

Breeding Birds—Australian Finches



This fact sheet gives guidance on breeding Australian Finches.

ACCOMMODATION

Suitable accommodation must be available before any birds are purchased. Many species can be housed in box-type breeding cages and these are best for the beginner.

The size of the cage is important; for one pair of birds 60cms is the minimum length with a height and depth of 40cms. The cage fronts should have 1cm (3/8") spacing between the wires, and are best without the head holes fitted for canaries. Ideally, any nest box should be fitted to the outside of the wire front, to allow easy inspection.

Wire fronts can be painted with black enamel; this shows off the birds better than the normal silver finish and helps to prevent rust. This also applies to wire mesh used to cover aviaries and flights.

Nest boxes suitable for the beginners birds should be 12cms x 12cms x 12cms with a half open front. Different designs of nest boxes are preferable for some of the more difficult species and advice from breeders should be sought when purchasing such birds. Any newcomer to the hobby who is starting from scratch is advised to visit an established breeder to see the type of cages and equipment being used. For those who already keep some other type of birds, the cages already in possession can easily be modified for the Australian Finches.

The size and diameter of perches are important and should be varied to provide exercise for the birds feet and legs. Some Australian Finches will roost on a perch, others prefer a nest box, and where the provision of a roosting nest is necessary this is indicated for that species.

Most beginners will stick with their new hobby and want to go on to keep and breed more birds, wherever possible the design of a birdroom and its cages should take account of this. Sectional buildings and moveable cages will help with this.

LIGHTING

During the winter months, most of our birds will be subjected to temperatures lower than they would experience in the wild. To survive this treatment the period when they cannot feed must be kept to no longer than ten hours. This means that artificial lighting to fourteen hours must extend natural daylight length. To save the inconvenience of switching the lights on and off manually, automatic time switches and dimming devices can be fitted in due course.

HEATING

The beginner is best advised to treat his Australian Finches as only semi-hardy and keep them in a temperature not lower than 10°C (50°F). Draughts and dampness must also be avoided.

With experience, the balance between daylight hours available to the birds and the minimum night temperatures can be adjusted. Some form of electric heater is recommended, the warm air fan heaters sold for use in greenhouses are ideal.

A thermostat, this being adjusted to achieve the desired temperature range, should control the heater. A maximum / minimum thermometer will indicate to the bird keeper the temperatures that are being experienced by the birds during the coldest part of the night.

Clearly the absolute beginner may not be able to afford the outlay of such sophisticated equipment, however many well established breeders started by keeping a few pairs of birds in the house, sometimes utilizing a spare room. Here temperatures are reasonable and lighting is easily controlled.

FEEDING

Most Australian Finches will thrive on two types of seed, plain canary seed and a mixture of the round seeded millets. Elaborate feeders are not necessary, small plant saucers are ideal and cost a few pence from garden shops.

All seedeaters need grit to help grind their food, and calcium to build up bones and produce eggshell. A mineralized grit and small pieces of cuttle bone will provide these requirements.

Many Australian Finches will rear more and better young if fed an egg-based soft food. This can be fed to the birds on a regular basis; the adults then become accustomed to it and naturally give it to their chicks. A number of different manufacturers produce such foods and discussion with the breeder of your birds will indicate which type they use.

Some Australian Finches will not rear their own young without the provision of live rearing food. There are a number of ways of supplying these and most garden insect pests fit the bill very well. An outside aviary is a tremendous advantage with these species.

Mini mealworms and well-cleaned pinkies or squats are a valuable source of animal protein.

Consultation of aviculture books and other breeders will provide many tips.

THE FIRST BIRDS

Most Australian Finches will mix in an aviary, and a small collection of different species is extremely attractive, however better breeding results come when two or more pairs of the same species are kept within hearing distance of each other. So, the beginner is best advised to purchase two pairs of one of the species described in group 1 below.

The birds can then be allowed some choice over mates and in the case of those birds that are difficult to sex there is a greater chance of getting at least one pair out of four birds.

Subsequent bred young birds can then be paired to the original odd birds.

Wherever possible try to pair unrelated birds together; very often the only pairs of birds available from the breeder will be brother and sister. The purchase of another pair from a completely different source allows unrelated pairings and will produce more fertile and vigorous young.

OBTAINING YOUR BIRDS

Whichever type of Australian Finches you start with, the initial purchase will be relatively expensive. It is wise therefore to take care in buying and obtaining quality guaranteed pairs, the age and pedigree of which is known. A specialist Australian Finch Breeder will be jealous of his reputation and should give the beginner a fair deal. The birds will almost certainly not be cheap, but should be best value for money.

