

Finch

Family *Estrildidae*



LIFE SPAN: Typically 5-15 years

AVERAGE SIZE: 4-6 inches, 10-30 grams

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written by an expert in the pet care industry and approved by a board-certified avian veterinarian

the information on this care sheet is a basic overview and not a substitute for veterinary care. For more information and to find a qualified avian veterinarian, go to www.AAV.org.

WILD AND DOMESTIC HISTORY: The finch species kept as pets range from all over the world including Australia, Asia and India. Some species, such as the society finch, never existed in the wild, but were bred in Japan. Common finch species that are often seen in the pet trade include: zebra, society, spice, cordon bleu, gold, Gouldian, parrot, Java, orange weaver, owl and strawberry finch. Age of sexual maturity is usually around 9 months. Some finches are sexually dimorphic, which means males and females are visually different. For instance, male zebra finches have black and white barring on the breast and throat and bright orange cheek patches. However, some color mutations of the zebra finch do exist where these markings do not show. Many other finch species are not easily distinguished by their appearances, but some experienced keepers may be able to make good guesses of the sex from the behavior of the bird.

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS: Finches are small passerines songbirds. They are a relatively quiet species with vocalizations of small beeps and chirps. Finches do best in pairs or groups of six or more; however, they do breed quite readily. It is possible to keep only females, but with many species it is difficult to determine a sex upon purchase.

NORMAL BEHAVIOR & INTERACTION: Finches are energetic, sweet tempered birds. They will happily hop from perch to perch and are a joy to watch. Finches enjoy the company of other finches. Keep them in pairs or in groups of six or more. Four finches (two pair) in one cage tend to become too territorial and will fight. Obviously, cage size must increase properly as the number of birds increases. Finches do not enjoy being handled, although some keepers have trained them to sit on a finger. Also, please note that some species are more compatible in mixed groups than others.

DIET: Finches benefit from a good quality pellet diet in addition to their seed mix. A seed-only diet can result in nutrient deficiency and diseases such as liver, kidney and heart disease, as well as obesity, all of which can severely shorten the life expectancy of your pet. Pelleted diets have been carefully formulated to meet the specific needs of your canary. If your bird is not used to pellets, they can be mixed

with seed. As time goes on, you can slowly convert your bird to a majority of pellet and fresh food diet.

Your finch should also be offered fresh vegetables, fruit and grains daily. You can also offer "egg food" or cooked egg as a good source of protein and vitamin A (be sure to include the yolk). Remember that vitamin A foods found in the red and orange fruits and vegetables (carrots, sweet potato) will improve the overall immune system. Finches often enjoy leafy greens and can be offered in small bunches or chopped finely. Be sure to remove any fresh foods that have not been eaten within a 24-hour period.

Never feed your finch chocolate, sugary/fried foods, avocado, or junk food. See our **Avian Nutrition** Handout for more information!

SUPPLEMENTS: If your bird is eating a balanced diet, the only supplement that you will need is calcium. Calcium can usually be offered in the form of a cuttlebone or mineral block. Do not use gravel or grit as it can cause impactions. For optimal calcium metabolism, your bird will need some UVB exposure for at least 3-4 hours a day. Careful outdoor sun exposure or indoor UV lighting is recommended (see our **UV Lighting** handout).

WATER: Clean, fresh water must always be available and should be changed daily. All water should ideally be free of fluorine, chlorine and heavy metals. We recommend that you use unflavored bottled drinking water or bottled natural spring water. If tap water is used, you should treat it with a water conditioner. If you do not want to chemically de-chlorinate the water, you can leave an open container of tap water out for at least 24 hours with exposure to ultraviolet light. Do not use distilled water, which can cause severe medical problems, since it lacks minerals that are essential to important body functions.

Because your bird will often even bathe or dunk food in its water, it must be checked/changed several times a day. It is recommended that the bowl be wiped clean with a paper towel at every change to prevent a slimy film (bacteria) from collecting on the inside of the bowl. Thoroughly wash the bowl with a mild dishwashing detergent and water at least once a day.

HOUSING & ENVIRONMENT: Finches need a clean, warm, mentally stimulating environment. One or two birds should have a cage no smaller than 18"x18"x18." Do not purchase a round cage. The basic rule of thumb is the bigger the better! Canaries are very active and like to flit back & forth as much as possible. Remember that birds fly horizontally, not vertically like a helicopter! Choose a cage that allows that natural movement. The spacing between the bars of the cage should be no wider than 3/8 inch to a 1/2 inch.

