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## **Birds As Pets: Canaries And Finches: Gouldian, zebra, etc.**

- 1. Canaries: German Roller, Timbrado, American singer, Belgian, Columbus, & Border fancy, Norwich, Lizard, Gloster, Dutch frill, Red factor, Blue, etc.**

### **“Comparative Pet Impact Statement”**

**( Song is substituted for talking in all finches.)**

*Size=2 to 5, Space=2 to 5, Noise level=2 to 6, Playtime=1 to 3,  
Destruction=1 to 2, Song=2 to 9*

As can be deduced from the numerous breeds listed above, canaries have been favorites for both song and beauty for a long time - especially in Europe. All the domestic breeds originated from a single species that was brought over from the Canary Islands many hundreds of years ago. This long length of time has allowed



the canary to become the most thoroughly domesticated of all non-produce birds and in turn allowed fanciers to develop types and show standards akin to how dogs and cats are judged.

It was the song that first led the sailors of old to trap and bring these insignificantly colored (green and brown highlighted with yellow) siskins back home where captive breeding brought on the development of the now common yellow form of the canary. As time passed many were bred for different standards of body conformation and color while other breeders concentrated primarily on singing styles.

North American bred canaries that were crossed with the Venezuelan black hooded siskin became the “red factors” we know today. These vividly colored red and black siskins from Central America have paid a heavy price for their beauty.

So many were captured for the pet industry or succumbed to habitat loss they are now critically endangered.



Contrary to popular belief, there are no canaries native to the western

hemisphere. The so-called “wild canaries” in the US are usually yellow warblers or goldfinches mistakenly called canaries because of their bright yellow plumage which, of course, does not even resemble the true wild colors of the canary at all. Actually in North America canaries are closely related to siskins such as redpolls, purple finches and house finches. The true native haunts of the domesticated canary, The Canary Islands, are located just west of Africa at about the latitude of Florida. This makes canaries a semitropical species and as such seasonal daylight change plays a crucial role governing the timing of pairing, nesting, flocking, molting, etc. This need for seasonal change must be served if canaries are to stay healthy and breed properly.

So many problems can be attributed to improper lighting techniques! The best way around this is simply to house the birds in a naturally lit part of the house and let nature take its course. Canaries do need uninterrupted sleep from dusk to dawn. Even through the longer nights of Winter it is important for them to have undisturbed sleep. This is what the timing mechanism is all about. If the birds are cared for and timed properly breeding compatible pairs should be easy. Cocks and hens will come into condition at the same time with plenty of offspring to follow. Young males should be molted out and in full song by the following holiday season.

When buying a canary for song make sure it is a cock bird because hens don't sing nearly like males do. Also it is good to hear him singing so you can judge the song for yourself. Birds bred for song qualities include rollers, timbrados and American singers. These sing with more of a closed beak producing a much softer pleasing rolling tone than louder varieties. Their song may not compete well in a noisy shop setting but I believe these birds are more suitable for the quiet of the home than the louder chopper singing breeds of canary.

Do let the canary out of the cage to fly and remain fit. It is erroneous to believe a canary will die if it is let out. My birds are so much stronger, active, and healthier when allowed in a free flight setting. I enjoy watching their flight as much as hearing their song. A Canary is a finch and the whole physiology of a finch has been fine tuned over millions of years for flight. Do not deprive them of this pivotal part of the expression of their existence!

