

Fostering With Societies Bengalese

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Recently while talking with a well-known finch writer we started to discuss fostering. The comment was made that "I do not consider you have raised a finch unless it is parent-reared". To us this comment was ludicrous and demonstrates the adolescent approach many Aviculturists have towards breeding finches. Fostering is a valuable tool and many people need to get beyond the "my pet bird" mentality and see fostering as the frequently necessary means to an end which it is. Parent-rearing is nice luxury when you can afford it.

For example, when the Blue-breasted Parrot Finch *Erythura tricolor* was found only in European aviculture and its numbers were very small, one breeder produced 50 offspring in one year from a single pair through the use of fos-

tering. Of course, we are not advocating the "cranking-it-out" factory mentality, but it does show what one can accomplish with well-conditioned Society Finches.

For good general care and housing of Societies, we recommend the article by Lisa Weedn in the October/November 1993 issue of the AFA Watchbird, "The Society Finch: A Bounty for Beginners". This article demonstrates the fundamentals in keeping Societies and we could not have said it better.

Good fostering Societies are not necessarily born nor made, but a combination of the two. So the first issue to be addressed is where to get good stock. We have searched diligently in this country to find such birds, only to be consistently disappointed. Many people

state that they have such birds, but when pressed further, it turns out they foster only Australians, such as Shaft-tails *Poephila acuticauda* and Gouldians *Chloebia gouldiae*, or as our friend Levin calls them, the "G" birds. The problem here is that the begging postures of Australians are very straight-forward, like Society chicks, and tend to be light-skinned to boot.

Africans, on the other hand, have a myriad of begging postures. Many, like the Pytilias, frantically wag their heads side to side. Some, such as the Violet-ears *Uraeginthus granatina* are very quiet for the first week or so in the nest. Many, to make matters worse, are dark-skinned. This bewildering array is very confusing to most Societies and they simply will not raise such unconventional chicks.

We consider the Society strains in this country unacceptable and had to go overseas for better bloodlines. This is not beyond the reach of the average aviculturist and can be gotten through Sigie Meyer of SE Bird and Supply Co., through special order. The Europeans are constantly developing their Societies and have produced excellent strains for the purpose of fostering. This is emphasized by the fact that perhaps the finch taking the longest to wean is the Pictorella *Lonchura pectoralis*. Domestic strains will feed them until they feel it is time to recycle. Unfortunately, Pictorellas may not be self-feeding until they are a couple of months old, and they must be supplemented by hand-feeding or else they will surely die. European strains, in our experience, will feed them until they are self-feeding and will then recycle. Truly a desirable trait!



Video print by Buckley & Buckley

A Society finch feeding a foster baby.

These imported strains are what the Europeans call "dark chocolate selfs with strong breast mottlization" and are an attractive bird in their own right. Size-wise they are huge – much larger than any other domestic strains we have seen. Interestingly, from this strain we have produced a mutation called a cremino. These are the first in this country. Clearly, many of these birds are splits and many mutations can occur.

Now that you have good bloodlines, you're halfway home. You must now develop these jewels in the rough into reliable foster parents that will accept any bird at any time. At this point in aviculture with the restrictions on CITES III birds and dwindling imports of wild-caughts, these are well worth their weight in platinum.

Many people suggest the use of triads or two males. But in our experience, best results are consistently obtained using bonded, true pairs. The first step in the procedure is sexing these birds. The only reliable indication is that the cocks sing and dance and the hens lay eggs. Of course, our friend Dr. Luis Baptista throws a monkey wrench into the works by announcing that very rarely he comes across hens that sing. We suggest obtaining a good assortment and banding each individual a different color. By keeping them in one cage, it is a simple matter to identify and remove singing cocks, and any birds that are left are probably hens. The production of fertile eggs by a pair you set up will confirm that you have a cock and a hen.

We suggest letting the pairs raise their first clutch, proving their nurturing instincts. Birds that fail to accomplish this should immediately be given new partners. After they have successfully reared their first clutch, their second clutch should be dark-skinned chicks, giving them no chance to imprint upon light-skinned birds. Of course, you must remove all the Society eggs and replace them with the desired eggs. If they fail to rear, try them again with a dark-skinned bird. They will be more likely to successfully rear the second time around. Soon you will get a feel for your birds and learn which ones will be particularly good parents. Their next clutch should be light-skinned, with a possible introduction of a dark-skinned bird. By going back and forth, you will develop pairs which will accept chicks regardless of skin color or begging postures. In this way, you are developing good pairs for the long

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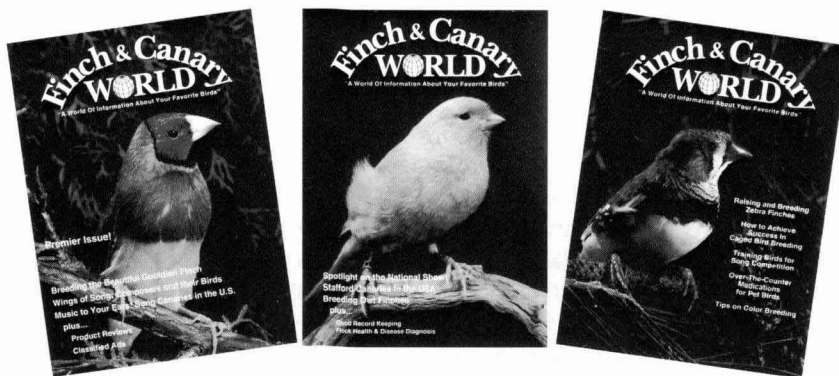
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run. If you run across a problem where Societies have not recycled but the birds that you wish to foster have already hatched, immediately remove them from the nest, along with the eggshell halves and place the entire contents within the fostering nest. For some unknown reason, pairs are more likely to accept chicks out of cycle if they have the accompanying egg shells. Societies will most likely eat the eggshells, thus forming a bond with the chicks, and thereby settling in to brood. It is important that the wild-caught birds from which you took the chicks, if you feel they will not raise their own young, are not allowed to brood, for they will eat the shells, settle in to brood, and abandon after a few days, destroying your chances for a successful fostering.

