

Canary

The beautiful melodious song of the canary has earned these delightful birds the status of being among the world's most popular pet birds. Canaries are admired and kept throughout the world. They are easy to keep, hardy and well suited to any home environment. They require little space, however as with any bird they enjoy having space to fly.

One of the most endearing qualities of canaries is their beautiful song. Although females will often sing, the best singers are males, which makes them in great demand. Males usually sing better when kept alone which often leads to a solitary life. Canaries are good pet birds for all ages but are especially appealing to older people as they provide lively color and song to the home.

The colorful history of the Canary - The domestic canary (*Serinus canarius domesticus*) is a descendant of the wild canary (*Serinus canarius canarius*) found in the Canary Islands and Azores Islands. Wild canaries were imported into Spain as early as 1478. Early European breeders worked to develop singing canaries. The first domestic breeds were the well-known singing canaries, Rollers. Singing canaries flourished in Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. German miners in the Harz Mountains played an important role in the domestication and distribution of canaries. These miners used canaries to detect toxic gases in coal mines and became canary enthusiasts. Since canaries are more sensitive to airborne toxins than men, if the bird died suddenly the miners knew to evacuate. Canary hobbyists slowly established numerous color varieties as early as the 18th century. In England breeders worked to develop type (body shape) and crested canaries. In France, Spain and Italy frilled canaries were developed. Crossing canaries with red siskins produced red factor canaries.

Canaries were the first birds regularly imported into the United States. Records dating back to 1900 indicate imports averaging 70,000 canaries per year, primarily aboard sailing ships in the early part of the 20th century. Unfortunately the canary fancy did not develop in the US to level of show sophistication that flourished in Europe for centuries. Birds show featuring exhibition canaries still draw huge crowds in many European cities.

Wild canaries live in open country with small woods and thickets. Their plumage is grayish green with black streaks on the wings and upper parts. They usually form small flocks, flying through the air in an undulating course. They nest in thick foliage of bushes and small trees. The song of wild canaries is a series of rapid, high-pitched trills and metallic sounds. They are also closely related to the Serin (a wild canary of Europe) and the green singing finch of Africa.

Canaries have historically been bred for, song, color or type. Some breeders attempt to combine some of the traits but this is very difficult due to the complex inheritance patterns of individual breeds.

The most common Canaries bred for song are Rollers but also popular are the Timbrado and the Malinois (from Belgium) or Waterslager (from Germany).

Canaries bred for color can be divided into two main groups, those with yellow or white background vs. red factor (hybrids derived from the Hooded Siskin *Spinus cucullatus*) with orange to red background. The original coloring of the wild canary contained dark black or brown pigments on a yellow background. The name pigmented or melanine is often used to describe birds with dark pigment patterns on their backs. Light colored birds which show only the light background colors are referred to as lipochrome. Birds in which the yellow background color has been lost by mutation have a white background. In the 1920's domestic canaries were hybridized with Siskins producing genes, which would produce red or pink coloration to the feathers. This trait referred to as red-factor will only produce red or pink coloration if the birds are color-fed (fed foods containing red-pigments).

Lipochromes - Yellow is the best-known color variety and these birds are widespread. The most prized show yellow canaries have no dark pigment even on the feet or beak. White birds have lost all yellow pigment except for the shafts of the flight and tail feathers. The English white is a different mutation and have no yellow. Orange and orange red canaries have intense, even coloration. Differences in shade of yellow or red may depend on the length of the feathers and whether the yellow extends to the tip of each feather. Lighter shades may be referred to as buffs or frosted, or ivory. Intensity of colors is also graded in show birds.

Pigmented or melanine canaries possess either black or brown pigments and are divided into 6 different varieties – Green (brown and black pigments on a yellow background), Blue (black and brown pigments on a white background), Bronze (black and brown pigments on an orange or red orange background), golden cinnamon (brown pigment on a yellow background), silver cinnamon (brown pigment on a white background) or orange cinnamon (brown pigment on an orange background). Lighter colored pigmented canaries are referred to as pastels or opals.

Mosaic mutations are similar to the pied mutations of parrots in which patterned loss of pigmentation occurs.

Canaries bred for type are birds with unusual body shape or plumage patterns. There are English breeds such as Borders, Gloucester Fancy, Yorkshire and Norwich. Frilled canaries such as the Paris curled, Dutch frilled, Paduan, Gibber Italicus. And patterned canaries such as the Lizard.

Frills and curls have extremely long feathers, primarily on their backs which curl and which should be symmetrical. The claws are often also left to grow long and curl. Some are crested and a variety of colors are available. In addition frills may be very large – up to 9 inches long. British varieties were bred for body type. The Norwich is a large, heavy bodied bird with dense soft plumage. The Yorkshire is a thin bird with very erect

posture, tight plumage and extended legs giving it an aristocratic appearance. The crested gloster is a small (4 1/2 inches) bird with a crest resembling a beetle haircut. The lizard canary was bred for having a pigment pattern which resembles scales on the back. The Belgium hunchback is an odd deformed looking bird like a tall Yorkshire with the neck of a vulture. This breed virtually disappeared after the First World War.

