



Living with Companion Captive Finches



Captive Finches As Pets

Finches come in an array of spectacular colours, patterns and markings. Each species has a unique personality, behaviour and voice. These birds prefer to live together as couples, or can even thrive quite well in a flock, such as an aviary situation. Generally, finches do very well without human interactions. They are quite content to associate with one another. However, for a great pet, hand-fed finches acquire better temperaments and learn to associate people with good things. Hand-fed finches are more likely to perch upon or near people, learn to come when called, interact easily in a family household, and enjoy the presence of people. Finches are beautiful, low maintenance birds, that are active and fun to watch.

Please note finches are great pets for adults and children.

However, children should not be solely responsible for the care of small birds. Finches should only be handled by adults, when necessary, because it is very easy to cause respiratory distress and suffocation by inadequate restraint.

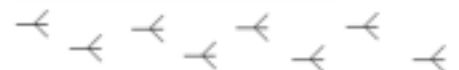
Description

Included as pet finches are canaries, gold finches and various species of captive bred finches. Most pet finches are Zebra finches, that are very hardy, and easy to maintain. Other species, such as the Societies and Spice finches can be found at pet stores. Another species, the Gouldian finch requires a little more care and attention, but still makes brilliant pets. All finches should be kept as pairs. A male and female will breed, and require more maintenance. A pair of females will interact very well with each other and decrease the need for extra supplies, and care associated with breeding pairs. It is not recommended to keep two males together as they will often fight. If a finch is kept alone, it is prone to have behavioural changes, such as increased vocalizations, depression, and feather picking (a form of self mutilation), which may lead to death.

Zebra finches are about 4 inches long. Often, the male is brighter than the female with a bright orange cheek patch, but both will have bright orange bills, mixtures of grey and white feather patterns, and black and white banding on the tails, and below the eyes. Canaries, a bright yellow to orange coloured finch are extraordinary singers, especially the males. Finches can live from 5 to 10 years depending on the species, diet and husbandry. They adapt well to people and can become quite social.

Finch – Proofing

Finch proofing a cage is relatively easy. Ensure that the cage is large enough to allow both finches to fly around, that the door closes securely and the wire spacing prevents escape. To allow pet finches to be able to fly around, a small room should be selected. The room should be quiet and all other animals, such as cats and dogs locked out. The windows must be closed, with curtains or blinds drawn. If a finch flies directly into a window, the end result is a fatality. Ceiling fans should be turned off, doors and closets closed. A dimmed light





A factsheet produced by the
Canadian Federation of
Humane Societies

September 2003

*The Canadian Federation of
Humane Societies is a
national body comprised of
animal welfare organizations
and individuals whose
purpose is to promote
compassion and humane
treatment for all animals.*

Author

Katharine Jones

Program Director

Shelagh MacDonald

Chief Executive Officer

Bob Van Tongerlo

*CFHS is a registered charity.
Donations in support of our
national animal welfare
programs can be made by
cheque, credit card or by
calling our toll-free number.*

Charitable Registration #
11830 884 RR0001



**Canadian Federation
of Humane Societies**

30 Concourse Gate, Suite 102
Ottawa, Ontario K2E 7V7

Tel: (613) 224-8072

Fax: (613) 723-0252

Toll Free: 1-888-678-CFHS

e-mail: info@cfhs.ca

Website: www.cfhs.ca

is less likely to burn, limits the bird's vision, and decreases the amount of stimulation and stress. In addition, it makes the finches easier to catch and place back into the cage.

Training and Handling

After a short time of adjustment to the new surroundings, finches will become aware of who belongs in the household. They will begin socializing and conversing with each other as well as their owners. To have a finch perch on a finger, it is best to wait for the birds to get used to the house, people and noises. Then, place your hand in the cage for several minutes, several times a day for a few days without forcing the birds to come to you. Treats, such as millet, or fruit can be offered. When they are ready, they will approach your hand. Do not immediately try to bring the bird out of the cage, or it may spook and fly away.

