

Finch Compatibility in a Mixed Aviary

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Photo by Mike Owen

Bourke's Parrots make an ideal addition to a finch aviary for those who wish to include parrots. A pair of Rosa Bourke's is shown with Gouldian Finches, a Red Star Finch, and a Zebra Finch.

There are few pleasures in aviculture that compare to watching a mixed aviary of finches going about their daily activities. The combination of their lively nature, never ending song, and a kaleidoscope of colors amongst a variety of living plants and shrubs provides a most relaxing and enjoyable picture – at least it should. If you have the right mix of compatible species, then it is indeed enjoyable. However, World War III might be a better description if the mix is wrong! It is therefore important before stocking an aviary with finches to carefully consider just which species can be housed together to provide a compatible group of birds.

Before I start with my discussion I perhaps need to make a disclaimer. My experience of finches is in Australia, in the mild sub-tropical cli-

mate of Queensland, and so my comments need to be read with that in mind. In Queensland, and indeed in much of Australia, finches are kept in outside aviaries, almost always with shelter from the elements over part of the aviary, but with part of the aviary open to rain, wind and sun. These aviaries can range from small ones maybe only 6 feet by 3 feet up to enormous flights covering several hundred square feet. The largest I have seen was about 100 feet by 25 feet and about 12 feet high.

The keeping of finches in cabinets or in inside flights is rarely practiced, except in specialized breeding programs. However the principles of compatibility I talk about here will still apply, be it on a smaller scale.

I have also restricted myself to discussing the species of finches, both

Australian and non-Australian that I am familiar with. These are, in the main, those that are common in Australian aviculture. Some may be less familiar in the USA, while some of the “bread and butter” species in USA aviculture may not get a mention due to their rarity in Australia. I have also used the common names current in Australia; some I know have different common names elsewhere. To avoid confusion I will add the scientific name for each species the first time it is mentioned in the text.

The first point to consider is that, provided their environment and diet are satisfactory, finches *want* to breed. If nest boxes or baskets are not provided then they will go ahead and build their own nest, much as they would in the wild. In fact many species will happily ignore provided artificial nest sites and do their own thing anyway. Thus in a finch aviary you can reasonably expect your finches to try to breed, and it is this breeding activity which leads to many of the compatibility problems that can arise.

These problems can be divided into two main areas, hybridization and competition.

Hybridization can be a serious issue in finches, especially now that importation of new stock into the USA is either very difficult or impossible. It is an issue that Australian aviculturists have faced for several decades since the importation of exotic birds into Australia ceased around 1950. The arguments against the production of hybrids, and the problems that they can cause to the genetic purity of a species are well known in aviculture and I will not repeat them here. Suffice to say I am opposed to deliberate hybridization, and with finches special care should be taken not to house together species that are known to be at risk of hybridizing.

Competition between species is most often related to breeding activity. Such behavior as fighting over nest sites, the stealing of nesting material from another nest, and fighting between males of the same species for dominance, can all be a problem. It might come as a surprise to parrot breeders to hear that those little finch beaks can, size for size, do as much

damage to another finch as a parrot's beaks can do to another parrot.

The first group of finches to be discussed are those that are unsuited to a mixed finch aviary. The two main species I am familiar with are the Cut-throat Finch *Amadina fasciata* and the Java Sparrow *Padda oryzivora*. The Cut-throat has the nasty habit of taking the babies of smaller species, and since it is one of the larger finches it is unsuited for a mixed collection. While I have heard of some kept without problems in mixed aviaries, the risk to smaller nesting birds means that it is best avoided.

The main problem with the Java Sparrow is its size. It is one of the largest of the commonly available finches, has a large strong beak, and is capable of inflicting serious damage to any smaller finch that gets in its way. Both finches are quite suitable to be kept in a colony situation with at least three pairs of their own kind, and may even do well if the two species are housed together, since hybridization is unlikely between the two.

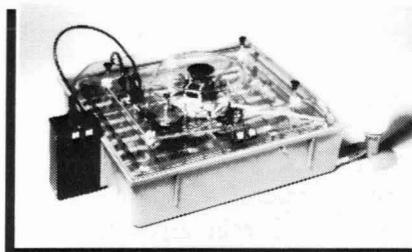
A further group of finches that sometimes cause problems in a mixed aviary are the Chestnut-breasted Finch *Lonchura castaneothorax*, Cuban Finch *Tiaris canora*, Zebra Finch *Poephila guttata*, Bengalese Finch *Lonchura domestica*, Red-headed Finch *Amadina erythrocephala*, and Black-throated Grassfinch *Poephila cincta*.

The Chestnut-breasted Finch is often an aggressive member of an aviary, and will frequently interfere with the rest of smaller species. It could, however, be safely housed with larger finches but never with other members of the *Lonchura*, since all members of that genus can easily hybridize with each other.

The male Cuban is one of the most attractive of finches, with its combination of black and yellow face, and in general has only just crept into this group of potential trouble-makers. While most behave themselves in a mixed collection, an occasional male can be aggressive to other small species, and hence it is one to keep an eye on in the mixed aviary. It is, how-

ever, a species that can be extremely aggressive to its own kind, and definitely do not have more than one pair in an aviary. Indeed even other species that have some yellow in their markings, especially around the head, are at risk from a male Cuban, and it is quite capable of killing another finch.

