

The Society Finch

A Bounty for Beginners

(*Lonchura domestica*)

by Lisa Weedn
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You're in a pet store and find yourself staring, fascinated by the activity created by a group of brown and white little birds in a little wire cage. The longer you watch, the more you convince yourself these would be great little birds to add to your domestic dwelling. Well, may I say — good choice! And with a little care, these small birds will bring you hours of avian enjoyment.

The Society (or Bengalese) Finch has a long history behind it. Believed to have been bred first in China, then introduced to Japan, this totally domesticated bird has been cared for for over 250 years. It is a small bird, about 10 cm (4 inches) in size. Color varieties include very dark browns (chocolates), cinnamon (fawns) and white. Solid colors are called "selfs." Birds with a mix of white and various shades of brown are called "pied"; chocolate-pied and fawn-pied. No two patterns are alike and may help to distinguish individuals. Males and females appear identical and cannot be visually sexed. Bengalese Finches are sexed by their behaviors. Gaining maturity at about nine months, males will sing, hop about with body feathers fluffed and neck stretched, head lowered and bouncing, or displaying with grass or nesting material in their bills. Females do none of these behaviors. The only sound they make is a slight buzzing or humming sound. Upon discovering these, try to make note of the color patterns of each bird to form your pairs.

Society Finches are year-around breeders, but it is recommended that you allow only three clutches per year with a one-and-one-half months rest between clutches to prevent overtaxing the birds' reproductive system. Ideally, breeders should be kept in single pairs, in individual cages; but in larger aviaries pairs may be successfully housed with other small finch

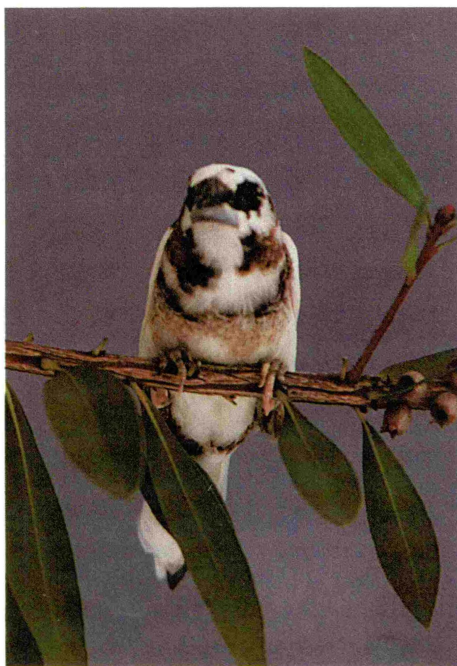


Photo by Nancy Vigran

The Society Finch, also known as the Bengalese Finch, is a universal bird for finch breeders. They are very hardy and, because of their good parenting qualities, are often used as foster parents for many other exotic finches.

species such as Zebras, Cut-throats or Gouldians with no ill effect.

Single pair cages should measure 35.5 x 35.5 x 60 cm (15" x 15" x 24") with 3/8" to 1/2" wire mesh spacing. Any larger mesh and the birds could possibly escape. The cage should be longer rather than taller, to provide adequate flying as they fly horizontally rather than vertically. Provide various sized diameter perching to keep feet in good condition. Small clean tree or shrub branches may be used. Keep perching clean of fecal build-up. In an aviary, you might consider adding potted bushes or trees along with the perching for privacy. Artificial nests provided can be the finch wicker woven baskets found in most pet stores or a simple cardboard or wooden covered 4-1/2" square box

with upper front open for access. Place nests in upper corners or mid-height in cages. In aviaries, hang several at different heights. When adding nests, don't forget to provide nesting material or the birds may try to use their food for material, causing the nests to foul quickly. Materials utilized are hay, washed and dried grass, horsehair nest material (sold in stores), burlap pulled apart and cut, or even dryer lint — it's been already sterilized! Interest in the material may take place as soon as it's added, with males being the nest builders.

Within a short time after a completed nest, a mature, bonded pair will start egg production. A completed clutch is usually four to eight eggs with the average being five small white eggs. Incubation is shared between the male and the female and lasts 12 to 14 days. Society Finches are very devoted parents so your inspection of the chicks will not disrupt their parental care. The chicks fledge in about three to four weeks, but chicks will continue to beg for one to two weeks after fledging.

