

Handraising Abandoned Finches

by Nita J. Haas
Raymore, Maryland

My introduction to pet birds was meeting a wonderful Cockatiel who lived at my Vet's office. This little guy talked and sang and recited poetry. I just had to have one of my own. I bought a Cockatiel from a local breeder and shortly thereafter purchased two pairs of finches; a pair of self-chocolate Society Finches and a pair of English Zebra Finches. I really wanted all Gouldians but I couldn't get two local breeders to sell me any. They felt that raising Goulds could be too disappointing for the beginner.

My two pairs of finches shortly expanded to three pairs when both of my Societies turned out to be males. That first spring the Society and Zebra parents raised about 15 youngsters. I was hooked.

So I added to my flock; more Zebras, more Societies, and finally Goulds. I converted my finches to an extruded diet, supplemented with a "Universal" mixture with insects and dried eggs. I also provided 'greens' every couple of days. I set up my breeding pairs again and waited... and waited... and waited.

Nest after nest of hatched but dead in the nest or hatched but thrown out of the nest was presented to me. I was horrified to find all these unfed, dried up little bodies in my breeding cages. The parents were eating well, but they weren't feeding with their babies. (In retrospect, I believe they wouldn't feed pellets to their babies because the pellet conversion was too short and too close to the breeding season.)

I read magazine articles and books on finch breeding, spoke to several breeders, and concluded that dead chicks represented "Nature taking its course." No one advised handfeeding.

Out of 10 breeding pairs, five babies survived. I was heart broken. With more fertile eggs being incubated, I panicked. When the first egg hatched under a pair of Zebras, who had previously let their clutch starve, I watched nervously for a couple of hours waiting for them to feed the chicks. After about 12 hours I decided not to wait any longer. I removed



Photo by Nita J. Haas

Tame Society Finches do make good pets as can be seen by Chocko with the author's nephew.

the tiny, pink chick from the nest and placed him in a small Tupperware container with a plastic juice bottle filled with hot water, covered with a dish towel. I had some Kaytee Exact hand-feeding formula on hand and mixed it up a tiny amount in a shot glass. I also had sterilized syringes and catheter type feeding tubes from my days as a dog breeder. I drew the watery mixture into my syringe, opened the baby's beak, slid the syringe down the right side of the mouth, into the crop. I decided not to put him back with his parents and took on the responsibility for this tiny life myself.

I continued to feed the chick every two to three hours as his crop emptied. I also fed at 10 p.m., at 2 a.m. and 5 a.m. I took the baby to work and continued to feed him every couple of hours. When I returned home that afternoon, another Zebra baby was discovered in the same nest. I took this one out and fed him as I

had the first one, then I put him back in the nest to see if the parents would take on their duties. Before I went to bed, the baby's crop was empty, and I fed him again. I did not feed him again, hoping the parents would get the idea and take over. The next day I left for work with my first chick; when I returned home that night, the second chick was dead. I was disappointed.

When I arose the morning of the fourth day, my chick's crop had not emptied from his 2 a.m. feeding. I took him to my avian veterinarian who was amazed that I had kept the little finch alive for four days. The vet did not know of anyone handraising Zebras. He advised me to buy some Pedialyte, a human baby preparation with electrolytes and sugars. The Pedialyte™ should be substituted for the handfeeding formula for the first 24 hours or so. He also advised me to add humidity to my baby's

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environment. When I got to work I added a twist-off bottle cap with hot water to my tupperware 'nest.' The humidity inside the plastic carrier was apparent when I later fed the chick.

At birth, the baby was no larger than my little fingernail. Now four days later, he was almost to the second joint of my little finger! He was doing great! I began to feel confident that the little guy would make it. When I went to feed him his 7 p.m. meal on the fifth day, he was dead. How could he have been fine at 5 p.m., and gone at 7 p.m.? I was devastated.

One week later eggs under a pair of Society Finches who had not fed their first clutch started to hatch. I left them alone thinking I would work them into a frenzy with all my puttering around. One chick died at 24 hours of age. I pulled two other hatchlings from the nest and became their mother. Several finch breeder friends thought I was crazy.