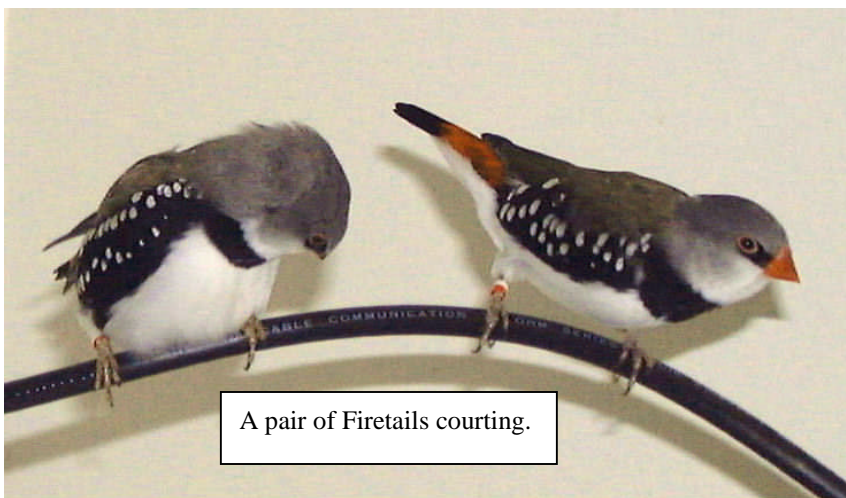
With the advent of business-oriented large scale production of hand-fed baby parrots taking more resources from those who might otherwise be raising canaries, this little gem of aviculture appears to be losing ground. Even though the demand for a "guaranteed to sing" male remains high the profit margin for a lot of work is basically nonexistent. Not only are hens unmarketable as singers but breeders must house young birds for 7 to 9 months before cocks will achieve full song. When expensive easily spoiled egg-foods, greens, vegetables and fruit; space for breeder cages, separate flights for hens, cocks, juveniles; and labor are tallied up it makes more business sense to breed birds year-around to be sold within days of weaning where sex is not an issue. Only a true lover of canaries will stay with them for their management takes work, dedication, and expense. Canaries are the first birds I ever raised. Even after these many years of breeding numerous species the Roller canary especially still holds a spell over me as he sings his varied tours of liquid song.

## 2. Other Common Domestic Finches: Society or Bengalese, Zebra, Lady Gouldian.

### “Comparative Pet Impact Statement”

*Size=1 to 2, Space=1 to 5, Noise level=2 to 4, Playtime=1 to 2, Destruction=1 to 2, Song=2 to 6*

The three different species of finches listed above are grouped together because of both their similar husbandry requirements and comparable impact as pets in the house. These very small finches should not be fit into very small cages. On the contrary; Environments suitable for these lively, on-the-go creatures need to be as large as possible. Healthy finches will forever be flitting about exploring every nook and cranny they can reach so need the stimulation and exercise to remain fit.



Finches are an easy way for budding naturalists to observe species behavior in a way that is denied the master of only the trained obedient pet. Few sights are more satisfying than seeing a thriving pair of birds display, court, nest, and successfully raise young in a well designed habitat you

researched and provided for them.

The **Bengalese or society finch** vies with the canary as the longest domesticated bird kept for pets and amusement. This species of finch does not even exist in the wild. Most scholars in the field believe societies are the result of captive hybridization of two or more species of munia, nun and/or mannikin finches native to Asia but this is not known for sure. The ultimate product of this Oriental biological engineering feat are very pleasant variably colored chocolate, cinnamon or white finches that breed better in cages than in larger flights. For this

reason I consider Bengalese to be one of the few species truly fitting the term “cage bird”.

Societies are, as the name suggests, very social birds that get along so well together that oftentimes pairs will be seen sharing nests. These mellow finches are easily tamed if handled often from fledging on and will enjoy being held, perching on a finger, following you around the house etc. In addition cocks sing a cheery little song and employ a simple courtship dance to attract a mate. This is the only way to tell the sexes apart for they both look very much alike. Breeding is a simple matter; the hard part seems to be stopping them! Simply provide some sort of nesting site supplied with hair, grass and other materials and the birds will do the rest.

The Bengalese or society finch is a very steady little companion that should not be a bother to anyone. I consider them tops on my list as a “first bird” for the child who wants to observe nature but not worry about problems such as fighting, feather plucking, incompatibility, unacceptable noise, flightiness and so many other problematic worries so prevalent among other species of birds kept confined in cages.

**Zebra finches** belong to the strikingly varied and unique group of finches known as the Australian grass finches. Most of the different species of grass finch are considered non-beginner’s birds due to their relatively high expense and unforgiving response to conditions not to their liking but Zebras are just the opposite! Zebras are probably the most prolific and therefore the least expensive finch available. A pair can bless you with babies when they themselves are only four to six months old. Sexing Zebras is no problem either for males will begin to show their dimorphic colors of chestnut flanks, red ear spots, and a zebra striped chest within a month or two after fledging. Babies just out of the nest all look like dull colored hens.

