

## ***Society finch or Bengalese***

The society finch is unique in that it is a cultivated variety of bird for which there is no wild population. It does not and never did exist in the wild state. They possibly originated as hybrids of 2 other manakin species which produced fertile hybrids. Its scientific name *Lonchura domestica* denotes its relationship to the manakins and its status as a domestic species. The origins are unknown but this species probably came from China into Japan in about 1700. The first known specimens in Europe were 2 pure white birds brought to the London Zoo in 1860.

The beautiful plumage, quirky song and antics of the society finch have made them one of the world's most popular finches. Society finches 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.

Society finches are good pet birds for all ages but are especially appealing to older people as they provide lively color and song to the home without the need to come out of the cage. They are an excellent starter bird for children and especially young aviculturists who want to learn first hand about breeding birds. They are constantly active hopping and flitting around the cage making a very pleasant squeaking call sounding much like a toy trumpet. Society finches 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.

They can be kept in groups in aviaries and even get along well with other species of similar sized birds. They are especially attractive when housed in planted aviaries. When nesting however they may become aggressive to other birds, especially weaker finch species.

Numerous color mutations have been developed over the years but most of the birds commonly seen are peds. Colors include fawn/white, gray-brown/white, chocolate/white and solid white. Dilutes of these colors have recently been established. As peds no 2 birds are identical. The patches are usually uneven but with careful breeding, birds with symmetrical marking can be produced. Solid colored society finches, birds with no white, have been bred and are referred to as selfs. An almost black bird has also been produced by crossing societies with Bronze-winged manakins. Crested varieties have also been bred and are increasing in popularity. Frilled societies, similar to frilled canaries, were produced in Japan.

Society finches are monomorphic; the sexes cannot be distinguished visually. They are sexed by behavior. The male society is identified by his song. He sings frequently and does a cute squatting, shuffling dance to accompany the song. Young males will start to practice their song shortly after leaving the nest.

When buying a society finches look for birds which are active and lively. Society finches are usually sold in pairs and should be kept as pairs for their social well being. If you are selecting birds from an aviary try to select two birds that are perching together to enhance your chances of obtaining a compatible or bonded pair. Catch the society finch 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. The eyes should be bright and alert and the plumage smooth and shiny.

Weighing in at 15-20 grams and 4.5-5 inches (11-12 cm) in length, they are slightly larger than the popular zebra finch.

### Diet and Feeding

Society finches are granivorous by nature feeding primarily on grass seeds. Classical society finch diets have been seed diets consisting of a mixture of mixed millet seeds, and canary seed but they can also be offered rapeseed, 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.

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

Society finches should also be offered small amounts 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 society finches, which have been introduced to them especially at a young age. Boiled eggs or commercial egg food are excellent for young and breeding society finches but care must be taken in avoiding contamination, leaving moist foods in the cage too long.

If your society finch 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.

Society finches have historically been given grit however contrary to popular belief society finches 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 in canaries 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.

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

## Housing

Society finches 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 for a pair should be at least 14 inches square. Bars are often vertical for society finch 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 society finch is eating seeds the feces should look like a small dark round dot or string (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 fruits, 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 fro a window, but should be in an area of the home where there is much activity. Society finches are very susceptible to air-borne toxins. If you keep your society finch 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 - Society finches love baths and small bird baths can be purchased that will fit into the door of a standard society finch cage. This can be filled with luke warm water. Allow the bird to enter as he chooses. Society finches 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 society finches, as they are not usually handled. If you do choose to let your bird fly in the house however there are safely 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 society finch'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.

Society finches 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 society finch. If well fitted they represent negligible risk but may help you to retrieve your bird if it is lost.

## Breeding

Society finches are typically easy to breed 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. They are usually reliable breeders, however some individual pairs will not be and may burry eggs, throw eggs from the nest or not care for chicks properly.

Breeding society finches in pair cages is ideal however they can be bred in aviaries. Breeding in cages gives better production and control of pairings. If you are breeding for specific colors pair breeding is required. 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. The standard canary breeding cage is a good choice. They are usually constructed so a partition can be slid into the cage to separate the male from the female. Society finch pairs are not usually separated as the male helps the female raise the chicks. Society finches build a nest in a half-open basket hung on the side of the breeding cage. Baskets can be purchased in pet shops and are usually about 4 ½ - 6 inches long. Small wooden finch boxes could also be used. If breeding in an aviary scatter the boxes and provide approx 2 boxes per pair to prevent quarreling over nest sites. Nests should be placed so they can be inspected without too much disturbance. Provide building materials such as dry grasses, moss, and cowhair, unraveled cut hemp rope, which should be placed on the floor of the cage or aviary. Pet shops often sell boxes of short strings, which can be given to society finches 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 4-8 pure white eggs. Most eggs are laid one day apart and are usually laid in the morning. The incubation period is 12-13 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. Chicks should be removed from the parent's cages when about 3 weeks old and they will continually want to squeeze into the nest with their parents. 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, separated by sex, 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

Bacterial infections, especially *Campylobacter*- can cause intestinal disease.

Yeast infection in the intestines can cause weight loss and poor digestion.

*Cochlosoma* is a flagylated protozoa which is often carried by society finches. Adult birds are typically unaffected but may pass the parasite on to other species especially when foster rearing other species. If zebra or gouldian finch chicks are raised by or with Society finches they may become infected.

Atoxoplasmosis – A common disease of canaries, this disease is occasionally found in society finches. 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.

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 society finches but may be a problem in breeding aviaries.

Don't allow your society finches to have un-supervised freedom in the home. Other family pets such as cats & dogs often kill pet society finches. 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 society finches should have a yearly examination by a veterinarian to help it live to its potential. Society finches can live up to 8-10 years with good nutrition and care.