

# Societies

## *ideal foster parents*

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I have often said, partly in jest, that societies will hatch anything. Well, maybe that's a little exaggerated, but it would be hard to find any other species of finch which, as a group, display such strong parental instincts in captivity.

Actually, even societies have their limits, though their objections seem to be more towards feeding strange mouths, rather than hatching them. I have rarely seen a pair of societies refuse to sit on eggs, but I have experienced problems with societies refusing to feed some babies. Some of these species are, in my experience, completely rejected and others are accepted, but with some reluctance.

One would assume that this acceptance or rejection is based on the mouth patterns of the babies, but I feel that other factors may also be involved, such as the begging position which the baby assumes or the overall size of the baby.

Most, if not all, baby exotic finches have distinctive mouth patterns (some also have gape spots known as gape tubercles) which distinguish one species from another and presumably identify babies to parents. In most species, the parents are not stimulated to feed the "wrong" pattern, but for some reason the societies are not all that concerned about patterns since they willingly feed babies with a variety of different patterns. These babies also have a variety of skin colors and varying amounts of baby fuzz. My own societies have raised stars, shafttails, red-headed and blue-faced parrot finches, purple grenadiers, Lady Gouldians, owls, violet ears and even zebra finches.

The species I have tried to foster but have had no luck with are gold-breasted waxbills and fire finches.

These babies are so small, that I wonder if this was a factor in the societies' rejection of them. I tried several different pairs of foster parents and experienced the same rejection from each pair.

When using societies as foster parents, it is important to feed a good rich diet since many of the foster chicks will likely be of a species requiring high protein (insectivorous) diet - a diet hard to duplicate in the aviary, which is the most likely reason that the natural parents are unwilling or unable to raise their own babies in a cage breeding (or even aviary) set up.

I tend to lean towards the theory that "more" probably won't hurt and the worst thing that can happen is that it will not be eaten. However, breeders who are trying to earn money may have a different viewpoint! The basic diet, which I give all of my finches, consists of unlimited access to a good quality finch seed, grit with oyster shell, egg shell, dried alfalfa, baby chick scratch, cuttlebone and mineral block. I also provide for them, fresh daily, whole wheat bread, egg food and greens such as spinach on which I sprinkle vitamin and calcium/phosphorus supplements.

Water bowls are changed daily. In addition, my exotics and societies with babies get fresh fruit and vegetables such as broccoli, oranges, apples, carrots, a cooked rice/grain mixture and mealworms or other bugs. I also mix ground monkey chow into the egg food.

I am always looking at ways to improve this diet, but I consider any changes carefully, since there is much truth to the adage "if it ain't broke, don't fix it!" The diet I use on my birds, works for me, but there are many variations and approaches to

feeding birds. No one way is the right way. A bird's overall appearance and the production of good healthy chicks is probably one of the best indications of whether or not the diet is adequate.

If, as in my situation, most exotic babies will need to be fostered, it is not over generous to set-up five pairs of societies for each pair of exotics. This should adequately provide an available pair for each clutch of eggs. I have not always had the luxury of this five to one ratio and have, on occasion, been known to complain of "all these eggs and no where to put them."

Most of my society breeding cages are 24" x 18" x 18", a size with which I feel comfortable. Ideally I would like to use much larger cages, but space is limited. Actually, many breeders use smaller cages than mine with great success. On a trial basis I tried a small number of cages which measured 24" x 12" x 12". From the start I disliked them. The small cages may be okay for two birds, but when a clutch of six or more babies fledge and there are eight birds flying around for several weeks until the babies can be moved out on their own, the housing becomes somewhat cramped.

When cage breeding more than one pair of societies, I find it almost essential to use opaque dividers between cages - their inquisitive nature often makes them more interested in their neighbors than their own mates and families.

Societies will nest in just about anything - if a nest is not provided they will nest in their seed dish. All of my societies are provided with nests with half open fronts. They are placed on the outside of the front of the cage for easy access. Because of the frequent fostering of exotics, I need to be able to check eggs and babies, so I do not give the societies much nesting material or they would build roofs, obscuring the view. I place a nest pad in each nest for cushioning and warmth and change it (and the box if necessary) after each clutch. Unlike many other finches, societies do not normally hold a piece of grass or feather when performing their mating dance, so it is unnecessary to supply them with the "props" for this purpose.