One pair of Zebras should be housed in a large cage that will give them at least a little flight space and room to get away from each other at times. housing these tiny but active birds in a small cage sold for a single budgie or canary is asking for trouble. Zebras are always on the move - they never stop! They are also more

nervous, swift in flight, and certainly not as docile as the society or Lady Gouldian finches, Canaries and Cockatiels. Overcrowded incompatible birds will often feather-pick and may be seen chasing other birds around the enclosure. Zebras, even in a large flight situation, may take over other specie's nests and/or try stealing nesting material if too many birds want the same nests or roosting place.

My pet name for this little Australian bird is "Beeper". The voice sounds something like a diminutive toy trumpet "meeping"- and this is kept up continually. (This can become bothersome for some people but others do find the vocal antics of the Zebra entertaining and, perhaps, relaxing as well. The cock's song is a short, repetitive, high-speed warble bleated out to any Zebra proclaiming to all his willingness to woo a mate and make more Zebras.

As is obvious from their willingness to breed Zebras are thoroughly domesticated and are bred for show conformation and depth of color. Several very nice mutation color forms are common so acquisition of these birds is really no problem. The rapid reproductive rate of these birds makes them particularly suitable if one wishes to experiment around with or seriously study genetics.

Although the active Australian Zebra finch does not appear to be as steady or tamable as the majority of domestic-raised cagebirds they still do comfortably well in a medium to large size cage in the home and are a pleasure to watch. When the ease of pairing the differently colored cocks and hens is added to the fast-paced reproduction of the zesty Zebra this becomes another highly recommended bird for the home.

**Lady Gouldian finches** have something about them that is captivating. The first thing that immediately draws the attention of one seeing a Gouldian for the first time is the vibrantly brilliant pure solid well defined shapes of vividly contrasting color!

Imagine a bird with a crimson-red face framed by a thin line of black followed by iridescent blue then green on the back but also showing a well defined deep purple chest clearly divided from the bright yellow breast underneath. What a

palette of form, shape, texture, balance and beauty that a mere human artist might search and strive for in vain!



The second thing that is noticed is the song and courtship of the male. The deeper colored cock will be seen hopping up-and-down on the perch while at the same time displaying his chest, looking at the hen, and rapidly shaking his head as he sings a soft but complex little tremolo of a song. Behavior is an important component to the lives of all birds and can be easily observed in your living room courtesy of the beautiful Gouldian finch. Sometimes a single cock will seem to give a “concert” performance. Two or three birds can often look to be intensely listening as the male does his song and dance routine.

Gouldians are very temperature sensitive. Juveniles will not molt properly and assume full adult color unless the temperature is at least in the low seventies, preferably warmer. Fledglings can molt as soon as two months of age or can wait almost a full year depending on the temperature. Many young Gouldians fail to complete the molt at all. The bird shows only a partial dress of the adult color while retaining much of the drab olive immature plumage. Adults also do much better in a nice warm draft free environment.

Years ago, when Gouldians first entered the United States, the birds rapidly gained a reputation of being delicate and difficult to breed. Most birds were imported from Japan during the touchy Juvenile stage when birds were the least able to withstand the stress of shipping and a multitude of environmental changes. The Japanese were not concerned



with quality but rather focused on quantity. Gouldian hens were made to lay as many eggs as possible which were in turn fostered to society finches. The Gouldians themselves were never allowed to rear their own kind. This disservice led to problems as the dysfunctional, miss-imprinted birds would not mate with their own kind, incubate eggs or feed chicks.

For many years it was common for Gouldian breeders to have societies on hand to take over when the Gouldians failed.

Finally, after decades of work, the present day parent-raised Lady Gouldian finch has completely adapted and, If conditions and diet are right, should breed freely. In the last few years new color mutations have been seen that provide fascinating results when mixed together. This can provide a new level of pleasure to one who is breeding this remarkable species.



Although Gouldians are still not considered a good “beginners” finch they can indeed make nice pets. These gorgeous Australians do well in medium to large cages but must not be overcrowded. Gouldians must feel comfortable before they will eat what they should. The old school of thought recommends at least one square foot of space per bird either housed as a pair or in a large flight. Lately they have done okay in less space but only if they are acclimated from birth. These are not flighty birds and will readily take spray millet from your hand if it is offered in a calm quiet manner.

The Lady Gouldian is my favorite finch and writing about them brings back fond memories. I truly consider them wonderful additions to any warm, draft-free home.

It is hoped that this brief outline will aid you in making an informed decision as to what pet bird or birds is right for your home or whether a bird in the house is a good idea at all. Choose carefully and enjoy!

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