Once you have broken the incubation cycle, which will be 12 to 13 days for Societies, this will make your Societies more likely to accept chicks regardless of the point in the cycle. It is at this point you should push your Societies into accepting chicks regardless of size. For example, we had Societies raising Purple Grenadiers *Uraeginthus ianthinogaster* which are dark-skinned, a bird which we can't recall which was light-skinned, which were approximately the same age – about five days old, and in another nest we had Societies which were raising Peters' Twinspots *Hypargos niveoguttatus*. These birds were about two-and-one-half weeks old, feathering up, but the Societies were floundering and the Peters' chicks were not doing well at all. We took the Peters' chicks and put them in the first nest and the entire mixed clutch was successfully fed and fledged. Societies which will accept chicks regardless of skin color, cycle completion, or age, have truly reached the pinnacle of the fostering art and are the crowning glory of your collection. This can only be achieved by not being redundant, but by always giving them a new challenge to meet.

Birds of this caliber should be given a chance to breed, for their offspring could be potentially important. Interestingly enough, the offspring of such a pair are not necessarily good foster parents themselves, so the process of conditioning must begin again. As we stated before, good fosters are not necessarily born, but rather a combination of heredity and conditioning.

Much has been written regarding the diet of such Societies while fostering, and this has reached the point of

being ridiculous. People rant and rave about Societies that eat mealworms and then feed them to their young charges. This is, once again, amateurish and not necessary. Better is a proper balanced diet with a good eggfood. Our eggfood recipe is basic and easy to prepare fresh every day or two. We usually hard boil two eggs for at least 30 minutes, shell them (saving the shells for future eggfood preparations), put the complete eggs through a ricer, add about seven good pinches of crushed eggshells (previously reserved, baked for about 20 minutes at 300°F. and ground in a coffee/spice grinder used exclusively for this purpose), and stir in about 2 tablespoons of toasted wheat-germ, using a fork. This mixture will keep in the refrigerator for about two days. This should be supplemented by a good finch seed mixture, millet spray, Romain lettuce, Nekton S in the drinking water daily, and Nekton I (insectile mixture) sprinkled over the eggfood served two or three times daily. This is fine for any estrildid finch the keeper is likely to acquire. The exception would be Negro finches *Nigrita* spp. and Ant-peckers *Parmoptila* spp. Although these birds are beyond the reach of the average aviculturist, the diehard may find a way of obtaining them. For these birds we suggest eliminating seed and millet spray while rearing. The statement arises that Societies will not raise non-estrildid finches, such as the Cuban Melodious *Tiaris canora*, but we feel this is far from the truth. Reports of Societies raising canaries proves this is certainly possible. We once had the opportunity to handfeed a Cuban Melodious chick. This gave us the ideal opportunity to study begging patterns and postures of a non-estrildid chick. These birds are reputed to beg straight up, but this is far from the truth. The experience of handfeeding and videotaping parent-rearing through a hole in the nest show that these chicks beg towards the direction of the parents. Although they do not bend their necks as estrildids do, this should present little problem in fostering these birds to Societies. One could carry this a step further and foster most of the South American finches.

Another issue often arises in any discussion of fostering with Societies – the question of imprinting. Do fostered birds necessarily suffer from an "identity crisis"? Our experience teaches us this is absolutely not true. The dangers of imprinting are over-exaggerated

and are suffered by those breeders who are too lazy or uninformed to remove the juveniles from the foster parents at the appropriate stage. After all, it is much more convenient to leave them there than to set up another cage. We have been breeding and fostering finches for about eight years now and have not had one case of imprinting. The solution is relatively simple. After the juveniles are self-feeding, remove them from their foster parents and give them separate quarters, preferable adjacent to or with their own kind (not necessarily their own parents). This way they will hear the vocalizations and see the behaviors of their species. Many behaviors and song structures are apparently inherited, but only at a fundamental level. This way the frills and embellishments may also be learned by observation. Obviously, when dealing with aggressive species, such as Violet-ears, it would be unwise to place juveniles in the same enclosure with adults. Once again, common sense and close observation must be your guide. Our fostered birds went on to successfully breed with their own kind, build their species-specific nests, and parent-rear.

To place the importance of such well-conditioned fostering Societies in perspective, we must recall the plight of the Australian finches after the 1960 ban. While American breeders were doddling with parent-rearing and stocks were dwindling, the Europeans took the bull by the horns and by the use of fostering built up stocks and preserved bloodlines, thus insuring a larger gene pool. The American stocks meanwhile vanished, doing nothing towards preserving Australian finches. The fact is, we would not have Australian Finches today including the very common Gouldian, if it were not for the European breeders and their Societies.

The fact is we are in that same boat today, with even the very common Africans vanishing at an alarming rate due to this parent-rearing mentality. It is our firm belief that no African finch will be established in this country and we will be buying stocks from Europe at an over-inflated price for the species they choose to sell to us.

As long as fostering is considered a dirty word in American aviculture, we as breeders cannot be up to the challenge of establishing the more difficult finch species. Dwindling gene pools cannot survive the parent-rear or else mentality. ➤

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