



Cherry Finch Care

The Cherry Finch – *Neochmia modesta* – is sometimes known as the Plum-headed Finch and is originally from the interior of Australia, where it travels around in loose groups. Imports from Australia have not been allowed for about 50 years, so it has been bred in captivity for many generations. I've only seen one colour variant of the Cherry Finch and this was called an Isabel – to my eyes it was a pale fawn and wasn't as pleasing to look at as the normal coloured ones.

Cherries are quite easy to sex as the female does not have the plum "skull-cap" that the male does. The female is also generally paler. The coloration on the head of the males is identifiable when they are still immature and therefore you should not have trouble getting a true pair. Cherries are not as brashly coloured as other Australian Finches, but the muted colours and the stripes are very pleasing. Youngsters should be fully coloured at 4-6 months of age. They should be at least 12 months old before you allow them to breed.

Cherry finches are an ideal bird for the beginner to Australian Finches. They are not as susceptible to lower temperatures (I would not attempt to keep them outside October – May though), are not aggressive if kept with other birds, are widely available, breed well and are quite long lived for finches (7 – 9 years). They are also one of the more inexpensive of the Australian Finch species. There is generally a good market for any chicks that are raised.

Cherry Finches will live quite happily on a seed based diet. However, they will breed better if they have access to a little greenfood, such as washed Dandelion leaves, and a little live food. I also supply a proprietary egg biscuit (eggfood). This is sprinkled with vitamin and mineral supplements, Oystershell grit and a little crushed chickens eggshell. The eggshells have been baked in the oven until they are completely dry and sterilised. I then grind this down to a fine powder with a pestle and mortar. This egg mixture is slightly moistened with tapwater until it has a crumbly texture. If it is too wet the birds will not eat it. The food is served in shallow dishes on the floor of the cage as Cherries spend a lot of time on the floor – even in the wild. Tapwater is left for 24 hours for any gases to dissipate out. This is then provided for drinking. Each week throughout the year I add a soluble Calcium additive. This is increased as the hen comes into breeding condition. This will allow her to form good strong eggs and the resultant chicks will have a good bone structure.

I had the best results from breeding Cherries when they were kept in a large 4ft cage inside my birdroom during the winter and released into the adjoining planted flight for the short UK Summer months (the 2012 summer never really got started though). This flight was fully covered with plastic sheeting to keep the worst of the weather off. They built their own nest in a bush from Coconut fibre lined with dried grasses and leaves – there was also the odd feather.

The clutch comprises 4-5 white eggs, which are incubated by both parents, although my male was not as enthusiastic about this as the hen. Like many other small Australian Finches the incubation period is about 2 weeks. When chicks were heard I increased the number of mini-mealworms I was supplying – trying to supply only the white-skinned soft ones that were moulting their case.

The chicks left the nest when they were nearly 4 weeks old, but they could have fledged earlier as they returned to the nest to roost. Due to the position of the nest I did not close-ring the chicks. If you are cage-breeding your Cherries you will probably find this easier to accomplish and the correct size ring to use is C (the same size as Gouldians and Star Finches) The chicks were seen to be feeding themselves at 6 weeks old, but I left them for another 2 weeks to make sure that they were completely independent.

The parents built another nest nearby, but this time the nest was disturbed by some curious Cutthroat Finches. As it was getting late in the season I caught the adults up and over-wintered them inside to give them a rest. In ideal conditions it is not unreasonable to expect your Cherries to have 2 or 3 nests, especially in indoor cages. Given an opportunity a compatible pair will attempt to nest all year round, but this is not recommended. The hen will run low on resources and could exhaust herself raising, what are likely to be, undersized youngsters in the later rounds.

Cherry Finches are generally in good feather throughout the year, only looking a little untidy during the annual moult. They hold their plumage tight to the body. As a consequence Cherries make good show birds. They are active, but not panicky in the show cage. The cage should be a "box" type with a black gloss painted outer and a white inner. The wire front should be black. The cage floor should be covered in the normal seed mix that you provide for them to eat. The cage should have 2 perches and there should be a container for the stewards to add water after judging. A pair will generally do better than a single bird, assuming that each bird is equal in quality.