When buying a canary look for a bird which is active and lively. If you want a singing canary request a male. Females may sing but rarely sing as well or often as males. The bird's plumage should be smooth and shiny and the eyes bright. Catch the canary and cup it in your hand to feel its chest. If the keel bone is prominent it may be too thin. Hold the bird to your ear and listen for clicking respiratory sounds that may indicate respiratory disease.

Canaries vary in size from the small Gloster, which is 4 1/2 inches long to the large breeds such as Parisian Frills, which may be 8-9 inches long. Their weight will also vary from 12-30 grams.

Canaries are pets for people who will admire them in their cage. Although they are highly domesticated they are not typically hand tamed and do not like handling.

Diet and Feeding

Canaries are granivorous by nature feeding primarily on grass seeds. Classical canary diets have been seed diets consisting of a mixture of good quality rapeseed and canary seed with the addition of small quantities of dehusked oats, niger, linseed, hemp, lettuce and other small seeds. Rape is high in protein and beneficial oils. Canary seed and millets are high in carbohydrates. Niger is often used to entice canaries to sing.

Kaytee manufactures pelleted diets, (extruded diets) in a small size are suitable for canaries and finches and provide balanced nutrition in every bite. These can be substituted for seeds and seeds can be given as treats.

Canaries should also be offered small mounts of fresh dark green leafy vegetables such as romaine, endive, spinach, watercress and dandelion greens. They also enjoy tiny slices of apple, grapes, melons, or sprouts. These fresh foods are relished by canaries, which have been introduced to them especially at a young age. Boiled eggs or commercial egg food are excellent for young and breeding canaries but care must be taken in avoiding contamination, leaving moist foods in the cage too long.

If your canary is fed a seed diet vitamin supplementation is needed. Ideally vitamins should be added to soft foods such as egg food and a soft bread mix. Vitamins can be provided in the water but the bowl or water bottle must be washed daily to prevent bacterial over-growth. Vitamin supplementation is not necessary if the bird eats a pelleted diet.

Canaries have historically been given grit however contrary to popular belief canaries do not require grit. They will consume it and if they are in good health it will not harm them but if they don't feel well they may eat too much resulting in an impaction. A recent scientific study demonstrated that grit consumption is not essential or even clearly beneficial. Mineral grit which contains digestible minerals may however be an important source of minerals if the birds otherwise do not receive adequate minerals in the diet.

Canaries must have fresh water daily and can die if water is withheld for 24 hours.

Housing

Canaries are small but they are very active and should be given plenty of room to move around their cage. They should have at least 2 perches far enough apart to jump or fly between. Cage size should be at least 18 inches square. Bars are often vertical for canary cages.

The floor of the cage should ideally be lined with paper, newspaper or craft paper. Sheets of paper cut to the size of the cage floor make daily paper changing easy. Make it a habit to look at the stools of your bird every day when changing the paper. This is an excellent way to monitor its health. If your canary is eating seeds the feces should look like a small dark round dot (the feces) with a smaller white spot (the urates or solid urine) on top. If he is eating pellets the feces will be slightly more bulky and may contain colors from the pellets, which pass harmlessly through the digestive tract. Some colors may also show up in the urates. If you feed greens or vegetables they can also make the stools more bulky and liquid. Stop feeding these food and the feces should return to the more typical appearance.

The cage should be placed so it is not directly below an air conditioning vent, or in a direct sunlight from a window, but should be in an area of the home where there is much activity. Canaries are very susceptible to air-borne toxins. If you keep your canary in the kitchen, always be aware of the dangers of Teflon poisoning, cleaning chemicals, oven cleaners. (Teflon poisoning occurs when a Teflon pot or pan is overheated, not during normal cooking temperatures).

Grooming - Canaries love baths and small bird baths can be purchased that will fit into the door of a standard canary cage. This can be filled with luke warm water. Allow the bird to enter as he chooses. Canaries can also be offered a shallow bowl of water in the floor of the cage. They should be allowed to bathe twice weekly to maintain excellent plumage.

Wing clipping is uncommon for canaries as they are not usually handled. If you do choose to let your bird fly in the house however there are safety concerns. Accidents are often associated with ceiling fans, birds falling into open toilets, swimming pools, pots on the stove, etc. Escapes can also happen very quickly when a door is suddenly opened and the bird becomes startled and flies out.

Nails should be kept an appropriate length, as overgrown nails can be a hazard as well. They can be clipped with fingernail clippers watching for the quick (vein) inside the nail. Since a canary's nails are white the vein can be seen easily and the nail should be clipped a little bit past the vein. In case a nail bleeds after it is cut, you can stop the bleeding by application of quick stop. If no such product is available you can stick the nail into a bar of soap, apply flour or cornstarch or you can light a match, blow it out and cauterize the nail on the hot head of the match. Because of their small size control of bleeding is important.

