

Cage Breeding Finches

by Brenda Geesey
York, Pennsylvania

Before I begin to tell you how we cage-breed finches, let me tell you why we breed in cages, indoors. We live in southeastern Pennsylvania and our winters can be very severe. We have chosen to work with many species over the years that could not tolerate being housed outside here, even in protected flights. We live in a Victorian house at the southern edge of a small city, surrounded closely by rural predators including possums, roving cats, dogs and ornery kids. The weather and the predators have made us decide that the birds are safer kept inside.

For a few years, at the beginning of our avicultural experience, we kept various species in community flights. Some held only a single species and some were of mixed species. We have always been able to produce exhibition quality birds of whatever species we were working with. Very early in our work with finches, our records showed us that we got more chicks of higher quality when we kept a single pair to a cage, whether parent-raised or fostered. We soon abandoned the use of mixed and single species flight cages, except for juvenile birds and resting, mature pairs between breeding seasons.

Another brief digression before I talk about the "how" we do it. If we count all the finchkeepers around the world who are successful, there must be thousands of us and that means that there are thousands of ways to do this successfully. There is no absolute right or absolute wrong. If it works for you and your finches, that's fine! By all means, continue with your methods in the belief that if it isn't broken it doesn't need fixing. I never have thought that I had all the answers and I'm equally sure that nobody else knows "all about breeding finches."

We travel a great deal each year to seminars and conventions; we read many publications and correspond with many aviculturists and try to keep an open mind. We are always interested in new ideas and discoveries and often change the things that we do with our flock. Nothing that

we now do is written in stone and everything is subject to change if we find a better way.

This paper will deal with what we are doing now and how we are doing it now. With the amount of research and innovation now occurring in aviculture, virtually everything could change overnight.

Our flock usually consists of 200 to 240 finches and softbilled birds of about 18 to 20 species. They are housed in our basement which is about 40' x 20'. The basement is mostly below ground level but does have three windows at ground level which are open all of the time in the warmer months to provide cross-ventilation which is assisted by exhaust fans. There are several sources of heat in the room for the winter months including a water heater, the furnace for the house and one radiator. There are also 30 sets of 4-foot fluorescent fixtures which contribute heat. The temperature varies from 52°F at night in the winter to 95°F on a summer day. At times in the summer we use a dehumidifier and at times in the winter an air cleaner, as we feel they are needed.

All of the cages are "homemade" and are all wire with no structural supports. Some racks of five or more have been made with a continuous piece of wire for the fronts, tops and bottoms and have just a single wire panel for dividers. We use 1" by 1/2" 16-gauge wire, galvanized after weaving, and we find that it is rigid enough without framing. We use ferules (J-clips) to fasten the pieces together, cable ties for door hinges and 12" x 18" heavier gauge door frames with snap-on plastic edge covers for the cut wire edges. The all-wire construction is lower cost, easier to do by yourself at home, and easier to keep clean and to sterilize. The smallest cages that we use for a single pair of finches are 24" x 24" x 24". All of the cages are suspended from the walls and there are no cage legs or anything else on the smooth cement floor. We can sweep the entire room in about 15 minutes. The cages are hung from screw eyes which are screwed into 2" x 4"

boards which are bolted to the semi-smooth, plastered, white walls. Some of the softbill cages are as large as 6' x 6' x 3' and these require support in the front edge to remain level. We use a short length of chain up to a nail in the rafters for this purpose. None of the cages have a solid floor or a tray or pan. The cage floors are the same type of wire and all debris falls through. We keep no papers inside the cages, only a deep layer of fine, organically grown, unsprayed hay. We are very careful to remove soiled and wet hay on a daily basis to prevent the growth of mildew, etc. We simply drop the soiled material on the floor and sweep it up. The hay is useful to us and to the birds for its sweet smell, its pleasant appearance, the edible seed heads, and its value as nesting and courting material.

Many of the finch cages are in two rows, one over the other on the walls and each has a fluorescent fixture laying directly on its ceiling. The lights are controlled by two timers, one for each half of the room. The lights remain on a fixed schedule, 16 hours year-round for optimum production. One-half of the lights go off 15 minutes before the other and we have a 7-1/2 watt night light on continuously in each half of the room. No dimmers seem necessary. The tubes are broad-spectrum Chroma 50's from either GE or Phillips. We see no need for higher priced tubes when the Kelvin output of these tubes is nearly equal to tubes costing three times as much. The bottom row of cages and their fixtures are covered by a single layer of newspapers to catch debris from the top cages. This is also discarded daily. This creates much less panic than removing papers from inside the cages.

