

SOME CAGE BIRD MANAGEMENT

FOR FINCHES SUCH AS CANARIES AND ZEBRA OR SOCIETY FINCHES

People giving advice often say, and sometimes believe that there is only one "right way to do it". In raising living things, in this case cage birds, I believe that there are several "right ways", but there are indeed many wrong ways. So I'll present what has worked well or best for me.

TRANSPORT

Taking birds home from the pet shop or to a buyer entails some danger to them. Avoid extremes! Keep the carrier out of the sun. Over 90 degrees F is dangerous. If the finches are in an overheated car in the sun, they can die rather fast. Chilling with a wind on the birds is hazardous. I usually use a welded wire mesh cage for transport to buyers such as pet shops. I cover it with a towel to stop drafts and provide shade or conserve warmth. Do not transport more than 3-4 hours without food and water. If the birds have been taught to eat apples, a cut apple in the cage helps provide moisture on longer trips.

CAGES

The bigger - - the better. However, most of us are looking for the minimal size that can keep the birds happy and reproducing. I use 14" x 14" x 24" long with welded wire mesh. Welded wire is very strong and can stand being stacked 7 high, at least. The door is about 6" high x 8" long in the middle of the long dimension. Vertical cages look nice and conserve space in a room; but birds fly back and forth much more frequently than up and down. I have 2-5 perches of somewhat different sizes (diameter about 3/8 inches to 5/8 inches.). Flat perches are not usually good. If one must be used, sand off the corners from sharp to quite rounded. One perch is near each end about 3" from the top and end of the cage. Sometimes I put 2 low ones about 3" off the floor and exactly under the upper ones. I place the feeder and waterers so they can use them from the low perches. Sometimes I have a long one running the 24" placed low and near one side.

I set each cages into a cardboard box glued to fit the bottom exactly with a 3" lip up to reduce seed hulls blowing out from the birds flying. Finch dropping are so dry and small, one could go 3 months before needing a cleaning! Indian meal moths and a rain of seed hulls usually induce me to clean more often.

FOOD

Commercial finch mix is readily available. The staple is usually millet: Large white Proso millet plus small red or yellow "German" millet. A black seed, Nigerian thistle, is often added; or for canaries, sesame seed. Wild foxtail "millet" is eaten too. Some finches will learn to eat many other types of seeds, for instance Safflower, small black oily sunflower, oat groats, soaked cracked corn... Try the latter on Java Rice birds, if they do not eat enough paddy rice. Canaries do like oat groats, and "canary seed" may make up about 5-10% of their diet. Canaries are very wasteful of seeds, and may starve to death if you try to force them to eat off the floor which may be covered with good seeds.

Doves eat milo, cracked corn, wheat, sunflower, safflower seed, and commercial pellets. Any of the small millet type seeds are avidly eaten by doves.

A protein supplement of boiled egg is very helpful in getting finches to start laying and also when they are feeding young. I cut a boiled hen's egg into eighths for this purpose. For zebra finches, at least, it is recommended to stop the egg "boost" after the 3rd egg is laid and to resupply after the eggs hatch.

Vitamins D₃ and A are essential. Window glass blocks the natural ultra violet which allows them to make their own D₃. So add something like liquid vitamin supplements to the water. Two to 4 drops of Avitron, for example, per 1/3 cup (just over 2 ounces) of water is ample. These commercial vitamin products have much more than A or D₃ in them. The additional vitamins which are necessary for humans and some other animals are made by the birds themselves naturally; but the supplements come with the extra unnecessary ones, so why quibble. Seed impregnated with vitamins is wasteful, since the hulls are not eaten.

Minerals are essential also. I use "granular F" for calcium (98%) and granular livestock salt fortified with trace element such as iodine, cobalt, manganese, etc. The doves and finches really like it; and consume four times as much calcium as salt. Consumption of minerals goes up drastically with raising young. Grit for the gizzard seems **not** to be necessary for doves and finches. Deep green leaves such as dandelion leaves (no pesticide please) is desired by the birds, but can be omitted if they are getting the vitamin additive.

NESTING

Commercial wicker nests often catch the toe nail of many species of finches. Then the birds starve for food and water while the owner thinks it is nesting. Zebras are not so bad in this respect, but I still make my own nests out of box cardboard and water soluble glue. The vertical sides also help stop the new hatchlings from "falling out" as often. Size can vary but 3 1/2" square by 4" high with a 2 1/2" lip front works well for Zebra and Society finches. Canaries will want front and back windows and a bit larger nest. They are said to prefer an open cup shaped nest, but mine, at least, will prefer the "closed" cardboard nest as often as the cup wicker nest.

Nest material can be diverse. A mix of types is best. I use 3 1/2' squares of burlap sacking and let the finches tear off strands to use. I put in freshly fallen, dry, white pine needles. I also put in fine (1/32 inch diameter or less) dry grass stems. Grass leaves are less desirable, but would be used. Odd things like fresh fallen bald cypress leaves works well too. Do not use string. Some young and even adults will tangle their feet or legs in it.

Give plenty of nest material while they are building a nest. Then remove it after the first 3 eggs or so are in it. Zebra finches especially are noted for burying their eggs and relaying. I have removed 40 eggs from one nest from one pair of zebras!! The young of Zebra and society finches are independent of the parents about 2 weeks after they come out of the nest. In the Zebra finches the young are independent if 1/3 of the bill from the base has turned orange.

Some finches, especially Zebras, need to roost at night in a nest. Pet shops and some fanciers seem not to be aware of this. If the cage is big enough (14" long), try putting in two or even three nests. Your finches will be happier.

CATCHING AND HOLDING

There are several ways of getting the bird into your hand and holding it. Canaries are a bit tamer and slower than Zebra finches, so they may be caught by the hand in the cage with reasonable care. Most people don't have nets for the faster finches. I prefer to carry the cage into a room with no windows. I open the door, note the position of the bird wanted, turn off the light and simply pick it up. If the room has windows, wait till night. The head can be held between the forefinger and middle finger with the thumb supporting the feet. The base of the fingers restricts the shoulders of the bird. Their startle movements are then well contained. The bird can thus be held upside down with the back supported by the thumb or other fingers. The bird can be held also with its back into the palm of the hand and tail toward the tips of the fingers. The thumb then holds the feet.

....W. J. Miller