



Two satinette greenfinches and two cinnamons.

European Greenfinches — The Ideal Aviary Bird for North America?

by Vladimir Kulhavy
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

I am fully aware that by choosing this title I am allowing myself to come under the fire of severe criticism because every serious breeder believes that distinction should be reserved for his or her own favorite species. And how many people in North America do keep or breed the greenfinches except for a few canary hybridizers? Yet I hope that by the end of this article I will be able to supply enough supportive arguments to justify this claim and will, hopefully, stir up some interest in these somewhat overlooked birds.

The European greenfinch, *Carduelis chloris*, is still a fairly common bird in Europe as well as in parts of Asia and North Africa in spite of a constantly worsening destruction of the European countryside. Its success is due mainly to its adaptability to a changed environment. Originally a bird of the forest, it can now be found in the countryside and also in the city parks and gardens. In winter the greenfinch is among the most enterprising visitors at the bird feeders and it joins flocks of other finches in the countryside feeding on weeds. They are useful to man by feeding on weeds and upon many garden insects during the breeding season.

The greenfinch measures about six inches long. The male is mainly yellow-green with a steely grey back and bright yellow wing bars. The female is noticeably duller. They are prolific breeders nesting two or three times per season which begins in April. They are considered an easy species for captive breeding, even for beginners, and can be bred in cages or aviaries.

From my personal experience I would recommend the use of aviaries for the following reasons. First, greenfinches are extremely hardy birds and can be wintered outside without heat even in very cold climates. Second, they can be mixed with other birds in an aviary with no bad effect. In my garden aviary there are, in addition to the greenfinches, European goldfinches, bullfinches, linnets, skylarks and Pekin robins.

To protect the birds from strong winter winds and snowstorms, I cover the exposed sides of the aviary with plastic. There is no doubt in my mind that birds kept outdoors throughout the year have plumage superior to that of birds kept indoors. They seem healthier and they even come into breeding condition at the right time. I am puzzled as

to why so many people keep birds in poorly lit basements when they have ample opportunity to build garden aviaries.

On sunny days, even in January, the cock greenfinch starts singing his quite nice song somewhat reminiscent of a canary's. And he'll continue to sing until the end of breeding season. Because they are such sociable birds, they may be bred on a colony system or two hens may be bred with one cock.

I feed my birds a mixture of canary seed, rape, white millet, niger and poppy seed with generous portions of sunflower seeds. From the arrival of spring I allow these seeds to sprout by throwing them on the earth floor of the aviary and forking them over twice a week. I also pick all the seeding weeds I can find and I include greens and fruit, primarily apples and oranges. Because the aviaries are heavily planted, the birds are able to find insects. When they are nesting, the greenfinches spend most of their time hunting the insects. To supplement the insect diet I provide an egg food which is a great help when they raise young.

Since greenfinches are the most domesticated species of European finch, a number of color mutations have developed. These mutations are rare and, therefore, expensive but can be obtained from Europe if one is willing to persevere. In my case it took over two years from the time I contacted British aviculturists until I was able to import three pairs of mutation greenfinches. As far as I know I am at the present time the only person in Canada or the USA

Continued on page 6



A lutino greenfinch. Note the red eyes.



Blue Gold Macaw
BG

Scarlet
SC

Toucans
TC

Amazon/African Gray
AAG

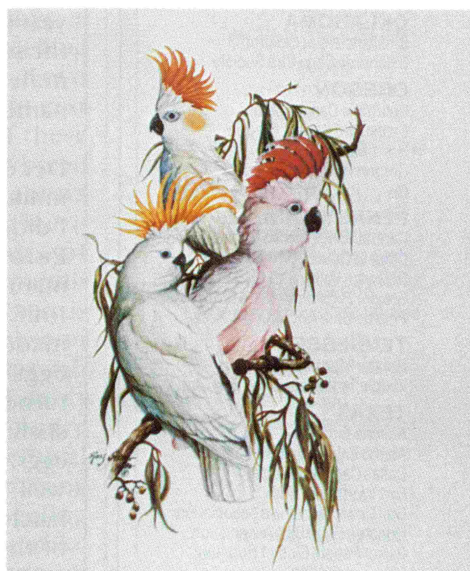


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who is breeding these mutation green-finches. These wonderful birds were worth the extra time and effort to get them, however.