It is not necessary to have true pairs to use for fostering - in fact many breeders have experienced better results from two males than from

true pairs. I have found males to almost always be ready to sit on eggs and, of course, the cycle is not complicated by the appearance of their own eggs. The obvious drawback if one uses exclusively males is the absence of any society babies, so a suitable balance based on one's own needs has to be established.

I don't know how important this is or if other breeders follow the same practice, but I usually let new pairs of societies raise a clutch or two of their own babies (or other societies) before I use them for fostering. This gives me a chance to see how well they incubate the eggs and raise the babies. It is not uncommon for new parents to not do well, so I watch and take note before I entrust exotic eggs to them.

There are several approaches to timing as far as the transfer of eggs or babies to foster parents from the natural parents. Some alternatives seem to be based on personal preferences of the breeder, but I have found some methods to work better than others depending on species and perhaps even individual pairs.

I must mention here that I normally give new pairs of exotics the opportunity to raise their own babies, but I have found most to be unreliable parents (when kept in cages) and therefore I resort to fostering. This, of course, varies even among pairs of the same species and some pairs, given an aviary situation, may be excellent parents.

If the natural parents show no inclination to incubate their own eggs, then the breeder is given little choice but to foster the eggs. I usually transfer eggs after the clutch is complete to societies which are already sitting. I rarely use dummy eggs, since I have found that even if my societies are not already sitting, they will do so within a short time after the exotic eggs are placed in their nests.

Some breeders remove the egg from the exotic pair each day, replacing it with a dummy egg and then introduce the eggs to the societies. This prevents the exotics from starting incubation and avoiding "cooling" problem during transfer.

If incubation has been started by the natural parents, the eggs must go to societies which are already sitting tight or chances are that the embryo will be lost. I try to avoid transfer during this time.

If the natural parents will incubate

their own eggs, but have problems in raising babies, it is often more suitable to transfer the babies after hatching. This is what I do with my purple grenadiers.

The societies' acceptance of eggs or babies, in my experience, has not been as "iffy" as I was led to believe when I first started. As I have already mentioned, if the societies are not already sitting, they can usually be persuaded to do so by the introduction of eggs (dummy or the real thing). I have found this to be especially true of two male societies together.

If the societies are already sitting on eggs, they obviously will accept other eggs. However, there are several things to keep in mind:

1. If they have been sitting for several days and the eggs are fertile, the hatch date on those eggs will be earlier than that of the exotic eggs to be fostered (assuming that the exotic eggs have not yet been incubated). Some breeders, at this point, sacrifice the society eggs in favor of the exotic eggs. I, fool that I may be, juggle eggs around until each pair is sitting on eggs with approximately the same anticipated due date.

2. If it cannot be arranged so that all the eggs under each pair are due to hatch at the same time, it is better to have the exotics hatch first. Societies are more inclined to feed their own kind first, so an earlier hatching gives the exotic babies a slight edge.

3. Societies are sometimes reluctant to feed certain species of exotics. If these are placed in a mixed clutch situation, they will probably not get fed. It is wise to arrange for these to be the only babies. I have found this to be especially true of blue-faced parrot finches, but have had no problems with stars or shaft-tails.

Transfer of babies, rather than eggs, is usually not a problem. If the societies already have babies, the newly hatched exotics should be of the same age or a little older. Societies will usually accept newly hatched babies, even if they have none already, as long as they have been sitting on eggs for more than a week or so. I have had pairs sitting on infertile eggs, that have been seemingly thrilled to have something to feed!

Keep in mind that many exotic species are larger and/or more demand-

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ing of society parents and care should be taken not to over-burden the societies. Whereas, many society parents seem to have no problems raising six, seven or even eight of their own babies, large clutches of exotics do not seem to fair so well. Usually try to keep exotic clutches down to a maximum of four. Sometimes a large clutch can't be avoided, so I help out by supplementing the parents' feeding by hand feeding two or three times a day.

A problem I often hear about, but have not really experienced myself, is the unwillingness of the societies to feed out the exotics, or that they try to wean the babies before they are ready to be weaned. This is usually in reference to Lady Gouldian babies. It is my understanding that some exotics develop more slowly than societies. This, logically, would be the basis of the problem, though I don't understand or can offer no explanation as to why it only happens some of the time. Perhaps some parents are better than others. The only two options I can offer are:

1. The obvious — hand feed as necessary when it becomes apparent that the societies are slacking off.

2. Move the babies to a nest where the existing babies are younger. This should probably be done before the babies fledge. I have found societies in general to accept strange babies quite readily, even after feathers appear, providing the babies are still in the nest. However, after fledging they are somewhat reluctant, if not totally against, acceptance of even society babies from a different clutch.

