

# Zebra Finches

by Jean Reynolds  
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Native to Australia, the Zebra Finch is one of the most commonly held cage birds among exotic finches because it is one of the easiest birds to house and feed and is ideal for the beginning bird keeper.

Once you have decided to keep Zebra Finches, you need to select perfect specimens. Choose birds from a reliable breeder and observe if your birds are alert, lively, sleek feathered and plump.

Whether you choose one Zebra Finch, or a pair, you will want to determine the sex of your birds. Zebra Finches are sexually dimorphic; that is, males and females look differently from one another in all the color varieties except the white mutation. Even whites can usually be sexed by the male's redder beak.

Male zebras are easily distinguished from females by their distinctive orange-red ear spots, while the female's head is plain gray. Both male and female are silver gray with black and white crossbarring on the tail, hence their name "zebra". In raising Zebra Finches many mutations will occur — black and white mixtures,

even gray or fawn colors.

Zebra Finches will breed inside the house in flight cages that are at least three feet long. They like to build their nests in wooden finch boxes or rattan baskets and need soft, dry grass, moss and bits of yarn or string for nest building. They find lint from the clothes dryer very acceptable nesting material. Your cages should not have wire flooring because finches like to eat off the floor. Do not place cages in drafts or direct sunshine.

If you decide on an outside aviary, you may want to build your own. Modular welded wire with a square steel post framework can be used for your bird house. These modular units can be easily and quickly constructed.

You may want to consider building your bird house using plywood and wire. We have two such aviaries in our back patio, each is four feet square by eight feet high. They are constructed of four by eight sheets of quarter-inch plywood for sides and sloping roof and half-inch plywood for the floor. Before construction began, all wooden materials were given two coats of white paint.

We used non-toxic half-inch welded wire, a few two by fours split to two by twos, a little roofing paper, clear plastic sheeting for a fold-down window cover, and with a handful of nails and hinges we made a suitable outside home for our Zebras. Leave plenty of window openings covered with wire with fold-down frames covered with plastic sheeting. This plastic panel can be hinged and raised at night for protection from cold, winds and cats. Perches were made of various sized branches from our mock mulberry tree.

The bird house should face south or southeast if at all possible, and some shade should be provided. Our bird house can be easily moved; simply nail a two by four on each side at about hand height and four men can easily pick it up and move it to a new location. This is particularly advantageous if you live on rented property and wish to move.

Should you want a second four-foot square bird house, reverse your floor plan, set the houses side by side leaving a small safety area between the houses with the food and "people" door inside the safety area. Add a roof and a few shelves for food storage and you will have a very practical and useful bird house.

My Zebras feed on finch seed, spray millet, boiled egg, cuttle bone, and cooked grains. I cook cracked corn (3 parts), milo (1 part) and red wheat (1 part) in my crock pot overnight. Next day the food is rinsed, put in plastic containers and refrigerated. I feed one-fourth cup of cooked food per day, or only as much as they clean up. Each day they are fed a sprig of celery, chopped apple, orange or any other fruit they will eat. In addition, they are offered a small bowl of Petamine. During breeding season they are fed small mealworms.

Zebras lay four to six white eggs at daily intervals. The incubation period is about 14 days with the female sitting on the eggs at night. After hatching, both parents feed the young. The babies leave the nest at about three to four weeks of age.

Avail yourself of the many fine books and periodicals regarding finches. Join a bird club, listen to lectures on birds and talk with experienced finch breeders.

Finches can be ideal pets. Enjoy them. ●

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