The presence of the ubiquitous Zebra and Bengalese Finches in the list of trouble makers will no doubt surprise many. They are in many ways the ideal finches for beginners, being hardy, easy to breed, and cheap to purchase. While active in the aviary they are birds that are also very unlikely to attack and injure other occupants of the aviary. Their vice comes, however, from that strong urge to breed that they both share. They are very prone to take over another finch's nest and use it as their own, often leading to stress for the other species, and as we all know, stress in birds can lead to sickness. Bengalese also have the habit of helping to feed the young of other species, and while this in itself is not necessarily a problem, it can upset the



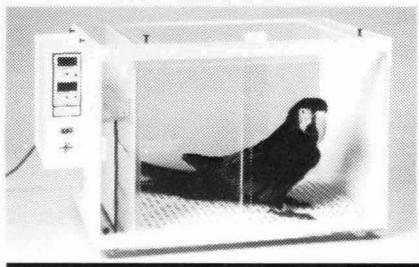
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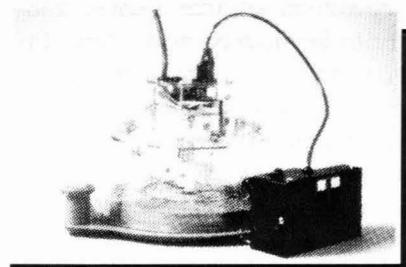


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A Cut-throat Finch and a Java Sparrow are not the ideal companions for a Red-faced Star Finch. The Star Finch is a peaceful finch easily upset by being housed with other larger, more aggressive species.

true parents and cause them to desert their babies. Bengalese Finches, being a member of the *Lonchura* genus, are also highly likely to hybridize with other members of that genus, and should not be housed with them. In fact Bengalese seem to have hybridized at some time or other with many finch species, so an eye should always be kept on them in a mixed aviary and any potential pairing with another species quickly broken up.

The Red-headed Finch is a close relative of the Cut-throat, but is usually a far less aggressive species, and will often not cause problems in a mixed aviary. However, some individuals can share the Cut-throat's aggressiveness, and it is perhaps wisest to keep it with the larger finch species. Since it will easily hybridize with the Cut-throat it should not in any circumstance be housed with that species.

The Black-throat Finch is another species that, while usually not a problem in a mixed aviary, can at times cause disruption due to a habit of taking over the nest of smaller species. While the Black-throat is highly unlikely to cause physical harm to another species this behavior can cause stress, and needs to be watched for.

Another group of finches which can cause problems are those that are aggressive to their own kind. Besides the Cuban, mentioned earlier, they include the Jacarini Finch *Volatina jacarini* and Melba Finch *Pytilia melba*. Both can be very aggressive to others of their own species in an aviary, and, while usually quite suitable in a mixed collection, only one pair of Melbas or Jacarinis can be housed in the aviary. It is also desirable with these two species, as well as the Cuban, to remove any young, especially males, as soon as they are fully independent.

Most other species of finches that I am familiar with are able to be mixed together without problem from aggression, but with care perhaps needed to ensure hybridization does not occur. This particularly applies to any species of the *Lonchura* genus since as a group the *Lonchura* seem to be able to inter-breed at the slightest excuse.

Species which come into this group of ready and compatible mixers are the Black-headed Munia *Lonchura malacca atricapilla*, Tri-colored Munia *Lonchura malacca malacca*, White-headed Munia *Lonchura maja*, Aurora Finch *Pytilia phoenicoptera*, Red-

cheeked Cordon Bleu Waxbill *Uraeginthus begalus*, Orange-breasted Waxbill *Amandava subflava*, African Firetail *Lagonosticta senegala*, Saint Helena Waxbill *Estrilda astrild*, African Silverbill *Lonchura cantans*, Spice Finch *Lonchura punctulata*, Star Finch *Neochmia ruficauda*, Blue-faced Parrot Finch *Erythrura trichroa*, Diamond Firetail *Emblema guttata*, Double-barred Finch *Poephila bichenovii*, Gouldian Finch *Chloebia gouldiae*, Long-tailed Grassfinch *Poephila acuticauda*, Painted Firetail Finch *Emblema pictum*, and the Plum-headed Finch *Aidemosyne modesta*.

A mixed finch aviary, if of sufficient size, can also house a variety of other types of birds, including some of the smaller doves, quail, and parrots. From my experience, doves that are compatible with finches include the Diamond and Peaceful Doves from Australia, the Central and South American Talpacoti Dove, and the South African Masked Dove. Quail most suited to the finch aviary are the King, or Chinese Painted Quail, while Australian *Neophema* parrots such as the Bourke's, Scarlet-chested, and Turquoise Grass Parrots will all live happily with finches.

The keeping of finches is one of the true delights of aviculture, one that even the most hardened parrot breeder can appreciate. By careful selection of the species that go to make up a mixed collection, the aviculturist will achieve a relaxing and enjoyable aviary to contemplate at the end of a hard day's toil.

Anyone wanting to gain further information about keeping finches, including details of the many species I am not familiar with, should obtain a copy of *Keeping and Breeding Finches and Seed-eaters* by Russell Kingston published by Indruss Press, Brisbane, Queensland.

I am fortunate in that Kingston is a resident of South-east Queensland, and I have had the pleasure of listening to, and learning from, many of his talks to local Societies. His book, of more than 500 pages, is a goldmine of information about finch aviculture. It can be ordered via the Internet from Australian Birdkeeper at HYPERLINK

<http://www.birdkeeper.com.au/> 