

Food for Thought... and Finches

by Jerry Jennings

Although we are what we eat, none of us look like hamburgers or hot dogs. Nevertheless, sound nutrition is the cornerstone of good health. The same applies to the birds we keep.

For every organism there is the appropriate mix of protein, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins, and minerals. This mix may be suitable on either a general or specific level and is important to the nutritionist interested in assigning values for each species. As aviculturists, however, we do not need such specialized knowledge to provide a proper diet that encourages vigorous health and prolific breeding.

In the process of designing a proper diet, we should recognize that finches forage freely in the wild exploiting a variety of food resources to which they have adapted. The components of this natural diet provide all the necessary ingredients of proper nutrition that are no longer available to a captive bird.

Although we cannot replicate the natural diet, we can attempt to approximate it, insofar as appearances are concerned. We will also have to supplement this diet, since we would otherwise miss the mark. Supplements will not be discussed herein as the literature already has covered this area on many occasions.

Why should we attempt to replicate the natural diet, if all the necessary nutritional ingredients can be artificially substituted? One answer would be to provide finches with a recognizable and attractive food supply. Secondly, a broad based variety will provide a natural source of protein and carbohydrates more readily absorbed by the bird.

The basic diet of finches consists of a good seed mix. Such a mix should contain a minimum of ten percent each of Canary Seed, Large White Proso, and Large Red Proso Millet, and preferably fifteen percent.

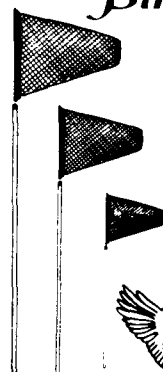
Other important seeds include watergrass, finch millet, panicum or millet 66, Japanese millet, red Siberian millet, and rolled or steel cut oats. Some finches will prefer one or two varieties, which if in short supply, will cause the birds to eat inadequately and fail to feed their young. Most finches do not prefer rape, niger, or

flax, and, since these seeds are very expensive items, they are not important in a finch mix. Finches consume far greater quantities of the two proso millets and canary seed, than anything else. If your mix does not contain the above items, offer them Wild Bird Mix and a good Parakeet Mix. In addition to the basic mix, finches should be offered spray millet, which can be fed both dry and green. First of all, the seed is not found in most mixes. Second, the exercise of removing the seeds from the head is good for the bird. In the wild, most grassfinches feed their young green seeds in the "milk stage". Seeding grasses mature at about the same time young finches are growing in the nest. The time is Spring and most dry seeds left from the previous year have either been consumed by birds, or have sprouted and produced grass plants, which can develop a seed head in a couple of weeks. This is why breeding cycles are geared to rainfall. The rain signals the coming of a plentiful food supply, i.e. the seeding grasses and the insects that prey on the budding plantlife. In periods of drought many species simply do not nest. Those species that do nest, have low success rates.

What about those insects? They are the source of protein, so important to the growth of young birds. Many species of finches become almost totally insectivorous during the nestling stage of the breeding cycle. This is especially true of some of the African waxbills. Without the proper quantity and quality of live food, they simply will not raise young. One solution to this problem is to foster such species, offering the foster parents appropriate protein substitutes, such as hard-boiled egg or other protein rich nestling food. Another route is to offer the breeding species a variety of insects in unlimited quantity.

There are several available sources of insect food. One source, in an outside flight, is the naturally occurring insects that fly through the wire, or dwell on the plants or aviary floor. This source is limited, however, and some insect species may prove harmful in that they serve as the intermediate host

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for parasites. The most reliable source is the one the breeder supplies. And the breeder has several options. The most common insect food for finches is the mealworm. Contrary to some antiquated opinions, you cannot over-feed mealworms. The rule of thumb is to offer as many as the birds will consume and within your budget, since mealworms can be expensive. A good wholesale mealworm supplier such as Olympic Mealworms or Rainbow Mealworms (Watchbird advertisers) offer quick delivery service at reasonable prices.

Variety is the spice of life for finches as well as for people. Give them a gourmet diet of live food. Wax Moth larvae, crickets (small), and white worms can be purchased commercially through advertisements in such magazines as *Field & Stream*. Ant eggs can be imported from suppliers in Europe.

There are also non-commercial sources of live food, such as your own back yard. Ant eggs can be collected simply, though perhaps not in large quantities. All that is required is a flower pot, a board to place over the top, and a hose with running water. With these materials in hand, find an

anthill. Flood the anthill with water, then place the small drainage hole in the bottom of the pot directly over the entrance of the anthill, placing the board over the top. Soon the ants will begin leaving the flooded nest with eggs, which they will wish to store temporarily in the nearest cool, dark place, i.e. your flower pot. However, as soon as the flood waters have subsided, the eggs will be returned to the nest, so keep an eye on things.

Another way to obtain ant eggs is to locate an anthill and dig it up with a spade. The contents, dirt and all, should be dumped onto the center of a bedsheet spread on the ground. If the corners of the sheet are turned over, the ants will carry the eggs to the corners to hide from the sun. There you may collect them.

Fly larvae from the blowfly can be easily cultivated with little mess and effort. These provide excellent food for birds. For details on a painless, odorless method of raising fly larvae, see Dr. Paul Engen's article, "Fly Larvae" in *Watchbird*, Vol. VI, No. 1, Feb/Mar 1979.

Perhaps the simplest ongoing producer of live food is a fruit fly culture.

Fruit flies occur in most climates during the warmer part of the year and can easily be attracted to an aviary. Simply place some spoiled fruit in a dish on the aviary floor. Flies will soon gather and stay as long as the fruit remains moist. Pineapple, citrus, and bananas are particularly good and can be obtained at a reduced cost or free from your greengrocer once they have deteriorated.

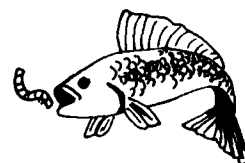
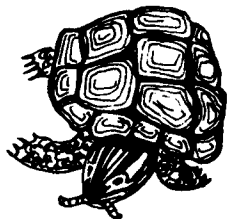
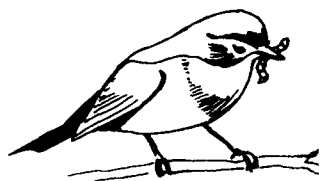
In Australia many breeders utilize termites as an insect food. If this is available in your area, by all means make an effort to obtain them, for they are the main constituent of some African waxbill diets in the wild. Termites in Africa live in mounds or under dung on the ground, as they do in Australia and are easy to capture, unlike their wood dwelling cousins.

Naturally, all finches require a continuous source of water, which should be provided fresh daily. Sources of calcium and grit must also be available and are essential to good health.

The list of foods offered herein is not intended to be exclusive or complete. Certainly there are more things available, subject to your imagination. It will serve as a good beginning.

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