

The Ultimate Finches

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Society or Bengalese Finches are not exactly the rare beauties of the bird world, but they are not totally without merit. They are hardy, easy to care for and inexpensive - ideal beginner's finches. They do not have a particularly attractive voice, but are outgoing, bold and always busy - delightful birds to watch. They also have a special place in aviculture in that they willingly raise the chicks of many exotic finches, which, for a variety of reasons, will not raise their own.

Societies are not found in the wild in their present form. They are believed to be a domesticated form of the White-backed or Sharp-tailed

Munia, a relative of the various nuns and munias found commonly in aviculture today. Apparently, the Chinese first kept these Bengalese Finches in captivity several hundred years ago and then they were imported into Japan around 1700, where they went through several changes. Through selective breeding, a strain of birds was produced which would readily reproduce in cages and which had strong parental instincts. Somewhere along the line the different color variations were also developed.

The chocolate or dark brown Society is closest to the original wild munia. The fawn, or light brown, and

white were developed in captivity. Most Societies available today are pied (i.e., chocolate and white or fawn and white) with a wide variation, both in the extent of the white plumage versus color and in the shade of chocolate or fawn.

The crested variety in which the crown feathers are curled or twisted at odd angles, giving the bird a "morning after" appearance, is available in all color variations.

Until recently, I had not known of any obvious difference in the appearance of male and female Societies, although I suspect that males are generally larger than females. I base this theory in the following "very scien-



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tific" observations:

For some time I had noticed that whenever I have sexed a group of Societies, which I had picked out, I was averaging over 80 percent males. I assumed that this was an indication of a generally greater population of males. Then someone asked me to sex some Societies for him and he produced a randomly caught group of birds. The results this time were about 65 percent females. Yet another randomly caught group produced even more females. Was this just coincidence or in my picking out the bigger, better looking birds, was I, in effect, selecting males?

Recently I have learned that, to the practiced eye, sexing by the width of the beak is a fairly reliable method of sexing these birds which has been used successfully by some breeders.

Even if these methods are correct, I am not about to abandon the more reliable method of sexing which involves watching for the males to do their song and dance routines. To do this, I normally put a group of no more than 20 birds in a holding cage, making sure that each one is easily identifiable by using colored leg bands. Over the following one to two

weeks I watch the birds frequently and make a note of the singers. By the end of that time period, assuming all the birds are sexually mature, it is a fairly safe bet that the non-singers are females. As a way of double checking, I pull all the identified males out and continue to watch the remaining birds for a while longer.

I know of other breeders who house each bird to be sexed in individual cages and then watch for singers. Obviously, they prefer this method, but just the thought of all those extra cages is enough to send me back to the leg bands!

Sexing 20 birds at a time is fine for breeders, but what if you only want one pair? Many breeders and pet shops are willing to try to sex their birds and sell "sexed" pairs. However, since sexing can be time consuming, large operations with hundreds of birds may not be set up to sell sexed Societies.

Contrary to the norm in finch breeding, Societies do much better in cages than in community or aviary settings. This is probably a good indication of how successful the Japanese were when selectively breeding for this trait. A few years ago I tried to aviary breed Societies, with terrible results.

The birds would start to build nests only to have their efforts destroyed by other pairs. Often several females would all decide to lay eggs in the same nest, leading to an impossible situation come time to incubate. They would "help" each other to the extent that interference would occur. In short, not one pair managed to produce babies without major set backs!

There was another problem, too. Societies are more than willing to cross-breed with some of the species of munias and related birds (I assume this is because they are so closely related). So, not only did I get very few babies out of the aviary of societies, but some of those were cross-breeds. Although there are probably many people who have had no problem community breeding them, as far as I am concerned there is only one way to have Societies in an aviary — one pair housed with other non-related species and even then I would not guarantee success.

Personally, I breed Societies for one reason only; to have good healthy foster parents for my exotics. I do not breed for color or for fancy variations — just plain good, healthy

birds.

Keeping that in mind, when pairing up the sexed birds, there are a couple of points which I feel are important:

1. Pure white Societies have a tendency to develop eye problems, especially as they age. I, therefore, try to breed away from white by not pairing two white or mostly white birds together. Logically this should lessen the chances of producing pure white babies. If you have a particular desire to keep or breed white Societies, be especially aware of the potential problem. There may be ways to lessen the risks through careful breeding and maintenance.

2. I have found that the chances of physical deformities are greater among the crested Societies, and since I am not interested in producing fancy varieties I do not normally keep crested babies back for breeding. If you like crested Societies and want to continue a crested line, pair a crested with a non-crested — not two crested together. Two crested parents can produce bald headed babies along with other problems.

The female Society normally lays three to eight eggs, most often five to six. The incubation period is about 15 days and the young leave the nest at around three weeks of age. Young are usually independent and can be separated from the parents by around five to six weeks of age. Male and female share parental responsibilities - often sitting together in the nest, both before and after the babies hatch.

Another piece of advice when setting up Societies for breeding is to make sure your adults are banded or otherwise easily identifiable. I neglected to mention this point when advising someone on setting up her finches. Some time passed, then I received a call asking how to distinguish the babies from the parents. She was ready to take her first clutch away from their parents and only then realized that they all look alike! Actually the fledgling Societies retain the swollen gape flanges for several weeks after leaving the nest, but identification is still much easier if the parents are banded.

Societies do not need a lot of encouragement to raise a family — give them a few basic necessities and they will take it from there. They have no specific breeding season, as is the case with many other finches, and will raise babies year round in most environments. ●

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