Canaries are often identified by a leg band by the breeder. These bands often show the hatch year and code of the breeder. They may also indicate the family of the canary. If well fitted they represent negligible risk but may help you to retrieve your bird if it is lost.

Breeding

Canaries are typically easy to bred and a pair will breed and raise their babies in the home. Breeding season is usually in the spring (March to July) in North America. Canaries are not dimorphic and are typically sexed by inspection of the cloaca or by their song. Holding the bird on it's back gently blow on the feathers surrounding the cloaca or vent. Canaries can breed when they are 1 year old. They can be bred in pair cages or in colony flight cages.

Breeding canaries in pair cages is ideal however they can be bred in aviaries. Breeding in cages gives better production and control of pairings. Breeding in a large aviary housing several pairs requires less work, however the results are usually not as good.

The breeding cage should be larger than a single pet cage. The classic breeding cage size is approximately 24 inches long, 14 inches tall and 10 inches wide. They are usually constructed so a partition can be slid into the cage to separate the male from the female. Many breeders leave the hens to raise the chicks alone. In this way they do not need to maintain so many males. Leaving the male to assist in chick raising however reduces the burden on the hen.

Canaries build a nest in an open basket hung on the side of the breeding cage. It should be placed so it can be inspected without too much disturbance. Provide building materials such as dry grasses, moss, cowhair, unraveled cut hemp rope. Shops often sell boxes of short strings, which can be given to canaries for nest building. Make sure strings are short so the birds and chicks won't become entangled in the string.

A few days after mating the hen begins to lay and will lay 4-6 eggs. Most eggs are 1 day apart usually laid at about 7-8AM. She usually starts to incubate with the first or second eggs. There can be quite a size difference between the oldest and youngest chicks in the clutch. For that reason some chicks may be lost if they are too small to compete with their siblings. For this reason some breeders remove eggs as they are laid replacing them

with artificial eggs. When the entire clutch is laid the breeder will return all the eggs to the nest to start incubation. The incubation period is 13 days.

Provide plenty of food for the pair to feed their young, especially egg foods and some fresh greens. Sprouted or germinated seeds are also relished. Both parents share in caring for the young. The chicks can be banded at 8-10 days of age. Serious breeders use these leg bands to maintain genealogical records to assist in breeding for desired traits. The chicks usually leave the nest when about 3 weeks old but are still fed by their parents for a few more weeks. During this time the hen may start preparing for the next brood. It is generally recommended that the pair be limited to 2-3 broods in a season to prevent exhaustion. The adults can then be placed in large flock flights to regain condition for the next season. Reducing the photoperiod (reduce to around 10 hours of light daily) will also help to shut them down.

When the young birds are independent they should be removed to a large flight cage with other young birds until they undergo their first molt at about 6 months of age. The molt lasts about 6 weeks and during this time the birds will be less active and usually won't sing. They require excellent nutrition and extra vitamins to enhance feather regeneration. After molting the young birds should be sexed and separated into aviaries by sex.

Diseases

Canary Pox – A viral disease, which can be spread by mosquitoes. This is a common disease in Europe, which can result in outbreaks with up to 100% mortality. In the US some poxviruses of wild birds can infect canaries.

Atoxoplasmosis – Caused by a coccidian (protozoa) called *Isoospora serini*, this parasitic disease of young birds (2-9 months) affects the intestines and liver and can result in high mortality. It is diagnosed by fecal examination.

Coccidiosis – A similar organism (*Isoospora canaria*), which also produces intestinal disease and diarrhea.

Trichomonas – flagellated protozoa that infests the crop causing regurgitation, respiratory symptoms and emaciation.

Toxoplasmosis – a protozoa carried by cats which can cause systemic illness and blindness in canaries (Panophthalmitis). No effective treatment is known.

Psittacosis or Parrot Fever – Caused by the bacteria *Chlamydia psittaci*, this disease can be transmitted to people. Birds should be tested, especially if going into the home of elderly people.

Cnemodocoptes mites – Scaly face and scaly leg mite causes build-up of scales with tiny holes on the surface of the feet and beak. Commonly results in tassel foot (elongated scales on feet).

Liver disease – Probably associated most often with poor nutrition or bacterial infections, however can also be associated with many other disease processes.

Lice and mites – Uncommon on pet canaries but may be a problem in breeding aviaries.

Airsac mites or tracheal mites – Tiny mites that live in the respiratory system and cause respiratory irritation and disease.

Don't allow your canary to have un-supervised freedom in the home. Other family pets such as cats & dogs often kill pet canaries. They also often succumb to household hazards and toxins and are particularly sensitive to air-borne toxins. Beware of carpet cleaners, scented candles and Teflon poisoning.

Ideally your pet canary should have a yearly examination by a veterinarian to help it live to it's potential. Canaries can live up to 10 to 14 years with good nutrition and care.