The cage should be placed in a family-centered room where the bird will feel like a part of the "flock"; however, the back of the cage should be positioned against a wall to provide security. Avoid drafty areas and any placement that will get too much direct sun for any portion of the day. If your bird spends time out of its cage, make sure that any ceiling fans are off. Do not place your bird's cage in the kitchen, as cooking fumes and even a small amount of smoke can be fatal. Average room temperature will be fine for your bird, not

to exceed 80 degrees. Be careful of drafts from air conditioning, especially when bathing and misting.

Perches of varying materials and types should be included in the cage, such as wood dowel, natural branch type, cotton rope or a cement perch. Having different sizes will exercise the feet and prevent sores and foot-related health issues. We do not recommend sandpaper covered perches as they are too abrasive for bird feet.

At least three clean bowls should be ready for use: one for fresh water, one for dry pellets/seed and one for fresh foods.

Use newspapers to line the bottom of the cage. It is easy to change and you can monitor your bird's feces daily. We do not recommend sandpaper floor paper or corn cob bedding. Corn cob can be ingested and cause obstructions and can grow molds on moist foods and feces.

We recommend against using mite protectors due to the potential for respiratory irritation (fortunately feather mites are not common in finches). In addition, a smoke-free household is best for bird and owner!

Your bird may appreciate a cage cover for nighttime. The cover can block out any extraneous light and create a more secure sleeping place. Be careful not to use any fabrics for your cover that your bird might catch its claws or beak in, or that it might pull strings from and ingest.

Finches will enjoy picking at small toys made of leather strips or sturdy string.

RECOMMENDED SUPPLIES:

- Cage
- Perches
- Dishes
- Toys
- Misting bottle and/or dish for birdbath
- Nail clipper & styptic powder
- Pellet diet
- Treats
- Calcium supplement
- Fluorescent UVB Bulb and housing
- Cage cover

CAGE MAINTENANCE: Your finch's cage should be checked daily. Feces and spoiled food should be wiped clean of perches, cups and cage bars consistently to prevent health problems. Cage paper can be changed every to every-other day.

The entire cage should be cleaned thoroughly at least once every month with:

- A mild dishwashing liquid in warm water
- Vinegar & water (1:8) or bleach and warm water (1:32)
- Cage "furniture" should also be scrubbed clean with the same dilution.
- Rinse off all soap and bleach thoroughly with plain water before re-introducing your pet to its enclosure.
- NEVER MIX VINEGAR AND BLEACH - IT CREATES A TOXIC SOLUTION

GROOMING & HYGIENE: All birds should be gently misted with a water bottle dedicated to this use only. In addition to misting, a shallow dish (2-3 inches deep) for bird bath should be offered to your bird at least twice weekly.

Be sure to take your bird to your avian veterinarian for regular nail trims. *Never* use styptic powder on your bird's skin-nails only!

SIGNS OF A HEALTHY BIRD: A healthy bird should be perky, active and alert with bright, clear eyes, and nostrils. You should observe your bird eating and drinking throughout the day. Your bird should appear well groomed with neat, bright feathers. The feathers should be mostly smoothed to the body at rest - not continually fluffed. The feet and legs should be smooth and free of lumps, scabs and rough scales. Finches vocalize regularly with chirps and beeps. Your bird should be interested in singing, but may be shy or intimidated around new people or in new environments. A healthy bird is confident and inquisitive, although cautious and aware as well. We recommend your bird be seen by an avian vet for yearly health exams.

SOME COMMON HEALTH PROBLEMS THAT REQUIRE VETERINARY EVALUATION INCLUDE:

- Fluffed feathers, missing patches of feathers, feathers being purposely plucked.
- Evidence that your bird has stopped grooming.
- Bird sitting still and low on perch with a puffed-up appearance, drooping wings; may also stay at bottom of cage.
- Beak swelling or unusual marks on cere.
- Nasal discharge, eye discharge, wheezing or coughing.
- Any change in stools including color or consistency.
- Loss of appetite.
- Favoring of one foot, holding a wing differently, presence of any blood.

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