Take time over finding the right birds and be prepared to come away empty handed if either the price or quality is not right. Check with the breeder, the temperature, feeding and other conditions the birds are used to and try to match these. A good breeder will be very pleased to help with this information and may even supply you with a fact sheet.

Gradually make any changes in conditions over a number of weeks.

Catching and transporting is very stressful for birds and your new acquisitions should be treated very delicately for the first few days. If the birds appear uncomfortable and sit fluffed up on their perch, keep them really warm, a temperature of 27°C (80°F) is not too hot, and seek advice from the breeder.

Over the next few days gradually reduce the temperature until it is normal, but do not rush this process. An easy way of giving this warmth is to hang a 40 watt bulb in the cage near one of the perches, the birds can get as near as is comfortable for them but will not burn themselves. This heat treatment should always be applied to any bird that looks off colour.

After any catching, transporting or handling of your birds a good quality, probiotic should be added to the water for a few days.

WHICH SPECIES ?

Australian Finches can best be divided into three groups with different degrees of difficulty in keeping and breeding. It is wisest to start with the birds from the easiest group, then when these have been bred, the purchase of more difficult birds can be paid for from the sale of young birds. Perhaps one word of warning is appropriate here. As far as is known no-one has ever made a fortune out of breeding Australian Finches, some breeders just about cover their costs, but for most people as with any hobby - bird keeping costs money ! The amount it costs can however be reduced considerably by breeding.

GROUP 1 - For the beginner with little bird-keeping experience.

Long tailed Grassfinch

Sleek and attractively marked, this species comes in two varieties; the Long-tail has a yellow beak whereas the Hecks has a red beak. They are a little difficult to sex, but once a true pair have been found they make excellent breeders. They will breed in a cage and prefer a nest-box for roosting. Colour variations are available and should not be mistaken for opposite sexes.

Bicheno Finch

The smallest Australian Finch; brown, black and white are the main colours, but put together so that the Bicheno looks like a miniature owl. Difficult to sex but a rather good breeder who is always active. They will breed in a cage and prefer a nesting box for roosting. They dislike draughts and damp conditions. Two species available Black and White Rumped. Again this should not be confused with differing sexes.

Star Finch

Pale green and yellow with a bright red face, the Star Finch is usually easy to sex. The cock has a lot more red on its head and face. They breed well, but resent interference with their nest, which they will use for roosting out of the breeding season. Colour variations are available. Again this should not be confused with differing sexes.

Parson Finch

The neat black bib, grey and fawn plumage make the Parson a most attractive little fellow. He tends to be a bit inquisitive with other birds and can upset their nesting plans. Quite difficult to sex but is an excellent breeder if in earshot of its own kind. It will breed in a large cage if not disturbed and will use its nest to roost. Colour variations are available and should not be mistaken for opposite sexes.

GROUP 2 - For those with some experience of breeding finches, canaries, or budgerigars.

The Gouldian Finch

Probably the most spectacular of the Australian Finches, the Gouldian is well known for its breath taking colours. It is easy to sex and will breed in cage or aviary. It is most successful when a minimum temperature of 13°C (55°F) can be maintained, and a temperature of 15°C (60°F) is desirable when breeding. A dark nest box is preferred and chicks can be reared on seed and soft food. A multitude of colour variations are available and should not be mistaken for opposite sexes.

Diamond Firetail

A larger, handsome bird in black, white and red, the Diamond Firetail can be a bit of a bully. They are best kept in an aviary as they are not suited to cage life. Excellent breeders once a true pair is established, the Diamond Firetail is a hardy character whose courtship behaviour and nesting habits add interest to any collection. White nesting materials must be provided or they will collect their own by feather plucking. Colour variations are available and should not be mistaken for opposite sexes.

Cherry Finch

The alternative name for this species is the Modest Finch, and the subdued colouring of this bird is one of its attractions. They are easy to sex and given privacy and no interference will breed in an aviary. Cage breeding is possible but more difficult. Colour variations are available

Chestnut-breasted Finch

One of the Australian Mannikins, this is a handsome bird in shades of brown, grey and white, sexes are similar. Once established a pair will breed in cage or aviary and will rear their young on seed supplemented by a soft rearing food. This is a flock bird and will do better when in the company of its own kind. It will breed as a colony in a sheltered flight. Draughts and dampness must be avoided.

