



## **The Bengalese Finch**

The Bengalese Finch (*Lonchura domestica*), known in the United States as the Society finch, is not found in the wild and never has been. The origins of the Bengalese is not certain, but it is believed that it is the domesticated version of the White-backed Munia (*Lonchura striata*). Thought to have been developed over many centuries by the Chinese, it was imported to Japan several hundred years ago. Selective breeding of this species resulted in the Bengalese finch and the variety of colour variants that are so popular today. There is even a variant with a small crest on its head. Some authorities say that other species of Munia may have been used to develop the Bengalese and to support this claim they state that it is possible to hybridise the Bengalese with many other Munias and the resultant young are usually fertile.

Adult birds are about 4 inches (10 cm) long and come in a wide variety of browns, black, grey and white. In fact the challenge with Bengalese is to make up an exhibition pair that are as closely marked as possible. With the exception of self Bengalese, no two Bengalese finches will look exactly alike, the colorations, the shade, distribution, and intensity of these colors vary greatly. Showing a single Bengalese is usually frowned upon. Males and females look similar, but only the males sings and will do so during breeding season. Once seen this little display is easy to identify.

The Bengalese finch is an excellent breeder and probably the easiest of the finches to keep. They are hardy, long lived finches (many will reach 8 years or more), who will thrive as long as they are given proper care. Unlike most finches, they breed better in a cage than in an aviary. They breed so reliably that a number of finch keepers will keep a few pairs of Bengalese purely to raise chicks from other species. The popularity of Australian finches is probably possible due to the large numbers raised using this fostering method, following the ban of importations from Australian in the 1960's. However many fanciers keep Bengalese in their own right as these birds are colorful, active, and pleasantly vocal, but they are not "pets" in the normal sense of the word. Like many finches they are too small, fast, and nervous to be handled.

Although Bengalese finches have been developed from species that evolved to eat seeds, an all-seed diet does not really provide adequate nutrition. Some fruits, vegetables (especially leafy greens, such as spinach, dandelions, romaine lettuce, and parsley), a proprietary eggfood and perhaps live insects (such as mini-mealworms) are useful additions to their diet. The eggfood should have a little Oystershell grit added to it to help with maintaining Calcium levels. Fresh, clean water should be available at all times. You may choose to add a soluble Calcium solution to this once or twice a week. The additional protein provided by the livefood and eggfood will help to build up healthy strong chicks. Bengalese that will feed their chicks livefood may be more successful at raising other species.

As the American name suggests this is a highly social bird and should be housed in pairs or small groups. If kept in groups many birds will roost in the same nestbox and it will appear to be crammed full. Even when Bengalese are breeding, they will not interfere with other birds, other than trying to steal a little choice nesting material. However, Bengalese should not be mixed with other Munias or Zebra finches as this will avoid cross-breeding.

You can keep Bengalese finches in a cage or aviary, and if choosing an aviary this can be indoors or outdoors. If outdoors, it must offer protection from the sun, harsh weather, and predators, such as cats and birds of prey. An aviary should have a safety porch, so that it is more difficult for the finches to escape when you enter and leave

If you are using a cage, buy the largest one you can afford; horizontal space is more important than vertical space because it gives your finches more room to fly. The minimum size should be about 20 inches (51 cm) long. Make sure that the bars are spaced so that your finches cannot get their heads out, or they may escape or become stuck. Your finch will need several perches in the cage. Vary the sizes and materials that the perches are made of to provide his feet with exercise. Natural wood perches with bark still on them are an excellent choice, but wooden dowel or rope perches are fine as well. Space them out so that your finch has plenty of space to fly.