Gradually allow the bird to come to your hand and perch on a finger each time the hand is placed in the cage. After this task is accomplished, it is possible to slowly bring the bird outside of the cage on your finger. Make sure this is done in a small room with the door closed, windows closed and covered (curtains or blind

closed), all other animals locked out, and lights dimmed. If the finch flies away, leave the cage door open, and wait to see what it does. Most often, the finch will return to the security of the cage.

If it is necessary to place him back in the cage, turn the lights off (or on a lower dim setting), corner the bird and gently cup it in your hands to place back in the cage. Capturing and restraining the bird should always be done by an adult. If it is possible to have the birds loose in the room for some time, leave the cage open and door closed.

Most finches cannot be trained to speak; however, some will call and peep at unknown visitors when they want attention or treats, or even when they feel like interacting with the television or radio.

Housing

Finches require either a metal or wooden cage of adequate size. Most pet store cages label small cages as finch and canary cages, but often these cages are a little on the small size for a pair. Always aim for a cage that is long and wide rather than tall. Finches require exercise and a cage with enough space to be able to fly



back and forth. The minimum cage dimensions for a pair of finches should measure 24 inches in length and 17 inches in height. The larger the cage, the better. Perches of various diameters should be installed at different heights throughout the cage. Make sure that the finch has enough room to fly from one end of the cage to the other.



Perches can be purchased from a pet store, or made from different sizes of doweling. Use sandpaper perch covers on only one perch as they can cause foot irritation and injuries. Be sure the sandpaper perch is not on the preferred location of the cage. Small branches work very well, but should be cleaned prior to being placed in the cage and replaced regularly. The bottom of the cage may be lined with plain paper, newspaper, or paper towel, and cleaned daily. A wire or mesh

barrier should prevent the birds from landing on the liner, to ensure that their feet and feathers remain clean. Wire spacing should be $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

The cage should be located in a quiet, secure location. Either a chain can be hung from the ceiling or the cage may be placed on a stand. The birds should be kept away from direct sunlight, drafts, air conditioners and noisy or busy areas. The room temperature should be maintained around 18 – 24 C. Do not allow people to smoke around the birds, as the smoke is very irritating to their sensitive eyes, and air sacs.

Full spectrum lighting in the room is helpful to control moulting and breeding, but is not necessary for the average pet finch.

The food dishes can be placed at the bottom or attached to the side of the cage. Water dishes should be attached to the side of the cage to prevent spilling and soiling. Be sure not to place the dishes directly under a perch, or they will become soiled quickly. The dishes should be cleaned and refilled daily.

With breeding pairs, a small nest is necessary, as well as soft nesting material. Avoid long and

thin nesting material, which has a tendency to become wrapped around the legs of the birds. Toys help to stimulate the personalities of the finches in their environment. Even though finches are not known to play with toys, they do tend to investigate and perch on new items in their cage. Swings and ladders are great additions. Mirrors always stimulate conversation. Baths are entertaining and help keep the feathers clean. A birdbath can be any shallow dish filled with lukewarm water placed at the bottom of the cage, or a purchased 'bird bath' from a pet store that hangs on the bars of the cage. The leafy ends of celery rinsed with water, and placed in the bars can also be considered a bath with flavour. Small bells can also be very amusing for the birds, and little hanging preening toys (they look like a miniature straw broom, but softer) amuse finches.

Cage covers, like a sheet, reduce the night drafts and are useful to help calm the birds as they decrease the amount of light and mimic nighttime.





Diet

Finches consume 30% of their body weight daily. Commercial finch seed or pellet mixes are available. However, finches should also be supplemented with a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as a calcium source. Leafy greens, such as romaine lettuce, and dandelion greens should be provided. Other options are broccoli, carrots, cantaloupe, mango, corn, pumpkin and sweet potatoes. Small amounts of different vegetables and fruits should be offered to the finches. After a short time, it will be obvious which are the favourites and which ones are truly disliked.