At 12 hours of age I fed each chick .01 cc of Pedialyte™ and watched for the yolk sac, which was clearly visible on the abdomen of the chick, to disappear. As long as the yolk sac is visible, DO NOT OVERFEED. I continued with the Pedialyte every two hours until the chicks were 24 hours old. At this time I mixed a minute amount of Exact Hand-Feeding Formula with the Pedialyte and continued the feeding for another 24 hours. The chicks were being fed about every two to three hours except at night. At three days of age the chicks were fed straight Exact Handfeeding formula. The amount of formula made at each feeding was less than one teaspoon for both chicks.

I took two more starving Society chicks to handraise when my original ones were about one week old. I tube fed these four chicks all the way to weaning. Feeding became a breeze; the little guys eventually grabbed the tube and sucked it down, so feeding was very quick and easy. At the age of ten days, I stopped the middle of the night feeding. I was very proud of myself... Heck, this was easy!

Then came weaning. The babies were used to having food deposited directly into their crops and they didn't like formula in their mouths. However, they did like canary nestling food. I just popped some into the gaping mouths and they swallowed! Later, I dropped Exact pellets into their mouths and they soon began eating on their own.

These hand-raised finches are adorable pets. I kept two and gave the other two to a good friend who had parrots

but thought finches were boring. She is now 'stuck' on her tame finches as I am. These tiny birds have so much personality; each one is a different little life with intelligence, inquisitiveness, and sense of humor.

They love to play tricks on Mom... like staying just beyond the fingertips when the 'Free Flight' is over and it's time to go back in their cage. I have one who even says his name! During his male 'display' behavior he says "Hi Cheeb." The bird's name is Chibi. None of the other males verbalize this kind of sound.

My tame finches are allowed "Free Flight" around the living room every day or two for about half an hour. They fly to me, and snuggle next to my neck, perch on top of my head, tug at my hair, nip at my ears (which hurts), and play tug of war with tissues sticking out of the Kleenex™ box. Several birds enjoy cuddling and having their chins scratched. Others enjoy "hanging out", but don't enjoy cuddling and petting. That's okay. Having a beautiful tame Gouldian on my shoulder whispering to me is an experience all its own.

I took my youngest handfed Society, "Chocko", to my niece's kindergarten class for "Show and Tell." This four month old finch let every child hold and pet her. Chocko was just the right size for little hands and her diminutive size did not frighten even the most timid child.

I have never been able to hand-raise a Zebra Finch baby, even though I've tried a couple of times. I have given up... they are just too tiny. For Societies and Goulds I would go through this all again, rather than lose a whole nest of babies. However, with less "puttering around" on my part and no diet changes during the breeding season, my birds have become good parents and good feeders. I have many people who want a tame finch from me, but it's a lot of hard work and, sometimes, a lot of heartache. I have pulled 10 day old Society babies to handfeed specifically for pets.

I now use a small pipette to handfeed finch babies if the parents refuse to feed. Usually the parents will settle down and take over after a couple of supplemental feedings. If not, I pull the babies and assume the responsibility myself. The majority of my breeding pairs are now excellent parents and raise their own young. I have so many requests for tame Society Finches, I don't worry about them imprinting on humans and not their own kind. These birds are placed as companions, and not breeding stock.



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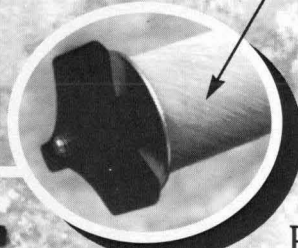
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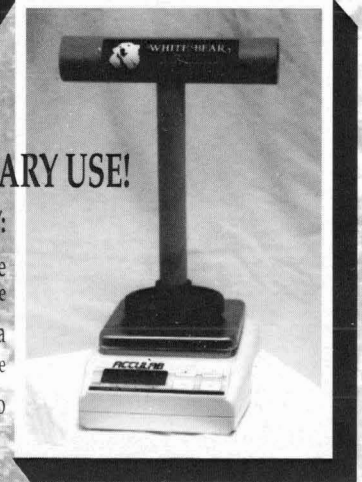
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