.

However, after the Exotic Bird Keeping Record Scheme (EBRKS) I reckon finch people are up to it. So roll up your sleeves and get keyboard and pen ready because we may need to call on all bird keepers out there to let these people know that we will not allow our finches to go quietly into the void – you see to a lot of us down here it's far more than a mere hobby!!!

We would like to express our thanks to Michael Baker (president of the Finch Society of Australia) for his support throughout this entire episode and our gratitude to all those that have supplied us with material in a plethora of ways already.

If anyone requires further information feel free to email me ([marcus\\_pollard@hotmail.com](mailto:marcus_pollard@hotmail.com)) or if you would like a copy of our finch submission to the government please email and I'll send you a PDF copy.