Cuttlebone is a source of calcium and mineral supplementation that attaches to the side of the cage. The bone also helps to sharpen and maintain the bill for breaking seeds.

Health

Paired breeding finches may have eggbinding, where the egg becomes lodged in the female's cloaca. The bird will look sick and you may be able to feel a lump at the cloaca. This is a serious problem that necessitates emergency action by a veterinarian.

Nutritional problems tend to be common, such as hypocalcemia, and hypovitaminosis in pet finches. These can be eliminated with proper supplementation, and feed mixes.

They are also susceptible to air sac mites, which can cause severe respiratory distress, and tapeworms that cause gastrointestinal problems. Thin, long nesting material has a tendency to become wrapped around legs causing gangrene if not removed. Some birds may have polyomavirus infections causing poor feathering and tubular shaped beaks.



Moulting occurs naturally at different times of the year, depending on the environment, temperatures, and breeding. Birds may pick at their own feathers at this time. Be sure not to confuse moulting with feather picking.

Wing clipping may be desired to

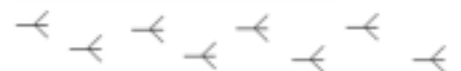
prevent escape, and to facilitate training. Nail clipping can be done at home with small bird nail clippers and a bottle of styptic powder to stop bleeding. Much care is needed not to cut the quick of the toe. Consult an avian veterinarian for more information.

A sick finch will have half closed eyes (even when awake), fluffed feathers, scaly feet, bloody feces, laboured breathing, swollen vent, will shiver and sit at the bottom of the cage (all the time). These symptoms are indications to move the bird into a separate cage and consult with a veterinarian. Annual veterinary visits are advised.

Finches and Other Animals

Finches get along very well with their own species, some other finch species and people. Groups of finches can be kept together in aviaries.

Keep finches away from larger birds, as the bigger birds may pick on the smaller finches and cause injuries and fatalities. Never allow a dog or cat to interact with the finches, because one sudden grab or paw strike can be deadly for the delicate birds.





Before you Make the Commitment...

- ✓ Finches may require medical care. Have you planned in your budget for emergencies?
- ✓ If you rent, have you checked to be sure that you are allowed to keep finches?
- ✓ What will you do with your finches during vacation time?
- ✓ Finches generally live from 5 to 10 years old. Are you prepared for this commitment?
- ✓ Young children should not be left unsupervised with finches. Will you have the time to spend with the children and their pets? Will you teach them to treat the birds gently and carefully?

- ✓ Do you have other pets to consider before bringing finches home?
- ✓ Finches moult. Are there allergies in your family?
- ✓ Will finches fit into your home and lifestyle?

Checklist

Housing

- Adequate sized bird cage
- Food and water dishes
- Perches of different diameters (natural branches)
- Paper lining for easy cleaning (lines bottom of cage)
- Chain to hang or a stand for the cage
- Cage cover

Food

- Finch seeds & feed
- Fresh water
- Fresh, washed vegetables and fruits
- Cuttle bone (minerals)
- Treats (millet, grass)

Supplies

- Toys (swings, mirrors, bird bath)
- Nail clippers
- Styptic powder
- Good book on finch care

Vet Care and More

- Annual check-up
- Emergency medical care
- Vacation care

MORE PUBLICATIONS FROM CFHS...

Other publications available from the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies:

 *A Common Sense Guide to Selecting a Dog or a Cat*

 *Living with Urban Wildlife* factsheets

- Raccoons
- Squirrels
- Skunks
- Mice & Rats
- Pigeon

 *Happy Indoor Cats* factsheet

 *Giving Your Cat a Safe and Happy Home*

Other companion animal factsheets in this series:

Living With Companion Budgerigars
Living With Companion Cockatiels
Living With Companion Ferrets
Living With Companion Hamsters
Living With Companion Gerbils
Living With Companion Guinea Pigs