Basic diet for Society Finches is simple — millet, vitamins, minerals, greens and water. Seeds that are eaten include canary, rape, poppy, flax, niger, hulled oats or commercial finch mix. You should check to confirm seeds are fresh by sprouting a small sample. Soak the seed and, in two to three days, sprouts should appear. The sprouted sample may then be fed to the finches. A 75% sprouting indicates seeds are fresh. Afterward, sprouts may be fed to birds, but allow no mold to form. Finches do not eat the whole grain of a seed, but crack and discard the outer husk, leaving the chaff, so it is always wise to blow on a dish filled with seed to remove uneaten parts. Crushed cuttlebone, oyster shell or hard boiled egg shells should be provided for calcium

source. Grit helps the birds grind the grain in their gizzards. Vitamins and additional minerals may be added to the grit mixture. All are available at pet stores. Supplements to this diet may include bread — toasted, crumbs or soaked in milk or with peanut butter as a treat. Wheat germ, ground fruit (apples, oranges), mealworms and finely chopped hard boiled egg are also good. Allow only the amount that can be consumed in one to two hours and remove leftovers to prevent possible spoilage. Water should be offered in shallow dishes or crocks that may double as a bathing area. You will quickly discover the Societies love to bathe. Keep water clean and all dishes disinfected regularly.

Place cages high so the birds can observe their surroundings and feel protected from other household pets. Find a bright location that will allow sunlight to partially bathe the cage, but never direct sunlight. Be very careful about drafts, too much may chill a bird. Optimum temperature should be kept between 15.6°C and 29.4° (60° to 85°F). Loud noises may also frighten birds, so keep TVs and radios at a minimum around them. Even if you're not planning to breed your birds, give them a nest to roost in at night, they will all pile in together and sleep through the night; just remove any unwanted eggs. If using artificial light, consider a full spectrum bulb placed on a timer with a dimmer, so they won't get caught in unexpected darkness. In an aviary, a very dim (10 watt) lamp may be helpful for birds disturbed at night to find their roosting places again.

Society Finches offer a beginning aviculturist an opportunity to observe behaviors of bonding, courtship, nest building, breeding, egg production, chick raising and fledging much faster and more successfully than with other non-domesticated species. It would be helpful to keep a record or diary of these behaviors/events for reference and further insights to birding behavior. Other considerations may be to contact the National Bengalese Fanciers Association, your local bird club, or visit your local zoo and talk to the avian professionals for more information.

In closing, may I say welcome to the fascinating world of aviculture, and very good luck with all your future avian endeavors! ●

Raising the Charming Bourke's Parakeet

by Jami D. Kennedy
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I remember the day well when my husband brought a small bowl with a diaper in it into the kitchen and placed it in front of me. As I peeled back the folded diaper, there huddled a piece of grey fluff with the smallest beak I'd ever seen! As I looked quizzically at my husband, he explained that as he was making his routine inspection of our small bird aviaries, and the nest boxes in each flight, he found a disastrous sight. Inside one of the Bourke's Parakeet nest boxes he found the mother and three babies dead, and one baby, about two weeks old, clinging to life. This is what he presented to me. I told him that I couldn't feed a bird that small, and who could find the beak on a baby Bourke's anyway! (I was used to hand feeding parrot types, after all!) He informed me that I was "a pro" and could do anything I set my mind on. Looking back, I realize that this was probably a buttering up job on his part, but it worked. I ran over to the feed store and purchased a 1 cc syringe, because the smallest I had in the house was 20 cc at that time, and that just wouldn't do. I successfully raised that little Bourke's baby, and she became my constant nursery companion for the next three years, flitting from cage to cage and riding atop my shoulder as I fed my nursery full of cockatiels, rosellas, and assorted parrot babies.

I know I'm known for telling sentimental, almost unbelievable stories about my birds, but I swear they are all true. This one is as well. This little Bourke's did not have a cage, she lived in my nursery, occasionally flying into the kitchen to see if I was preparing the next batch of handfeeding formula. She monitored my feeding each time, watching intently from my shoulder. Since I was usually feeding 60 cockatiels at a time, there were occasions where one would flutter

down from its cage. The nursery at that time was my small family room, so with the clutter of many, many cages, piles of diapers, and the aquariums I used as brooders, the cockatiel would be lost. On one of my missions of cockatiel finding one day, the Bourke's flew off my shoulder and onto the floor. She started to chirp and excitedly hop back and forth while facing a folded pile of diapers. I looked around the diapers and there was my baby cockatiel! From that time on, when I had a baby to find, I just waited, and my Bourke's would eventually find it and "point" to it. She was my unofficial nursery attendant. True story!

Now that I've gotten the sentimental "mother hen" story out of my system, I'd like to tell you a little about one of the most precious, docile birds ever to come out of Australia, the Bourke's Grass Parakeet. They belong to the family Psittacidae, a large family of birds which belong to the Psittaciforme group, and bear the name *Neophema burkii*, or *Neopsephotus bourkii*.

Of all the grass 'keets, I believe the Bourke's Parakeet is the hardest, even though it is the most docile. We have only raised the Bourke's, but this is comparing notes with other grass 'keet breeders.

We found the Bourke's very easy to breed, and I would highly recommend this bird if you're thinking of getting into breeding small birds for the first time.

If you are hurting for space, you can colony breed the Bourke's but we have found that this does not produce the best results. They are not aggressive to their mates, other Bourke's, or other birds in the cage, but the production is not what it should be when you colony breed them. We have, however, placed a pair of Bourke's in