All cavity nesting species are given a 5" cube nest box made of plywood with a 1-1/2" high opening all the way across the front and a lid that lifts for inspection. We put a handful of cedar chips in the bottom and a handful of hay on top of that and they build their own nests from there. The boxes are hung on the outside of the cages, near a top corner, with a small diagonal perch just in front of the box opening. Cup nesters get a wicker basket, similar to a canary nest but larger, wired about 2/3 of the way up the side in a corner inside the cage, usually at the front. Shy species have plastic greenery hanging in their cages, screening the nest or nest opening.

We feed a seed mix that we make up fresh in small batches. We use two parts of a premium finch mix, not one with artificial colors and/or treated seeds, just fresh, wholesome seeds. We buy it because it contains a small portion of cut oats which we find hard to obtain as a single item. We add two parts canary seed, one part Siberian millet, one part German millet, one part white Proso millet, one-half part Japanese millet and, in the winter, one-half part Niger. In cages with fledglings we keep a separate dish of Japanese millet as it is always the first seed that young finches can hull. I do not use spray millet as we feel that it is largely wasted. When fresh, locally grown greens are available in the warmer months we feed them liberally but we don't buy shipped greens in the winter as we feel that four-day-old greens have very little to offer nutritionally. We grow dandelion, endive, comfrey, basil and clover for the birds in the backyard. In the winter we rarely feed any greens other than cucumber which remains fresh and nutritious during shipping.

Undoubtedly the most valuable part of what we feed the entire flock, softbills included, is the eggfood we make fresh every day. Bruce is the chef in this house and he distributes this eggfood, a scant teaspoon for two birds, by 8:00 a.m. each morning. (Thanks, Bruce — from the flock and me!) He uses seven large eggs, boiled 12 minutes, cooled, peeled and dried; he discards the shells. Three tablespoons Vionate; 2 tablespoons of 91% protein soy protein isolate; 2 tablespoons corn meal; 1 tablespoon bee pollen; 1 tablespoon finely ground cuttlebone; 800 international units of vitamin E; and 1/2 tablespoon Hagen's Prime complete the mixture, and he puts them all in the food processor together for a few seconds' spin until the eggfood is the texture of fresh cornbread crumbs. For birds who are new here we sometimes find it necessary to remove their seed dish for a few hours each morning and leave no other edibles in the cage but this eggfood until they learn to eat it. For those hatched here it is the first thing they eat and they hang on the doors waiting for it. We feed it on shallow saucers that are non-porous and we keep them at the far side of the cage from the water dish. This recipe, if not kept in a deep dish or allowed to get wet, will not spoil in 24 hours; instead, it will dry

out completely.

We keep and feed small mealworms and waxworms and for a few species these seem necessary, either to bring them into breeding condition or to induce them to feed chicks. For most, they are a treat and a luxury.

Each cage has a shallow, wide seed dish, the eggfood saucer and a broad, shallow, rough-surfaced water dish. We use plastic saucers (the ones that come with flower pots that resemble clay pots) for water dishes so that the finches can bathe every day in a dish that has a safe footing. We believe that free access to bath water is very valuable in keeping finches' plumage immaculate. Each water dish is scrubbed each day in detergent and rinsed and returned to the same cage. The eggfood saucers are washed and soaked in a bleach solution as are the softfood dishes the softbills use. We "winnow" the hulls off the top of the seed dishes daily and refill them. The "throw-away" portion doesn't get thrown away here; it keeps the feeders outside full year-round. Also, each cage contains either a cuttlebone or a salt/mineral block, sometimes both. All perches are natural


branches from hardwood trees that we are sure were not sprayed and did not come from a roadside location. We do a lot of cross-fostering and we house and feed the fostering Societies just the same as the more rare species.

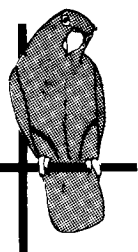
We welcome visitors to see our birds and we have quite a few visitors, year-round. Since the aisles are narrow, this results in the finches and the visitors being "up close and personal" and this has been an advantage over the years on the show bench. Our birds are steady and calm when being closely observed and we have been champion exhibitors in our division for five consecutive years. We pride ourselves on producing high quality specimens of the more common birds such as Shaft-tails and Gouldians and on our success with more difficult species such as Black-crested Finches, Violet-eared Waxbills and Bali Mynahs. We are always interested in talking with aviculturists about their experiences and in sharing ours. We encourage all finchkeepers to join and participate in the National Finch and Softbill Society so that we can all learn from each other. ●

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