Another suggestion for those planning to foster exotic babies on a large scale. Keep close track of which eggs are put where and when. Once I found an egg which I didn't recognize in a nest to which a large number of birds had access. Just in case it was an exotic, I put it under a pair of societies but didn't make note of it. By the time the egg hatched, I had forgotten what I had done — I thought the baby looked strange, but didn't pay much attention to it and assumed it was a shafttail. Then one day I took a better look and questioned why the shafttail had white wing feathers! I couldn't imagine what it was, until I finally remembered where the egg had come from and realized that I had fostered a zebra finch.

I should point out that it had been

years since I had raised zebra finches and had only recently put a pair in that flight. I neither remembered what a zebra finch egg looked like or what a newly hatched zebra baby looked like. I know what they look like now, and will not be fostering any more of them.

I have found the easiest way to keep records is on 3 x 5" cards attached to the nest boxes. I also use colored stick pins to code at a glance who has exotic eggs, exotic babies, society eggs or babies and what pairs are available, etc. Then when feeding I can tell easily who gets what and when transferring eggs it is easy to spot potential nests.

There are many arguments for and against the practice of fostering baby birds and there are very valid points supporting both sides. I have neither the expertise or the necessary space to completely cover this controversial subject, but I can share the reasons why I foster my exotic finches.

I have been using societies to foster exotic finches for several years — prior to that all of my finches either raised their own or didn't. At that time the birds lived in a large, planted aviary and in addition to the varied diet which I provided, they had access to live food. Several of the species I kept raised their babies and it was a joy to watch.

Then we moved away from an area which was almost ideal finch breeding country to an area which has a much less desirable climate as far as outdoor finch breeding is concerned. I tried to house my finches outside, as before, providing them with additional protection against the elements, but in short, the project was not successful.

I though I was going to have to give up any hope of breeding all but the very hardiest of finches, because I doubted that I would be able to breed them in cages. However, a very helpful couple introduced me to the use of societies as foster parents. At first, I did as they had done and stuck to shafttails, stars and Lady Gouldians. But, then I discovered that many other exotics can also be raised in the same way.

I would still prefer to allow the exotics to raise their own babies and I feel it is a worthwhile goal to work towards in trying to find the missing elements. However, some of the species I now work with do not readily raise babies even in planted aviaries.

Until I can provide my exotics with whatever is lacking in their environment or diet in order for them to raise their own babies, I will continue to use whatever means are available to me in order to save those eggs or babies that might otherwise be doomed.

### Nest Pads

Since I have started breeding finches, I have found that the use of nest pads has made life a little easier.

While many finches build more than adequate nests, some do not and as a result, eggs and/or babies are sometimes lost. The soft cushion and extra warmth provided by a nest pad can make up for the parents' less than enthusiastic nest building.

I also use nest pads for societies, not because they won't build their own nests, but because I need access to the nest cavity for fostering exotics and if I allow them to build their own nests, access sometimes becomes next to impossible.

The nest pads are quick and easy to take, but if do-it-yourself projects are not for you, I have on occasion seen ads for them so you may be able to purchase them ready made. Remember though, these are finch, not canary nest pads.

Directions to make them yourself are:

1. Choose a fabric which is washable and which will not entangle parents or babies. Cotton jersey knits (tee shirt material) are ideal.

2. For each pad, cut out two rectangles a little larger than the inside dimensions of the nest box. If the box measures 4 1/2" x 5", you need rectangles measuring approximately 5" x 5 1/2".

3. Cut a piece of batting to the same size and sandwich it between the two rectangles of fabric. Zig-zag around the edges, being careful to completely enclose the batting to avoid possible problems with loose fibers.

4. In the center, zig-zag a circle approximately 1 to 1 1/2" in diameter to provide an indentation for eggs and babies.

The finished pads are washable and therefore can be used over and over again. ●

*Editor's Note: Society finches are fun finches to work with, even if you don't want to utilize them as foster parents. For more on society finches, please see the next upcoming issue of Watchbird.*