Masked Grassfinch

The most difficult Grassfinch to breed, the Masked is hard to sex and Sometimes true pairs seem incompatible. They prefer to nest with other birds of the same species within earshot. They will always use a roosting nest. The cock birds beak and mask tend to be larger than the hens. A sub species - the White Eared Masked is sometimes available in the UK and the EU but prices are a lot higher (these are Group 3 birds).

Blue-faced Parrot-finch

Bright blue, green and fiery red are the colours of this delightful species, much more at home in an aviary than in a cage it will breed readily. Cold draughts and dampness must also be avoided if this gem is to prosper. Like all Parrot Finches it loves to bathe, this also improves the birds feather quality. Colour variations are available and should not be mistaken for opposite sexes. Differences in the sexes are very slight - hens appear as dulled down version of the cock birds; this can lead to confusion as young cocks can easily be mistaken for hens.

Redheaded Parrot-finch

The most expensive of this second group, this is a beautiful and lively addition to any collection. It needs a really large flight cage or aviary. They are difficult to sex, but once true pairs are established they will be very prolific. Cold draughts and dampness must be avoided if this species is to prosper. Like all Parrot Finches they love to bathe, this also improves the birds feather quality. Colour variations are available and should not be mistaken for opposite sexes.

GROUP 3 - Only for the experienced (and sometimes wealthy).

Most breeders who aspire to keeping birds from this group can only do so after breeding and selling numbers of the easier species. Available in the UK now are

the Pictorella, Yellow-Rumped, Red-browed, Painted and Crimson Finches. The Beautiful and Red-eared Firetails are kept only in Australia and it will be many years before European breeders will be able to obtain them. Among the Parrot-finches, the Pin-tailed Parrot-finch is usually available as an imported species, but is very difficult to acclimatise and breed. Many young cock birds are sold as hens, so buyer beware. Other Parrot finches occasionally available from dedicated breeders in the UK & EU are the Bamboo, Peals, and Mount Katanglad. Clearly, anyone contemplating keeping birds from Group 3 is unlikely to be studying this fact sheet.

BREEDING

The following points apply to most Australian Finches, but for birds in Groups 2 and 3, additional information should be obtained.

Once the new birds have settled in and are fully adult, usually more than nine months old, they should come into breeding condition. Signs of this will be obvious, cock birds will sing and display and the hen will sidle up to him. In some species, the beak changes colour and the birds will appear to be bursting with vitality.

If not already provided, a nest box should be made available together with nesting material. Dried grasses and coconut fibre are the most suitable (do not use horsehair or artificial fibres as they may get entangled around the bird's legs). A small quantity of shredded paper tissue, white feathers or fur can be given for the birds to line the nests. Give the materials to the birds and wait. Nest building will begin over the next few weeks, and eggs should be laid within a month. No eggs can mean two cocks; old birds or an incompatible pair. More than seven eggs usually means two hens. The only answer is to swap pairs around until breeding is achieved.

In most cases however, eggs will be laid and hatch between 12 and 16 days after incubation begins. If the eggs appear to be late hatching, leave them at least five days past the due date. Many birds, until they are really used to their owners, will resent interference with their nests. Some will never tolerate it. It is therefore best to leave well alone unless you think something is seriously wrong.

Remember birds change over for incubation and brooding at regular times. If you always feed your birds at the same time each day, during these periods you may never see one or other of the pair, but all is well. The parents should feed their own young, and they will grow rapidly, being ready to leave the nest after about 21 days.

They should be kept with the parents for as long as a month after that, and can be encouraged to feed themselves by the provision of soft food.

If you lose some youngsters during breeding, or if the eggs do not hatch, do not despair, both you and the birds learn by your mistakes. Very often pairs who

have failed in their first round or even their first season go on to become thoroughly reliable parents.

FOSTERING

Many breeders foster the young of some Australian Finches to Bengalese Finches. The Bengalese eggs are taken and destroyed, and are replaced by the eggs of the Australian species.

Fostering under Bengalese is a subject of much controversy, as it is claimed that it may damage the long-term breeding potential of the Australian and Parrot-finches. In due course, the beginner will be able to make up his own mind about this. As an insurance for the person with only a few breeding pairs, it is a useful device to ensure at least some young are raised. It is important to obtain good fostering Bengalese stock in the first place and to treat the foster parents with as much care and concern as their rarer and more expensive Australian cousins. It should not be forgotten that without the help of the humble Bengalese some of the Australian Finches would probably not be available today.

This fact sheet has been produced for:
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