Presently there are three basic mutations well established, with others appearing sporadically. The oldest one is lutino with the bird being completely yellow and having red eyes. The hen tends to be a little more whitish.

The second mutation is cinnamon. In this mutation the black is eliminated, the bird being brownish on a yellow ground.

The third mutation is silver, the bird being completely grey. Other mutations also appear; satinette, which looks like lutino but with a brownish tinge; silver with white wing bars; and one or two others heard of but not seen. All of these mutations are sex-linked.

Breeding this year has produced mixed results. I raised four young birds from a lutino pair (with the help of canaries), and six babies are about to fledge as I write this. Their parents consist of a cinnamon male raised last year and a wild hen of uncertain age. Of the six babies, two are normal colored males split for cinnamon, two cinnamon hens, and two satinettes.

I received the lutino pair last December and had to keep them indoors until they could be acclimated. I didn't expect to breed them as most European finches take two years to mature. The lutino hen, however, laid four eggs at the end of February but made no attempt to sit on them. The eggs were put under canaries and turned out to be fertile but died in the shell. The second clutch was also four eggs, and this time the hen was sitting well, however, when the first two babies hatched I found them dead on the floor of the cage with numerous wounds. I transferred the two remaining eggs under a canary and two lutinos were eventually raised. A third clutch was laid and exactly the same situation repeated itself.

However, I don't place the blame on the birds. I think it was a combination of their immaturity and the confines of a small cage that caused this misfortune and I believe that next year in an aviary they will raise their offspring without my interference.

With the second pair of greenfinches I had more luck. Initially I had reservations about the hen which was a two-year cage bird that I used to replace the original cinnamon hen who disappeared under mysterious circumstances. The replacement hen at first refused the male's courting. In the middle of May,

For information about contacting any of these member clubs, please call that club's closest state coordinator. There is a state coordinator listing with phone numbers elsewhere in this publication.

however, she built a nest and soon after began sitting on eggs. The young greenfinches hatched after 14 days incubation and have grown rather rapidly, probably thanks to the animal protein they were receiving in the form of insects. At twelve days of age they are already feathered and I expect them to leave the nest any day.

Of course a lot of things can still go wrong but, so far, I have found my breeding experiments with greenfinches quite promising, especially since I don't qualify as an experienced breeder as I have kept European birds for only the past four years.

So, presenting my case for these birds, they are lively and elegant birds, good singers, very hardy and easy to keep, good breeders and, thanks to the color mutations, they offer a challenge to their breeders. The normally colored greenfinches are from time to time available on the market and the scarcity of the mutations only enhances their desirability.

I would like to end this article with a personal appeal. Through my four years of specializing in keeping and breeding European birds I have encountered two major obstacles. One is the disinterest on the part of many owners of these birds to make a serious effort to breed them, falsely believing they will always be available. That misconception is evidenced in dwindling numbers of European countries which still permit an export of their native birds. There is no doubt in my mind that very soon these birds will not be available through importing them legally. And I don't think smuggling them into the country will work either. First off, no ethical person would do it. Second, the rising number of people caught smuggling other birds and the heavy fines make one think twice about undertaking such an adventure. And if a few were smuggled in they would be so over priced as to be out of reach for the average breeder.

Another frustrating experience I've had is the inability to find suitable mates for my greenfinches. Therefore I am inviting correspondence from others interested in breeding greenfinches. We can exchange breeding information as well as surplus stock. There may even be enough people to establish a corresponding club. I firmly believe that such cooperation is necessary if we want to see these beautiful birds established in North American aviculture. Interested persons may write to Born To Fly, 32 Juliana Court, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M6S 2R2. ●



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